

A BOOK REVIEW
“THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION” Second Edition

MARCH 22, 2024

TITLE OF BOOK: “The Prophetic Imagination”, Second Edition.

AUTHOR: Walter Brueggemann, the William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, and author of a number of books on the Old Testament.

PUBLISHER AND DATE OF PUBLICATION: Fortress Press, 2001.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I, your Reviewer, must admit from the outset of this Review, that I, likely, should not even write this Review. As one who has no formal academic, theological training, I am reluctant to write a Review about a book which I, admittedly, do not understand.

Our Author is, obviously, a brilliant, talented writer and academician. He would, very likely take great, justified offense at my statement that I simply do not “Get This Book”. I approached it with great interest, and have read it and re-read substantial parts of it with the true goal of understanding it. However, my desires and efforts notwithstanding I am left with the question: “So What?”. I understand that it is our Author’s desire to criticize what he believes the current status of the American Church, writ large, to be and to try to ignite in that Church a burning passion and fire, akin to the fire and passion of the Old Testament Prophets, to bring about grief, sadness, sorrow and laments for the current ills of our “consumerist culture”, and its excessiveness, and its failures to achieve social justice for our poor and oppressed people, and to have a vision, again akin to that of the Old Testament Prophets, of a completely alternative community, as envisioned by God, in which such ills are no longer present. Ok, so I get that. I understand that, but I fail to grasp how, with his brilliant writing, our Author adds anything to the already ongoing conversations about the roles of the Church which are far more understandable and concrete than the, frankly hard to grasp, ethereal (although brilliantly worded) words of our Author.

I admit it. I do not understand the significance of this book. I cannot recommend it for the hard working, time crunched pastors and church leaders who, I hope, read these Reviews. That said, my wish is that someone, who is far smarter than me, reads this Review and takes it as a personal challenge to read this book and understand it and then tell me how wrong I am in my conclusions. Frankly, I want to be wrong, but, at this point, I cannot recommend this book.

I am going to state a couple of further observations, which are purely based in my personal opinions and sense of this book. As I read on in this book, I oftentimes felt that I was reading some theologically based “political argument”, or, perhaps, a veiled argument for the justification of “Liberation Theology”. As I got through this book, hoping that I would find ending conclusions which would shed light on the entire book, I came to the Author’s observations of currently ongoing efforts or projects which he believes exemplify the efforts which the Church should be making in view of “Prophetic Imagination”, that being what he believes to be the “imagination” of Moses and the other Old Testament Prophets, and of the ultimate Prophet, Jesus, that God can and will bring about (apparently before the eschaton, as we all know that God will bring it about at the eschaton) alternative communities in which the current values of the predominate cultures (what he calls “The Royal Culture”) are destroyed and God’s true values and ethics (including complete social justice) for the poor and town trodden are instilled. One of those “exemplary projects” is the one that is fueled by “the passion and strategies of Saul Alinsky”, a political

activist who has authored a book which, I think, describes political practices which many of us would abhor and which have (my opinion and only my opinion) led to much of the very unfortunate social and political abuses and lack of civility and decorum of our current day society. Forgive me Mr. Author and Mr. Alinsky if I am wrong in this conclusion, but I site this conclusion as being one, in part, which leads me to an overriding impression of this book that it is actually a form of a theologically expressed social or political argument, and that it is less one that will help our pastors and church leaders in guiding their congregations. Now I will admit that other examples cited by our Author, including the wonderful efforts of our former president, Jimmy Carter, are wonderful examples of Christians and Christianity in action, but I do not see how this book helps to bring about additional, highly laudable efforts comparable to these examples.

So, Dear Reader, I am asked to give my opinions. I have done that here. If you feel challenged, as I hope you do, to prove me wrong, then please read this book and tell me how wrong I am. I welcome such a discussion.

WHAT IS THE AUTHOR DOING WITH WHAT THE AUTHOR IS SAYING?

Look, this Author is highly credentialed and has a great reputation among his peers in the academic and pastoral community. So, he does not deserve having some cretin like me leave you with nothing but negative impressions of his book, as to which he has obviously expended substantial efforts and real passion. So, let me do the best I can do to try to do some justice to this Question about What The Author Is Doing With What He Is Saying.

