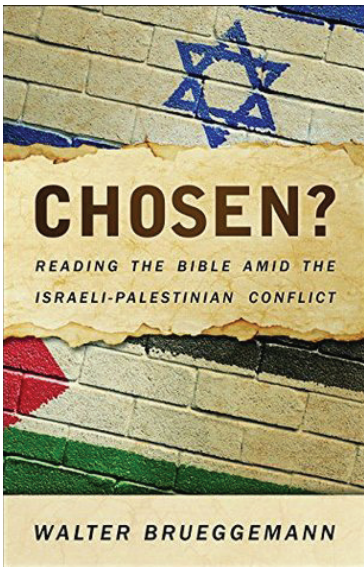


CHOOSING TO MISREAD?

Review by Gerald R. McDermott

CHOSEN? READING THE BIBLE AMID THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

by WALTER BRUEGGEMANN—Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, 108 pages.



Consider the following three items.

On October 3, 2015, a Palestinian terrorist stabbed four Israelis, including a two-year-old child, killing two. He then fired a gun at police who returned fire and killed him. The BBC ran a story under the headline, “Palestinian shot dead after Jerusalem attack kills two,” without informing its readers that it was the Palestinian who killed the two. Since that attack, nearly thirty Israelis have been killed, and scores of others injured in unprovoked knife assaults by Palestinians.

The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor reports that in 2015 the two Palestinian parties, Fatah and Hamas,

arbitrarily arrested Palestinian citizens at least 1,391 times. During that year, according to the Monitor, there were at least 179 cases of torture in Palestinian Authority (PA) prisons.

According to Palestinian journalist Khaled Abu Toameh, “Palestinians who beg to differ with PA President Mahmoud Abbas or one of his friends are called criminals and can expect to be interrogated and/or imprisoned.”¹

These are human rights abuses by Palestinian parties against other Palestinians.

One would think that these kinds of terrorist attacks and human rights violations would be part of any honest and balanced treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

That in fact is exactly what the renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann (emeritus professor at Columbia Theological Seminary) calls for in his new little book, *Chosen? Reading the Bible Amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. He criticizes accounts of the conflict that are “indifferent to human rights,” provide “unconditional support” for one side, lack “courage” and “honesty,” are “mere ideology” because they are “one-dimensional” and

do not pay “attention to facts on the ground.” Treatments of this complex subject should be “prophetic” and “truth-telling.”

Unfortunately, this little book fails Brueggemann’s own test. Not once do Palestinians or their governments (the PA and Hamas) come in for any criticism. The reader is led to believe that human rights violations are committed by Israelis alone. The fact that the human rights of Palestinians are violated more often by fellow Palestinians than by Israelis is conspicuously missing from this book. I remember my hike across Galilee in 2009 when a burly Palestinian Christian whispered to me, “Our real enemy is not the Israeli government but our Muslim cousins who attack us for our faith.”

Not once in this book are we told that for more than four decades Palestinians have cheered their fellow Palestinians who have deliberately attacked non-combatant Jewish elderly, women, and children. The present PA names squares on the West Bank after terrorists who have killed innocent Israelis, including children. Are these not human rights violations?

Brueggeman charges that the Israeli government has asserted its claim to the land “without compromise” and “refuses to

engage in any serious negotiations” (49, 51). Perhaps this is why he never mentions historical evidence that makes these claims risible: Israel’s giving up the Sinai peninsula in 1979—more than ninety percent of the land it occupied after the 1967 war—and unilaterally withdrawing from Gaza in 2005. In 2000 the Israeli government offered to return 92% of the West Bank, but the Palestinians refused to accept the offer.

Brueggemann claims that the Netanyahu government does not seem interested in pursuing a two-state solution (58). Although he criticizes those who don’t pay attention to “facts on the ground,” he seems not to have paid attention to the facts outlined by (Palestinian) Toameh:

No Palestinian leader has a mandate to reach an everlasting peace agreement with Israel. No leader in Ramallah or the Gaza Strip is authorized to end the conflict with Israel. Any Palestinian who dares to talk about concessions to Israel is quickly denounced as a traitor. Those who believe that whoever succeeds Abbas will be able to make real concessions to Israel are living in an illusion.

There are two main reasons why Palestinians will not sign a real and meaningful peace agreement with Israel—at least not in the foreseeable future. The first is a total lack of education for peace. The second is related to the absence of a leader who is authorized—or has the guts—to embark on such a risky mission.

