



Community of Christ

Pacific Southwest International Mission Center

The Prophetic Imagination: A Brief Review and Study Guide

By Glenn Johnson

Walter J. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed., (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001)

Walter Brueggemann brings thorough research and scholarly insight to historical and modern questions of authority, oppression, and economics, in his seminal work: *The Prophetic Imagination*. Drawing extensively on the prophetic tradition modeled by Moses, Jeremiah, Second Isaiah, and Jesus of Nazareth, Brueggemann explores themes of prophetic criticism, grief, energizing, and amazement. This leads to an informed discussion of prophetic ministry and its practice today.

I believe many adult Sunday School classes would enjoy the theology of this text and will find its message, though written decades ago, surprisingly relevant today. What follows is a summary of the chapters and some discussion questions that you can use to prompt engagement with the text.

As you study the text together, it is recommended that the group leader select a hymn that can be read or sung and to begin each session with prayer.

Ch. 1. *The Alternative Community of Moses.* The “American ethos of consumerism” diminishes the church’s faith and activity (1). Brueggemann proposes that the prophetic task is to form an alternative consciousness (3). Every action of ministry ought to build a prophetic alternative community (4). “The task of prophetic ministry is to hold together criticism and energizing” (4).

For Brueggemann, the “covenantal tradition of Moses” forms the basis for insight into the prophetic function (5). The radical prophetic call for “alternative social reality” births a “theological cause” (6). In a break with “triumphalism and oppression,” the myths of empire are overturned by “the alternative religion of the freedom of God” (6). Moses substitutes political “justice and compassion” for “oppression and exploitation” (6-7). Moses’ prophetic activity centered on the intersection of the “religion of God’s freedom” and the “politics of human justice” (7).

Moses’ rendering of alternative consciousness arose through “criticizing and energizing” (9). The motif of grief in Israel’s history gives birth to prophetic criticizing (12). Prophetic criticism of the imperial consciousness yields energizing in three ways. 1. “...Energy comes from the embrace of inscrutable darkness” (14). 2. “*God is for us.* In an empire, no god is for anyone” (15-16). 3. Moses’ prophetic doxology in the Song of the Sea and the Song of Miriam energizes alternative life” (16-17).

Questions for consideration:

1. The author suggests that the prophetic task is to form an alternative consciousness and to build a prophetic alternative community. Can you think of examples in the church today where the voice of a prophetic alternative community has been heard?
2. What do you suppose Brueggemann means by “God’s freedom” as opposed to human freedom? In what ways can the activities of humans go against God’s freedom? In what ways can human actions embrace God’s freedom?
3. Why do you suppose criticizing and energizing are seen as related? In what ways must criticizing proceed energizing? Why is it important for energizing to follow prophetic criticism?

Ch. 2. Royal Consciousness: Countering the Counterculture. “Moses was not acting to overthrow a regime, but rather to overturn royal consciousness thereby permitting a “new reality to appear” (21). Moses’ concern with linguistic and epistemological matters is not less than his concern with social and political ones (21). Brueggemann’s analysis of Solomon’s reign is of a “self-serving achievement with its sole purpose the self-securing of the king and dynasty including harems; tax districts; elaborate bureaucracy; a standing army; fascination with wisdom; and conscripted labor. This agenda was pursued under the “umbrella of the Jerusalem temple” (23-24). Brueggemann explores three dimensions of Solomon’s achievement: affluence; oppressive social policy; and state religion (26-28). Through these means “the freedom of God is completely overcome” and “God is now ‘on call,’ and access to [God] is controlled by the royal court (28-29). Solomon: “countered *the economics of equality with the economics of affluence*”; “countered *the politics of justice with the politics of oppression*”; and “countered *the religion of God’s freedom with the religion of God’s accessibility*” (31). *Creation faith* and *messianism* hold theological promise for Israel but are coopted by royal consciousness (34-35). “The royal program of achievable satiation” leverages “management mentality,” an “official religion of optimism,” and “annulment of neighbor” to achieve a reality served by the royal consciousness (37).

Questions for consideration:

1. Brueggemann’s critique of Solomon shows how political and religious power can be utilized to oppress, control, and exploit. What examples can you think of today or in Christian history where these powers have combined in similar ways? Does separation of church and state ensure that this doesn’t happen?
2. What do you think is meant by “the royal consciousness”? In what ways can the royal consciousness exist even in non-monarchical societies? How does one guard against it?
3. Who gets left out of the “royal program of achievable satiation”? Why does that matter?

Ch. 3. Prophetic Criticizing and the Embrace of Pathos. Prophets are characterized by their use of “poetry and lyric” (40). Poetic imagination, which comes before implementation, challenges the dominant cultural reality (40). Conversely, royal consciousness fosters “numbness about death” (42). We cannot relate to death effectively, so we “deny it with numbness” (43). The task of prophetic imagination is to “offer symbols” that convey the “horror” and scale of death under empire; bring them to public attention; and render metaphor and detail to ignite candid passion (45). Therefore, the prophetic idiom is “the language of grief” (46).

Jeremiah models “prophetic imagination and ministry” (46-47). Jeremiah grieved for the “end of his people” and grieved that “no one would listen” (47). Jeremiah grieves at the “lack of resolution” but also feels empathy for “royal folk” (51). Jeremiah speaks midway through Israel’s history of grief between Amos and Jesus (56).

