Book Review

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Walter Brueggemann's book is more concerned with the application of one's imagination to be a vessel for God's prophecies as shown through the book of Amos. He does this by first showing that when studying Amos and the Old Testament prophets one must take into consideration both the Old Testament and today's contemporary churches' situations. Brueggemann argues the church is supposed to be an alternate community as the community in Exodus was also. To do that, a different way of thinking, consciousness needs to arise that challenges the political and even religious practices of one's day. When this awareness is achieved, a prophetic kind of criticizing and embrace of God's new ways must be done, and it is also done through the process of lament and grieving of losing God's ways. This grief gives birth to hope and nourishment that leads to new beginnings. This is done through the prophetic imaginations.

Joseph Blenkinsopp takes a more historical approach. He first opens with sharing the sources for the study of Israelite prophecy and how the Deuteronomic law influences Old Testament prophecy. Also influencing prophecy is the prophet's background and upbringing whether having a direct experience with God or being mentored under a previous prophet. Blenkinsopp goes into detail of even the social location of the Old Testament prophets and how prophecy is more of a response directly from God as He made a covenant with Israel back in Mount Sinai. Joseph Blenkinsopp also goes into depth of prophets like Elijah, Elisha, and other major and minor prophets, and Amos' role as God's agent.

First off, even though both authors take a very different approach to the book of Amos, they do have their similarities. The first similarity both authors share is how they use the Old Testament laws as a foundation for the Old Testament prophecies. Blenkinsopp writes, “In Deut. 18:15-19, the passage about the “prophet like Moses,” prophecy is, in effect, redefined as a way of continuing the work of Moses throughout history; it is therefore understood in terms of urging law observance and transmitting the same message to posterity” (12). The story and work of God through Moses is not only used in Blenkinsopp’s approach but also with Brueggemann’s approach. “The participants in the Exodus found themselves, undoubtedly surprisingly to them, involved in the intentional formation of a new social community to match the vision of God’s freedom. That new social reality, which is utterly discontinuous with Egypt, lasted in its alternative way for 250 years” (Brueggemann 7). Even though Blenkinsopp uses a more a historical approach compared to Brueggemann’s prophetic imagination approach, both use the backdrop of Moses’ story as the foundation for Amos’ prophecies. The law of Moses is used in both books to redefine Israelite community whether through imagination or direct usage to communicate God’s will and ways.

A second similarity between both books is how both authors emphasize the prophet’s own personal experiences with God in their effectiveness in carrying out God’s prophetic call in their lives. Walter Brueggemann points out, “For Moses and Israel, energizing comes not out of sociological strategy or hunches about social dynamic, but out of the freedom of God. And so the urging I make to those who would be prophets is that we not neglect to do our work about who God is and that we know our discernment of God is at the breaking points in human community” (16). For Brueggemann, practicing genuine and effective prophecy ultimately comes from personally knowing who God is and how His character applies to modern society. But that takes

hard work, but it is work that must be invested in for prophecy to be properly carried out. “Prophetic utterance of this kind proceeded from what Gunkel called the prophet’s mysterious experience of oneness with God and identification with his purposes in history” (Blenkinsopp 20). With Blenkinsopp, it is also important that prophetic utterances that are successful is tied to the prophet’s experience with the oneness of God that leads to discerning God’s purposes for each historical time period.

A key difference between the two author’s descriptions of prophecy and prophets is where each author chooses to focus on throughout one’s book. Walter is more concerned with taking the study of the prophecies and prophets into application for today’s times. Whereas, Joseph is more focused on showing the realities of prophecy and the prophets as revealed throughout biblical times. Blenkinsopp shares, “The Deuteronomic History (Dtr) was apparently written to explain the disasters that overcame both kingdoms as the result of failure to heed prophetic warnings” (51). Through his writings, he shows how the previous accounts of Scripture were applied to the current study of prophets and prophecies especially highlighting the influence of books like Deuteronomy to Old Testament prophecies. Brueggemann says, “That is, Solomon had this kind of shrine not because he inherited it from the Canaanites or Jebusites but because he adopted and developed it because it served his social ideology” (28). He takes the examples of kings like Solomon to contrast it with prophetic imagination that he then ties with how this is relevant to the times we are living in today.

