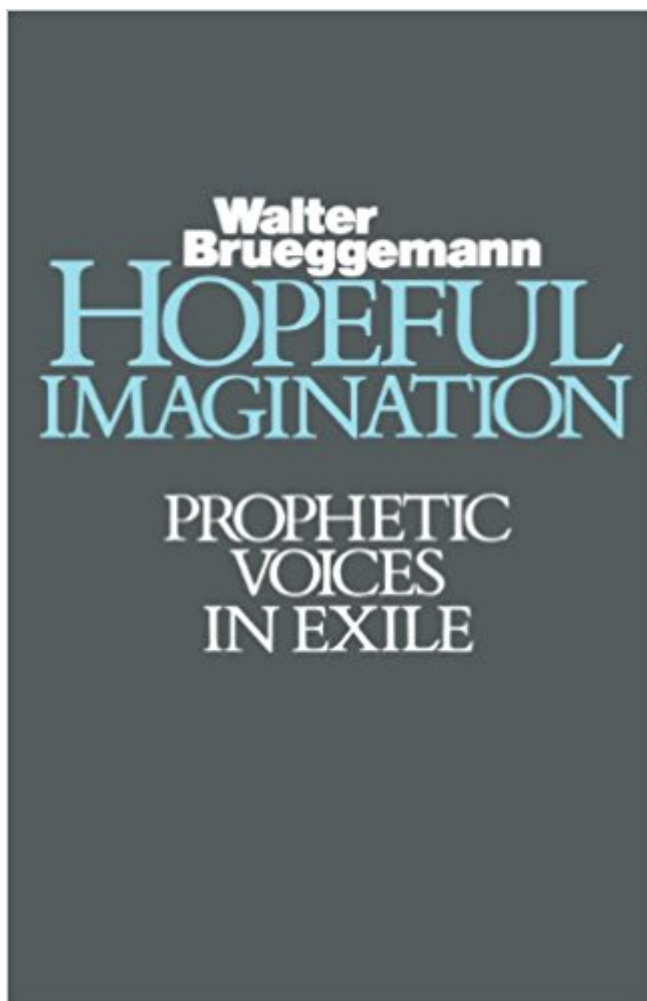




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# Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices In Exile



## Synopsis

Professor Brueggemann here examines the literature and experience of an era in which Israel's prophets faced the pastoral responsibility of helping people to enter into exile, to be in exile, and to depart out of exile. He addresses three major prophetic traditions: Jeremiah (the pathos of God), Ezekiel (the holiness of God), and 2 Isaiah (the newness of God). This literature is seen to contain the theological resources for handling both brokenness and surprise with freedom, courage, and imagination. Throughout, Brueggemann demonstrates how these resources offer vitality for ministry today.

## Book Information

Paperback: 160 pages

Publisher: Fortress Press (January 1, 1986)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0800619250

ISBN-13: 978-0800619251

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.3 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #363,836 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #538 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > Criticism & Interpretation > Old Testament](#) #619 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > Commentaries > Old Testament](#) #1775 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Bible Study & Reference > Old Testament](#)

## Customer Reviews

Professor Brueggemann here examines the literature and experience of an era in which Israel's prophets faced the pastoral responsibility of helping people to enter into exile, to be in exile, and to depart out of exile.

I am a seminary student and a youth minister. I have been captured by Walter Brueggemann's words since I first read *The Prophetic Imagination* for a course in seminary. *Hopeful Imagination* is probably the fourth book by Brueggemann that I have read, and it is probably my favorite out of all of his works. Brueggemann provides an extremely easy-to-follow outline for his analysis of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and 2 Isaiah. I found this book to be extremely energizing for scholarship, application,

ministry, and personal spiritual formation. My dream is to be a Hebrew Bible professor, and I can guarantee you: this will be required reading.

This paperback, a sequel to his "Prophetic Imagination", does an excellent job of integrating scholarship with contemporary insights into how these prophetic writings relate to current American life. I have used it successfully as a text in my university and theological seminary courses and believe it to be one of the best texts on the prophets of the exile. I will be using it next month in an adult Biblical class in a church. Dr. Brueggemann was a mentor and advisor of mine at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis and is one of the most prolific Old Testament writers today. A must for O.T. interpreters!

A timely work for our current need to face the disaster we are preparing and the hope for renewal we need. Brueggemann is one of the premier biblical scholars and theologians in the world today. I am using this book in an adult class. It has been well said and now is demonstrated in our contemporary life that we are already a people in internal exile. This book can help clarify our need and renew our hope.

I only read this book because it was on such a list - and in London. I found it very disappointing. Apparently, the author was attempting to use segments from the Hebrew scriptures as a takeoff point for US evangelical preachers, who see their time and place as one hostile to the gospels. I would be the first to see capitalism as possible idolatry, but frankly the book has no scholarly value because the connection of ancient Israelites with America is forced and contrived. I was specifically referencing the book in relation to Deutero-Isaiah. The treatment of the aftermath of the Babylonian exile was a brief sketch, with far less insight or stimulation than scholarly works I have consulted. It included a few basic considerations, then on to application to modern America. The author well may have a strong background in exegesis, but here the Old Testament is merely a peg to show a perceived hostility in American culture. I cannot see this book as valuable except, perhaps, to US preachers from non liturgical traditions.

