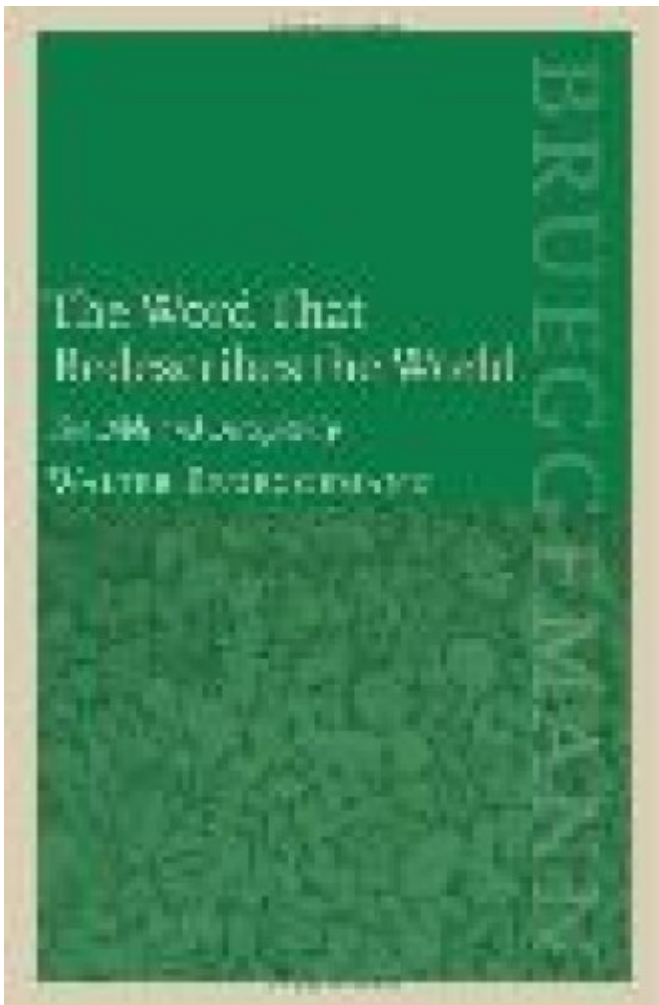


The Word That Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship

reviewed by [Dennis Olson](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

In Review



The Word That Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship

Walter Brueggemann
Fortress

What is the underlying cultural script or metanarrative that guides the values and lives of 21st-century North Americans? And in what ways does the Bible offer an alternative and opposing cultural script? These questions animate the latest collection of essays by Walter Brueggemann.

Of course, some evangelicals on the Christian right have their own account of the dominant cultural script and the Bible's countervoice. They point an accusing finger at what they see as the dangerous loss of prayer and of God in public and political life, and they lament the loss of moral clarity and backbone and the erosion of what they define as family and biblical values.

Brueggemann, emeritus professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, agrees that the Bible offers a strong counterscript to contemporary North American culture. However, his diagnosis of the current script and his understanding of the Bible's antidote are quite different from those of right-wing evangelicals. Brueggemann has been a consistent, popular and prolific advocate for a much more politically liberal but at the same time deeply theological reading of the Bible.

"Counterscripting" is what Brueggemann sees as the Bible's primary strategy for evangelism and discipleship. The thesis of this, his eighth collection of essays, is that contemporary North Americans are unavoidably saturated by a "technological-therapeutic-militaristic-consumerist" ideology, or script, imposed by a combination of arrogant U.S. imperialism and international corporate capitalism. The Bible's counterscript exposes the shallowness and false promises of this familiar cultural ideology. The true and genuine biblical alternative affirms that God, not human superpowers or corporations, is in charge of the world and its ultimate destiny. The world is "upheld by cosmic, holy, sovereign fidelity" toward those who are vulnerable, poor, humble and yet hopeful.

The essays fall into three large sections. Four essays focus on how the biblical text can be preached and taught in congregations in ways that create memory, faith, hope and love in the midst of a culture of amnesia, doubt, despair and selfishness. The next four deal with practical issues of urbanism, evangelism, environmentalism and ecumenism. The third set features a pair of lectures delivered at the inauguration of the new president of Union Seminary in New York, Joseph Hough, who asked Brueggemann to speak on the themes of tradition, pluralism and solidarity with the poor, whereupon Brueggemann offered his "vision for a new

church and a new century.” The final essay in this concluding section explores the meaning of patriotism “for citizens of the penultimate superpower.”

Throughout the essays, Brueggemann focuses on the variety of Old Testament responses to Israel’s exile to Babylon in 587 BCE. “The great theological reality” of the Hebrew scriptures is “the failure of Jerusalem, the end of the hegemony, . . . the reality of exile.” The church in the West, he argues, is in a situation analogous to that of the exiles of ancient Israel—once in power, now surrounded by other powers and empires that compete for allegiance and loyalty. Brueggemann seeks to persuade readers to go back and attend carefully to ancient Israel’s scripture—its complex and multilayered rhetoric, its dialectical thought, its passionate poetry, its gripping counternarrative of identity and vocation.

To that end, Brueggemann redefines the traditional rubrics of evangelism and discipleship. A renewed evangelism means speaking good-news truth to bad-news power. Discipleship involves counterscripting people back into their true baptismal identity, an identity that is peculiar and distinct as well as pluralist and open to the other. Evangelism and discipleship involve biblically retexting a community into both trusting and obeying, hoping and doing, asserting the self and giving up the self in at least a provisional way for the sake of others. Brueggemann uncovers these and countless other dialectical polarities in his detailed reading of biblical texts; they give his work the ring of authenticity and an adaptability to various contexts and issues. Although at times he is less persuasive when generalizing about large complexes of biblical material and about complicated social realities, he continues to be an important voice describing both the world as it is and the world as God would have it be.