One of the compelling arguments by Walter Brueggemann was his thesis for using grief as a catalyst for prophetic imagination. “In the Christian tradition, having been co-opted by the king, we are tempted to legitimate the denial by offering crossless good news and a future well-being without a present anguish” (Brueggemann 44). Brueggemann argues that the deception

that Pharaoh and countless leaders that seek to control societies uses is the offering of veneer of well-being throughout their reigns. The world wants to tell its people everything will be okay and uses that deception as a way to deceive people in completely following and obeying everything the ruler wants. The antidote to this problem is the usage of grief and anguish. He states, “The task of prophetic imagination is to cut through the numbness, to penetrate the self-deception, so that the God of endings is confessed as Lord” (Brueggemann 45). The prophetic imagination is here to show that the reality God’s people is currently living in is a deceptive reality and is wrong. The way to break out of that is by imaging God’s reality. And the first step in doing so is by grieving the current reality and questioning everything that does not align with God’s ways.

Brueggeman ultimately concludes that, “But that risk must be run because exiles must always learn that our hope is never generated among us but always given to us. And whenever it is given we are amazed” (79). The risk he is explaining here is the risk of trusting God completely to bring the changes that are needed for His glory. I love how Brueggemann brings back one’s prophetic imagination to trusting in God completely. And he argues, it is not a passive kind of trusting. But a trusting that knows that change and transformation can ultimately only come from God. Overall, Brueggemann offers a bold thesis on utilizing Old Testament prophecy in a very practical way. Never have I thought that using one’s own imagination and critical faculties for being a vessel for God’s prophecies would be achievable. My only concern would be to not let this prophetic imagination to become subjective, but God must be the objective leader, motivator, and guider behind all kingdom transformation.

Blenkinsopp’s main utilization of Old Testament prophecy is done through historical grounding as best as possible. Blenkinsopp chooses to argue from the original biblical times as much as possible. He argues, “One explanation would be that the historian wished to apply the

lesson of Samaria's fate to Judah: If you ignore your prophets as they did theirs, the same will happen to you (2 Kings 17:7-18)" (56). Everything Blenkinsopp fights for is along these thought lines. His thesis and arguments are because it has happened in the Scriptures previously. And even when comparing Old Testament prophets and prophecies to today's times, he argues from the historical context of the Bible itself. "Like certain peripheral groups in our day, they expressed their rejection of the dominant urban culture by a distinctive attire (cf. 2 Kings 1:8), simple diet, and physical segregation from the amenities of city life" (61). A prophets rejection of dominant culture, simple diets, and counter cultural lifestyles is because it has been practiced previously throughout Scriptures. In conclusion, Blenkinsopp fights to show, "In this situation Amos, like Hesiod a little over half a century later, took up the cause of the dispossessed and marginalized, and did so in the name of traditional values" (81). Amos' fight for justice and God's righteousness was influenced by God's will and ways previously shown through the Scriptures.

One main presupposition I had about Israelite prophecy prior to reading these books was how the first five books of the Old Testament influenced the rest of Old Testament Scripture including Old Testament prophecies. This was confirmed and expanded at the same time. I did not know that my assumption was more along the lines of a traditional view of prophetic Scriptures, and I did not know there were multiple theories behind explaining Old Testament prophecies. I thought my assumption was the right and only assumption. But it was definitely expanded through these books. The second assumption I had prior to reading these books was the importance of the person behind the prophecy. Brueggemann's book did a really good job of showing the importance of the person being the vessel to God's message, but my view on this was greatly challenged as I saw the details and extreme importance of being aware of the world's

culture and learning to challenge it especially through the practice of grief and anguish as God's vessel. Never did I see such a pivotal role of emotions playing a part in God's prophetic ministry.