I like everything that Brueggemann writes. He pulls the rug from under the feet of the pious who oppress others in the name of their god. Like Israel, we are in a period of exile in this 'vale of tears', not so much because of individual but because of corporate sin: that of the multi-nationals and super powers who grind the face of the poor for the purpose of a fast buck. On barrenness as a

metaphor: But Sarah is the model of barrenness (Gen. 11:30), the pivot point of all the memory. The motif of barrenness is a way Israel has of speaking of the future, the child of the next generation being given freely and graciously by God in spite of all circumstance. The future is always unmerited, unwarranted, and impossible for Israel. Yet it is given! p. 116

Why this barrenness metaphor? Because the story was told in a time of exile when there seemed to be no future: The issue then is this: How can one assert that something which the empire judges to be impossible is possible for God? The answer is found in the memory.' The memory makes available to Israel in exile models, paradigms, and concrete references about old impossibilities which linger with power. The tale of Sarah and Abraham thus is told as a memory which continues to be actualized and fulfilled in this time in Israel's life. The power of this memory of impossibility works its transformative, subversive effect in the imagination of the present generation. Clearly only this memory, powerfully and passionately made available, prevents acceptance of imperial decisions about what is possible. p. 115

On the metaphor of the dry bones: In the powerful language of chapters 34--37, 40\_48, 19 Ezekiel speaks about a new future given by God beyond the lost city. The final test of vitality in ministry is to articulate concrete hope just when the community decides upon hopelessness. In 34:1--10 Ezekiel presents a harsh analysis of the shepherds (kings) who had used their power and office in exploitative ways. By way of contrast he enunciates the new rule in which the shepherd will genuinely care for the sheep (vv. 11--16). Very likely there is editorial work here reflecting a difference of opinion in the community. On the one hand, it is Yahweh himself who is offered as the new shepherd (v. 11). On the other hand, the hope is for a new David (v. 23), but either way, the ordering of social life will be humane and just: I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice. (v. 16) The newness anticipated is a restored political order with political institutions that will practice justice. The justice refused before 587 is now to be a social reality. The most familiar new possibility is the metaphor of resurrection in 37:1--14. It is clear that the language of "dry bones" and resurrection is precisely metaphorical, for in v. 12 the promise is "I will bring you home into the land of Israel." The hope is for homecoming for exiles. It is remarkable that this prophet who spent so many words on judgment and exile is the very same one who, in a new setting, can speak about hope so powerfully and so concretely. The homecoming is not presented on the basis of political analysis. Indeed, one could not see how that could happen under the Babylonian hegemony. The point is theological, not political. It is the "wind of God" which creates a new) future. That wind is beyond resistance from the empire or anyone else. p 66

The verse in Isaiah 43, that God 'has called you by name' and the rivers won't overwhelm you is a

favourite text for people in times of crisis - but what does it actually mean in its original context?:

The assurance, in the form it is cast in Isa. 43:1-5, is an announcement that sounds like a baptismal formula: "I have called you by name, you are mine." You belong to the hopes and memories of Yahwism. You do not belong to Babylon. You are mine, not theirs. Such a liturgical formula is not worth much unless it comes with an act of concrete solidarity, which presumably it did. This rhetorical act of solidarity is a life-changing assertion because it begins to dismantle the conventional assumption that Babylon is the only game in town. Think what kind of imagination it would take to envision and articulate an alternative identity! Such imagination is evident in the claim of salvation oracles in the midst of the empire. It is also evident in the claim of baptismal reassurance in the midst of an alien culture. It's a tragedy that so many look to the Old Testament prophets to buttress their current political beliefs and to mine predictions for some future end of the world scenario. This book shows how Ezekiel radically undermines such misuse of scripture: God is not congenial to our more liberal co-opting of the prophetic tradition. In some ways, unsettling as it is, this view of God is freeing, because it asserts that all human efforts at being right with God and gaining admission to God's presence are so dwarfed as to be irrelevant. The initiative for the relationship is held so closely by God as to discourage human possibility or even human anxiety about possibility. The key to Ezekiel's proclamation of God is this: God will not be mocked. God will not be presumed upon, trivialized, taken for granted, or drawn too close. God takes being God with utmost seriousness and will not be caught in any partisan alliance or any efforts at use. God will not be pressed into the service of any other cause, no matter how noble or compelling. This is an important point for us in ministry as the known world of the Western Enlightenment collapses, for we have arrived at a view of God which is essentially utilitarian. We use God either in conservative fashion to buttress morality and the American way of life or in liberal fashion to provide motivation for social change of various ideological kinds. In the tradition of Ezekiel, against such exploitations, one must talk not even about God's will but about God's person, who is first of all not even to be obeyed but to be honored, glorified, adored, and feared. For those who talk about homosexuality as an 'abomination' but neglect social justice: What Ezekiel found in Jerusalem was a widespread practice of idolatry, which he regards as an abomination. Such idolatries are attempts, misguided attempts, to secure the city by trust in other gods because the terms of security from Yahweh are too costly. Serious ministry as embodied in Ezekiel requires profound ethical commitment, but it requires an ethical commitment that is not reduced to a pet project. The juxtaposition of sexual morality and economic justice in chapter 18 is one that requires serious reflection. It is as though Ezekiel anticipates the critical reflection of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud and understands how

closely related to each other they are. The economic issues concern the unmasking of vested interests; the sexual agenda has to do with repression and with libertinism. This twofold agenda rooted in the issue of idolatry is precisely to the point of our own situation. The catalogue of righteousness in Ezekiel 18 has enough of a sexual agenda to satisfy any conservative who is worried about permissiveness. It has enough of an economic agenda for any liberal who is preoccupied with such public questions. The wonder of the statement is that they are there together. None of us may pick an item we prefer to the neglect of the others. The holy God intends that the two key "neighbor questions" (sexuality and economics) be sorted out on the basis of a right settlement of the God issue. Both issues are related to God's sovereignty and the distortion of idolatry.

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