

BOOK REVIEW

Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. (Paper, 76 pages, \$6.00, ISBN 0-8006-3450-0)

Walter Brueggemann begins this brief, but very rewarding book, by admitting that any study of the psalms, including this one, is limited. The psalms, he says, are simply too rich and any probe into them leaves one with a sense of inadequacy. Nevertheless, the preacher will find this book more than adequate for both an overview on the psalms and a guide for interpreting them for preaching. Brueggemann helps us appreciate the psalms as nourishing prayers for the many twists and turns our individual and communal lives take. The psalms, he says, are a "most helpful resource for our conversation with God about things that matter the most" (p. 1).

Spirituality of the Psalms helps facilitate that conversation, for it shows how the psalms voice the full range of Israel's dialogue with God. The psalms, Brueggemann says, also are a "voice of the gospel," for they speak a faithful word to God's listening community. They are for all levels of faith, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated and so they allow us to enter at whatever level we find ourselves.

Brueggemann is interested in a "postcritical" study of the psalms; he wants to consider the "interface between the flow of the Psalms and the dynamics of our common life" (p. viii).

He provides a convenient organization of the psalms based on form-critical analysis. His "scheme" classifies the psalms into three categories: "orientation", "disorientation" and "new orientation." But he does not want this methodology to restrict our notion of the psalms. In reality, he says, there is no "master key" for the understanding of the psalms.

The psalms of "orientation" are for those in seasons of well-being. They evoke gratitude for God's faithfulness and reliability. These psalms describe a well-ordered world with God in charge. Psalms of orientation are filled with praise and gratitude. Brueggemann warns however, that these can be psalms of the well-off, satisfied and powerful in society who have a vested interest in things staying just the way they are. Thus, they can be used to keep a tight reign on society, requiring a system of adherence and conformity. To the poor and outcast though, psalms of

orientation express God's will and plan. Thus these psalms hold out hope that someday God will set things aright for those who are currently the outsiders looking in.

Psalms of "disorientation" express the anguished seasons of hurt, suffering, alienation and death. They evoke rage, complaint, resentment, self-pity and hatred. Like the moments and moods they express, psalms of disorientation are raw, ragged and in disarray. While our culture and church, prefer to express, what Brueggemann calls, "relentless affirmation," the large number of "psalms of darkness" shows a biblical tendency to put aside pretense and speak the blunt truth to God. What to outsiders may sound like acts of unfaith, in reality are expressions of bold faith, "...because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. Nothing is out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate" (p.27).

Psalms of "new-orientation" express the surprise of new life. Just when nothing was expected and the previous conditions of life were impossible to retrieve, the surprise of grace happens. New life comes, not from anything within human capabilities, but from God's goodness. These are psalms of amazement, gratitude and resolution. Behind psalms of new-orientation were statements of trouble. But the unexpected new conditions were not the "natural" outcome of trouble. These psalms celebrate the God of surprise who can create new life where all the former evidence pointed to disaster. Where there was once only despair, now there is joy; where there was darkness, now there is light.

Brueggemann concludes this study with a reflection on theodicy. With Jose Miranda, he says the psalms cannot be confined just to a private spirituality, but are about the struggle of the oppressed against the unjust. For Israel, religious hungers were never devoid of justice questions. Thus, the psalms address the nature of God and the social order. A crisis occurs when questions are raised about the way things are and what God's role is in human affairs. Brueggemann says that Israel is not primarily concerned with a spirituality that tries to overlook the issue of theodicy. The psalms reveal that Israel's communion with God "must be honest, open to criticism and capable of transformation....The psalms suggest that Israel is nearly incapable of an address to God that does not confront the issue of justice and righteousness" (p. 68).

This may be a small book but it is no fast-read. Brueggemann's writing is dense, full of biblical interpretation, cultural background and application to our world. It

is a perfect book for those who pray the psalms. He helps us expand our notion of the psalms away from a merely privatized spirituality to recognize them as the prayer of a faith community struggling to be faithful in a larger and often hostile environment. For the preacher, he makes many "homiletical moves"—showing how the psalms continue to speak to our present faith community also struggling to be faithful in a large and often hostile environment.

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