

Walter Brueggemann. *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013. 176 pages. \$17.

Walter Brueggemann latest book, *Truth Speaks to Power*, emerges from his lecture at Kenyon College on biblical faith and public policy, posing the question, “How does truth speak to power?” While Brueggemann does not offer concrete suggestions for how the Bible informs public policy, he does offer a narrative context for how truth interacts with power in the Old Testament.

Brueggemann defines power as “a network of influence and leverage” (2), seen in political regimes and monopolies of wealth, though these two are usually synonymous. Those in powerful positions often justify their roles with truth claims, but truth has a way of eluding and challenging power. Brueggemann writes: “truth, unlike establishment power that is visible, is characteristically elusive and contested because the claims made for truth are variously endorsements of or subversions of established power” (3-4).

Brueggemann lifts up truth and power within the biblical narrative, focusing on Moses, Solomon, Elisha, and Josiah. Truth in these narratives represents the justice of God, sometimes working in spite of current power arrangements, though sometimes working with or over against current power regimes. Brueggemann makes clear he is not setting up a typology—truth against power vs. truth transforming power, etc., reminiscent of H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*. Rather, he is attempting to listen to the subtleties of the truth narrative and how in different biblical stories it speaks to power.

Opening the way for a critical reading of power in the Scriptures, Brueggemann makes references to the “masters of suspicion”—a phrase attributed to Paul Ricoeur and referring to Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche. Brueggemann here points to the more recent “master of suspicion” Michele Foucault, and with these theorists Brueggemann does not take for granted “divine right” understandings of power. That is, those in powerful positions are not necessarily divinely appointed. In fact, because power often accumulates through totalizing regimes, violence and deception, we should view power with suspicion. Biblical accounts of kings and rulers provide examples of persons coming to power through violence. At the same time, because it is the Bible, the scriptures Christians hold to be sacred, Christians also read here words of truth. It is with an eye towards discerning the narrative of truth that we carefully examine biblical accounts of power.

The narrative of power reads sometimes like an ironic display of hubris, as in the case of Solomon’s glory (1 Kgs 1-12). In the story of King Solomon, Brueggemann points to a subtle undertone of irony, despite the dominant story line for Solomon’s reign being one of wisdom and success measured in his building of the temple and amassing great wealth. This ironic tone can be seen in the terse descriptions of violence preceding Solomon’s rise to power, or the depictions of Solomon’s Pharaoh-like behavior of taxing the people, using cheap labor and keeping one thousand wives, reducing persons to commodities. Challenging the narrative of power seen in Solomon’s “glory,” Brueggemann points to a New Testament saying from Jesus: “do not worry about what you will wear . . . even Solomon was not clothed like one of these” (Luke 12:22, 27). This saying of Jesus follows just after a parable of the “fool” who stored up a barn-full of grain, only to die during the night. Brueggemann suggests that the narrative of truth presents this ironic juxtaposition to unveil the anxious rush to accumulate as an ultimately deadly pursuit.

Brueggemann offers the example of King Josiah as a moment where the power regime answered to truth in humility. When learning of the contents of the scroll of the law newly

discovered, King Josiah rends his garments and seeks out the prophetess Hulda for instruction. Following this encounter, Josiah enacts a host of reforms that conform to the Deuteronomic standards of caring for the poor and needy. That is, loving one's neighbor became an economic policy. Thus, the narratives of power and truth can sometimes overlap, but this connection is made only when the powerful work for the benefit of the poorest and the "least" among society.

Brueggemann equips readers to approach the Bible with eyes of faith, looking for the narrative of truth, while raising our suspicion towards totalizing power regimes. This book helps us to look critically beyond the narrative of the power regime to hear what truth is saying and doing in the text. Preachers, biblical scholars, theologians, and ethicists would do well to read Brueggemann's book as a model for how to engage scripture in the pursuit of justice.

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