Questions for consideration:

1. Pass around copies of Doctrine and Covenants Section 161 and 163. Highlight or underline phrases that exemplify “poetry and lyric”. Discuss with the group why you selected certain passages and how they might be good examples of what Brueggemann is discussing.
2. Brueggemann says “the prophetic idiom is the language of grief.” What scriptural passages can you find that help illustrate the use of the language of grief in the prophetic idiom?
3. Why do you suppose Jeremiah felt empathy for “royal folk”? What was happening in his context that might evoke such empathy?

Ch. 4. *Prophetic Energizing and the Emergence of Amazement.* “...The prophetic alternative community is both critical and *energizing* (59). Royal consciousness fosters despair of new life whereas the prophetic task is to imagine the “newness that is at work in our history with God” (59-60). Royal consciousness opposes hope; new beginnings; and engenders despair (61-63). The prophetic task is to “offer symbols”, bring hope, and reveal “newness that redefines” (65-67). The “language of amazement,” as modeled in Second Isaiah, “serves as the peculiar paradigm for a prophet of hope to kings in despair” (68). Second Isaiah brings people back to the “doxology of Moses” (70) and energizes Israel “to fresh faith” (71). Second Isaiah offers three poetic inversions: “new song” (74); “birth to the barren” (75-76); and “alternative bread” to that of the empire (76).

Questions for consideration:

1. Pass around copies of Doctrine and Covenants Section 161 and 163. Highlight or underline phrases that exemplify “energizing” and the “language of amazement.” Discuss with the group why you selected certain passages and how they might be good examples of what Brueggemann is discussing.
2. Brueggemann says “the language of amazement” is modeled in Second Isaiah (typically considered to be chapters 40-66). What scriptural passages can you find that help illustrate the use of the language of amazement in second Isaiah?
3. What scriptural stories can you think of that illustrate new song, birth to the barren, or alternative bread? In what ways do these stories contain an inversion? What does Brueggemann mean by this?

Ch. 5. *Criticism and Pathos in Jesus of Nazareth.* Brueggemann relates “the prophetic ministry of criticism” to Jesus’ ministry (81). Jesus’ birth (82-84); kingdom teachings (84-88); compassionate ministry; and crucifixion (94-98) are all dimensions of Jesus’ prophetic criticism. Jesus embodied the “politics of justice and compassion” that “Jeremiah felt so poignantly” (99).

Questions for consideration:

1. What are some specific teachings or examples from Jesus’ ministry that illustrate “the prophetic ministry of criticism”?
2. Thinking specifically of the crucifixion, how does the betrayal, trials and condemnation of Jesus reveal a criticism of the standing order and authority of those times? Who was being criticized?
3. How is “the politics of justice and compassion” seen as a part of Jesus life and ministry? What examples may best illustrate and reinforce this view? Do you agree with it?

Ch. 6. *Energizing and Amazement in Jesus of Nazareth.* Now Brueggemann sets about showing how—in similitude to Second Isaiah—Jesus’ birth, ministry, teachings, and resurrection (102-113) energize and amaze the community in a way that revitalizes the “religion of God’s freedom and politics of justice and compassion” (101) and enables “dismantling of the royal consciousness” (102).

Questions for consideration:

1. What are some specific teachings or examples from Jesus’ ministry that illustrate “energizing and amazement in Jesus of Nazareth”?
2. How do these stories and teachings serve to revitalize the “religion of God’s freedom and politics of justice and compassion”? What might an alternative point of view be today and how would you respond to it?
3. What are some examples of ways that churches today might be engaged in “dismantling of the royal consciousness”? Is there room for such activity in a movement that espouses peace and nonviolence?

Ch. 7. *A Note on the Practice of Ministry.* Brueggemann summarizes by recounting how his review of the prophetic imagination found in Moses, Jeremiah, Second Isaiah, and ultimately in Jesus of Nazareth, models criticizing, dismantling, energizing, and amazement (115-116). Jesus of Nazareth practiced the most radical form of prophetic imagination. His death embodied the full dismantling of empire and his resurrection embodied the “new future given by God” (116). In terms of practical ministry, the task of prophetic ministry is “to evoke an alternative community.” It encompasses all aspects of ministry. A prophetic minister shares pain, overcomes numbness, and lets the reality of death “sink in.” Prophetic ministry penetrates despair, energizes, and affirms the future (117). Radical faith is a gift that employs “grieving about the present” to foster “the joy of the kingdom” (118).

Questions for consideration:

1. Thinking of your specific congregation or ministry group and its contexts, what is the “grief” that you face today? What are some examples of this in your community?
2. What specifically can your congregation or ministry group do to bring criticism and energizing and amazement in these situations? What would that look like? Who would be involved? How can you get started?
3. Prepare together a poster or art project that declares the joy of the kingdom in your context. Celebrate your time studying together and close with prayer.

Conclusion: Brueggemann’s clear and compelling analysis spans prophetic traditions from Moses to Jesus. In so doing, he reveals patterns in the prophetic imagination characterized by criticizing, dismantling, grieving, energizing, and amazement that overcome imperial oppression and invoke a new reality and hope for the future. “And finally, we have yet to learn it about God, who grieves in ways hidden from us and who waits to rejoice until [God’s] promises are fully kept” (119).

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