Americans and Europeans who keep talking about the need to revive the stalled peace process in the Middle East continue to ignore these two factors. They continue to insist that peace is still possible and that the ball is in Israel’s court. The Americans and Europeans fail to acknowledge that in order to achieve peace, the leaders must prepare their people for compromise and tolerance.²

Brueggemann charges that Israel “relies on military power without reference to covenantal restraints” (56). This is laughable for anyone familiar with Israel’s practice of warfare. Consider the 2014 war with Hamas in Gaza. According to the High Level International Military Group, a consortium of some of the world’s leading military experts, Israel went out of its way to minimize civilian casualties and observe international law during that war, even to the point of costing the lives of its own soldiers and citizens. Despite a daily barrage of rockets, often launched from schools, mosques, and hospitals within Gaza, Israel went to great lengths to follow laws governing armed conflict. The fighting was sparked by daily rocket and tunnel attacks mounted from Gaza, as well as the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teens by Hamas operatives, and lasted for seven weeks, leaving more than 2,000 dead. “Israel not only met a reasonable international standard of observance of the laws of armed conflict, but in many cases significantly exceeded that standard,” states the report.³ Gen. Klaus Naumann, former chief of staff of the German armed forces, observed, “A measure of the seriousness with which Israel

took its moral duties and its responsibilities under the laws of armed conflict is that in some cases Israel’s scrupulous adherence to the laws of war cost Israeli soldiers’ and civilians’ lives.”⁴

Brueggemann makes not only historical mistakes but exegetical and theological ones as well. His most serious is the supersessionist mistake, which claims that the church supersedes Israel, so that for the New Testament authors God is supposedly no longer interested in the Jewish people or the land of Israel. He advises that “we will do well to avoid such [overt arguments] in the church,” but claims that “Paul insisted that the early church was ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16), and the lyrical articulation of 1 Peter 2:9-10 clearly intends to preempt the claims of ancient Israel from Sinai for the church as the carrier of the covenant” (56).

Translation according to Brueggemann: Paul and Peter believed that God had transferred the covenant from Israel to the church. This is the false claim that most Catholic and Protestant theologians rejected after the Holocaust made them ask how the most Christianized country in Europe could have murdered six million Jews. The fact of the matter is that the New Testament never once uses the term “New Israel” for the church. In every one of the eighty times that the word “Israel” is used by New Testament writers, it refers to the Jewish descendants of Abraham. When Paul refers to the “Israel of God” at the end of Galatians, he probably means what he called the “commonwealth of Israel” in Ephesians 2:12, Israel as the (faithful) Jewish people with Gentiles as associate members. This was

what he called the “olive tree of Israel” in Romans 11:17-24, into which believing Gentiles were grafted. Of Jews who did not accept Jesus, Paul said they were “enemies” of the gospel but nevertheless still “beloved for the sake of their forefathers” and their “calling” as God’s people was “irrevocable” (Rom 11:28-29). In other words, God was still in covenant with the Jewish people, even those who had not yet accepted the messiah.

Peter held the same view. He proved it by his second speech in Jerusalem, where he said the day was coming when Israel would be restored to its land as the prophets had foretold. Peter used the same word—*apokatastasis*—for the “times of restoration” (Acts 3:21) that the prophets used repeatedly in the Greek version of the Old Testament for God’s vindication of his covenantal promises to Israel.

Brueggemann’s real opponent in this book is Zionism, which claims that there is a connection between the Hebrew Bible’s promise of the land and the return of Jews to establish a polity in the land in recent times. Brueggemann complains that Zionism “disregards the Deuteronomic *if*” (36)—that Israel will control the land only if she lives up to the terms of the covenant. He suggests that modern Israel has not done so because of its “oppression” (57) of Palestinians, and that the essence of Judaism has nothing to do with land anyway. “Judaism consists most elementally in interpretation of and obedience to the Torah,” which “can be done anywhere” (36).

This claim ignores what is central to the Hebrew Bible. As the great Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad put it, “Of all

the promises made to the patriarchs it was that of the land that was the most prominent and decisive.” Land is the fourth most frequent noun or substantive in the Old Testament. It is more dominant statistically than the idea of covenant itself.⁵ When the biblical God calls out a people for himself, he does so in an earthy way, by making the gift of a particular land an integral aspect of that calling.