I think that this question can be best answered by brief reviews of the opening "Preface to the First Edition", and the opening of the "Summary" provided by Chapter 7, the last full Chapter in the Book. In the Preface the Author states that he believes that "the time may be ripe in the church for serious consideration of prophecy as a crucial element in ministry"..... (and that it is time)...."for a sobering and a return to the most basic issues of biblical faith". In order to try to bring about this awakening in the Church for a "return to the most basic issues of biblical faith", our Author writes, extensively, about the God given roles of Moses, and the other Old Testament Prophets (particularly Jeremiah and Isaiah) and of Jesus, the ultimate Prophet, which (and I am really summarizing the Author's position) were to bring to light the current failing status of the then existing cultures (what the Author refers to as "the Royal" cultures of Pharaoh, and of the Jewish Monarchs, and of the Roman and religious and political leaders of the times of Jesus), and to "lament", with great sadness, the failures of those dying cultures, and to give the abused, poor, down trodden and neglected people of those cultures hope and energy to look forward to God designed, alternative communities in which all people would be treated with compassion and justice. In other words, the roles of the Prophets were to lift the benumbed spirits of the down trodden so as to recognize the ills of their societies and to understand that those ills were "not the way things were supposed to be", and to have hope for alternative communities and cultures in which such ills did not exist. So, in the Author's view, the Church has a Prophetic Mission (which it has totally lost) akin to that of Moses, the Old Testament Prophets and Jesus to bring about, in its people (who the Author believes to be satiated or benumbed by affluence and consumerism, and to the dictates of the current "Royal" cultures) to bring about a realization that "things are not the way they were, by God, designed to be" and that God can, working through them, bring about alternative communities in which things are at least closer to the way in which God intended them to be.

Quoting from Chapter 7, the Summary, the Author states, in summarizing his arguments, that "Something new happened in history with the Exodus and the Moses movement...(in that)...Moses intended the dismantling of the oppressive empire of Pharaoh; and on the other hand, he intended the formation of a new community focused on the religion of God's freedom (meaning that God is completely

free of all human constraints to do what He wants to do-my insertion) and the politics of justice and compassion. The *dismantling* begins in the groans and complaints of his people: the *energizing* beings in the doxologies of the new community.” The Author points out that this new community was “too radical” for Israel, which, in effect, reverted to the old history of Pharaoh, with Monarchs (i.e. kings) who acted, generally, in their own self interest and in the interest of preserving the status quo at the expense of numerous people. The Author refers to the culture created by these monarchs (who failed in their God given duties) as the “Royalist Culture” (and he would find that such cultures exist today, with the Church being absorbed by such Royalist Cultures). The roles of the Old Testament Prophets, and later of Jesus, were to challenge, with brilliant words, this status quo and its injustices and to bring about an energy that would ultimately give rise to an alternative, radical new community built on passion and justice for all people. Summarizing (again my summary, which is far from complete), in the Author’s view the status of our current day cultures are not unlike those of the Biblical cultures, and that our Church has become so compromised and encultured by our cultures as to make it incapable of challenging this status, a God given prophetic role, which it is obligated to fulfill.

With these probably inadequate summaries, I leave it to you, Dear Reader, to read this book and challenge my conclusions. The book is a rather short one, of just over 115 pages, so you can read it without expending a huge amount of your valuable time in doing so.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

I believe that you can get a reasonably good grasp of the contents of this book by reading the opening Preface, and Chapter 7, and then, perhaps, follow up with the ending “Postscript on Practice”. If you then find that the contents of this book might be of interest, then you can read it in its entirety.

IS THIS BOOK SUITABLE FOR INCLUSION IN THE TEI LIBRARY AND/OR FOR USE IN TEI/ECLI CLASSES?

This book should be retained in the TEI Library. It can provide a very interesting, somewhat alternative view about the roles of Moses and the Old Testament Prophets, and, possibly, about the roles of the Church today. However, this book would not, in my view, be of much use in any classes of TEI or ECLI, although some references to its contents might be made in a class, or any part of a class, where the Prophets are being discussed, such as, possibly, a Class on “Bible Survey”.

APOLOGIES

Again, I offer apologies for the somewhat negative tone of this Review. Our Author is obviously a brilliant and talented academic theologian and his book justifies a better treatment than I have provided in this Review. Having completed this Review, I have continued to reflect upon (and actually dream about) the contents of this book. I have concluded, and concede that, leaving aside the rather obvious political undertones of the book, the Author does have a point about the current status of some (certainly not all) congregations of our Church. You sometimes get the feeling that some congregations are more designed, if not in fact exclusively designed, to help its congregants “feel better about themselves. Many sermons seem to be directed to solely to the individuals in the congregation, in the hopes of their achieving some “self help”. Now this critical remark is obviously not one that is appropriately directed to all congregations, but it might fit as to some of them, in which there appears to be a reluctance to critically recognize the various obvious ills of the cultures or societies in which the congregants exist. So, maybe, the Author has a point, but that point is not one that is obviously made by his book.

With Apologies

Dan Simon