Brueggemann is right about the Deuteronomic *if* in chapter 28 of that book of the Bible—Israel was told she would lose control of the land if she was unfaithful to the covenant. But what he misses is that even when Israel was driven off the land because of her infidelity to the covenant, her prophets said the land was still hers. She had lost control of the land, but she still held title to it. In exile Jeremiah wrote that God was promising to “bring them [the people of Israel] back to *their own land that I gave to their ancestors*” (Jer 16:15; 12: 14-17). God told Ezekiel that he had driven the people of Israel off “*their own soil*” because “they defiled it with their ways and their deeds; their conduct in my sight was like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period.” This was why he “scattered them among the nations.” But there was coming a time when “I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into *your own land*” (Ezek 36:17-19, 24).

Brueggemann argues that Israel does not deserve to control the land because she excludes the Palestinians “either by law or coercive violence” and by various kinds of “oppression” (7, 57).

Is that true? Does Israel exclude and oppress its Palestinian

minorities? Of course Israel is not a perfect country. It has not always treated its minorities with justice. But here is what one of those minorities has written:

We minorities get to enjoy nearly-free medical care in one of the best medical systems in the world. We have full economic freedom to start a business, and participate fully in one of the most vibrant economies in the world, and certainly the healthiest economy in the Middle East. Our children get free education in excellent schools, and we Christians can send them to schools that reinforce our faith. We feel privileged indeed.⁶

Palestinians in Israel have more freedom of speech and religion than in any other Arab country in the Middle East. King Hussein massacred thousands of Palestinians during the “Black September” of 1970 for protesting against him, and all the Arab states backed him up. Hamas in Gaza slaughtered almost one thousand Fatah Palestinians in order to consolidate its own rule, and the Arabs kept silent. Israel allows its Arab citizens to practice their democratic rights, to protest and even curse the state, and still enjoy freedom from the Zionist state. Arabs hold seats in the Knesset and from those privileged positions criticize the government at will. Nowhere else in the Middle East does this kind of political freedom, especially for minorities, exist. Why are these anomalies never cited by Brueggemann?

Does Brueggemann know that the government of Israel has affirmative action programs for Arabs?

Affirmative action policies initiated under Ehud Olmert were accelerated during the Netanyahu administration. These prioritized economic development, including allocating funds for joint industrial parks in Arab and Jewish towns. Subsidies helped firms hire Arab labor and expanded transportation infrastructure, which allowed Arabs to reach employment sites. These ventures were so successful that the government began setting up industrial parks and employment offices exclusively in Arab towns. In addition, the Israeli government developed a five-year plan for improving Arab education and established a special unit in the prime minister's office

to promote economic development in the Arab community.⁷

If Brueggeman knows about these practices—which are strange for a government that supposedly wants to “exclude” non-Jews—why does he not acknowledge them? If he does not know about them, he is not paying attention to “sociopolitical facts on the ground” (53).

Walter Bruggemann is a distinguished Old Testament scholar. His enormous prestige will help perpetuate, through this book, distortions and untruths about Israel, both biblical and modern. Sadly, *Chosen?* is an example of the one-sided propaganda which he says he deplores. P

Gerald R. McDermott is editor of *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (InterVarsity Academic, forthcoming).

Endnotes

1 Toameh, “U.S., Europe Fund Torture by Palestinian Authority,” *Gatestone Institute* (Feb. 26, 2016), <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/7509/palestinians-torture-funding>

2 Khaled Abu Toameh, “Why Palestinians Cannot Make Peace with Israel,” *Gatestone* (July 13, 2015), <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/6142/palestinians-peace-israel>

3 “Key Preliminary Findings of the High Level International Military Group on the Gaza Conflict,” *UN Watch*, <http://blog.unwatch.org/index.php/2015/06/12/key-findings-of-the-high-level-international-military-group-on-the-gaza-conflict/> (accessed July 6, 2015).

4 *Ibid.*

5 To learn more about the use of the use of the word “land” in the Old Testament, see McDermott, Gerald R., “A New Christian Zionism,” *Providence: A Journal of Christianity & American Foreign Policy* (Winter 2016), p. 61. Or read online at <https://providencemag.com/2016/04/new-christian-zionism/>

6 Shadi Khalloul, “Theology and morality,” in McDermott, ed., *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (InterVarsity academic, 2016), chap. 10.

7 Robert Cherry, “Netanyahu and the Israeli Arabs: The Untold Story,” *Mida* (July 9, 2015), <http://mida.org.il/2015/07/09/netanyahu-and-the-israeli-arabs-the-untold-story/>