

Hope Restored  
Biblical Imagination against Empire

*Walter Brueggemann*

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

The Walter Brueggemann Library

Davis Hankins, *Editor*

Other books in this series:

*Deliver Us: Salvation and the Liberating God of the Bible*

*Our Hearts Wait: Worshiping through Praise and Lament in the Psalms*

*We happily dedicate this volume to our  
teachers, advisors, mentors, and advocates,  
James Muilenburg (Brueggemann) and  
Carol Newsom (Hankins). When our hopes flag,  
we remember that they hoped in us.*

# Contents

Series Preface by Walter Brueggemann	ix
Editor's Introduction by Davis Hankins	xiii

## **Part One: Introducing Biblical Hope**

1. The Bible as Literature of Hope	3
2. Living toward a Vision	15

## **Part Two: The Torah: Hope in Promises and Expectations**

3. The Open-Ended Hope of the Torah	31
4. God's Promises and Provision: Exegetical and Homiletical Focus	45

## **Part Three: The Prophets: Hope for Restoration**

5. The Prophets: Deep Memories, Passionate Convictions, and New Hopes	65
6. Hope for Well-Being in Second and Third Isaiah: Exegetical and Homiletical Focus	81

## **Part Four: The Writings: Hope of Transformation**

7. Hope Transformed in the Writings: Exegetical Focus (Daniel 2–4)	101
8. Hope in God's Future, Grounded in Holiness (Daniel 1; 7–12)	117

viii Contents

9. The Nagging Hope of the Lament Psalms: Exegetical and Homiletical Focus	133
----------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

**Part Five: Conclusion**

10. Embracing the Transformation: A Comment on Missionary Preaching	153
---------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

Acknowledgments	169
-----------------	-----

Notes	171
-------	-----

## Series Preface

*I* have been very pleased that David Dobson and his staff at Westminster John Knox Press have proposed this extended series of republications of my work. Indeed, I know of no old person who is not pleased to be taken seriously in old age! My first thought, in learning of this proposed series, is that my life and my work have been providentially fortunate in having good companions all along the way who have both supported me and for the most part kept me honest in my work. I have been blessed by the best teachers, who have prepared me to think both critically and generatively. I have been fortunate to be accompanied by good colleagues, both academic and pastoral, who have engaged my work. And I have been gifted to have uncommonly able students, some of whom continue to instruct me in the high art of Old Testament study.

The long years of my work that will be represented in this series reflect my slow process of finding my own voice, of sorting out accents and emphases, and of centering my work on recurring themes that I have judged to merit continuing attention. The result of that slow process is that over time my work is marked by repetition and reiteration, as well as contradiction, change of mind, and ambiguity, all of which belong to seeing my work as an organic whole as I have been given courage and insight. In the end I have settled on recurring themes (reflected in the organization of this series) that I hope I have continued to treat with imagination, so that my return to them is not simply reiteration but is critically generative of new perspective and possibility.

In retrospect I can identify two learnings from the philosopher and hermeneut Paul Ricoeur that illumine my work. Ricoeur has given me names for what I have been doing, even though I was at work on such matters before I acquired Ricoeur's terminology. First, in his book *Freud and Philosophy* (1965), Ricoeur identifies two moves that are essential for interpretation. On the one hand there is "suspicion." By this term Ricoeur means critical skepticism. In biblical study "suspicion" has taken the form of historical criticism, in which the interpreter doubts the "fictive" location and function of the text and hypothesizes about the "real, historical" location and function of the text. On the other hand there is "retrieval," by which Ricoeur means the capacity to reclaim what is true in the text after due "suspicion." My own work has included measures of "suspicion," because a grounding in historical criticism has been indispensable for responsible interpretation. My work, however, is very much and increasingly tilted toward "retrieval," the recovery of what is theologically urgent in the text. My own location in a liberal-progressive trajectory of interpretation has led me to an awareness that liberal-progressives are tempted to discard "the baby" along with "the bath." For that reason my work has been to recover and reclaim, I hope in generative imaginative ways, the claims of biblical faith.

Second and closely related, Ricoeur has often worked with a grid of "precritical/critical/postcritical" interpretation. My own schooling and that of my companions has been in a critical tradition; that enterprise by itself, however, has left the church with little to preach, teach, or trust. For that reason my work has become increasingly postcritical, that is, with a "second naiveté," a readiness to engage in serious ways the claims of the text. I have done so in a conviction that the alternative metanarratives available to us are inadequate and the core claims of the Bible are more adequate for a life of responsible well-being. Both liberal-progressive Christians and fundamentalist Christians are tempted and seduced by alternative narratives that are elementally inimical to the claims of the Bible; for that reason the work of a generative exposition of biblical claims seems to me urgent. Thus I anticipate that this series may be a continuing invitation to the ongoing urgent work of exposition that both makes clear the singular claims of the Bible and exposes the inadequacy of competing narratives that, from a biblical perspective, amount to

idolatry. It is my hope that such continuing work will not only give preachers something substantive to preach and give teachers something substantive to teach, but will invite the church to embrace the biblical claims that it can “trust and obey.”

My work has been consistently in response to the several unfolding crises facing our society and, more particularly, the crises faced by the church. Strong market forces and ideological passions that occupy center stage among us sore tempt the church to skew its tradition, to compromise its gospel claim, and to want to be “like the nations” (see 1 Sam. 8:5, 20), that is, without the embarrassment of gospel disjunction. Consequently I have concluded, over time, that our interpretive work must be more radical in its awareness that the claims of faith increasingly contradict the dominant ideologies of our time. That increasing awareness of contradiction is ill-served by progressive-liberal accommodation to capitalist interests or, conversely, it is ill-served by the packaged reductions of reactionary conservatism. The work we have now to do is more complex and more demanding than either progressive-liberal or reactionary-conservative offers. Thus our work is to continue to probe this normative tradition that is entrusted to us that is elusive in its articulation and that hosts a Holy Agent who runs beyond our explanatory categories in irascible freedom and in bottomless fidelity.

I am grateful to the folk at Westminster John Knox and to a host of colleagues who continue to engage my work. I am profoundly grateful to Davis Hankins, on the one hand, for his willingness to do the arduous work of editing this series. On the other hand, I am grateful to Davis for being my conversation partner over time in ways that have evoked some of my better work and that have fueled my imagination in fresh directions. I dare anticipate that this coming series of republication will, in generative ways beyond my ken, continue to engage a rising generation of interpreters in bold, courageous, and glad obedience.

Walter Brueggemann



## Editor's Introduction

*I* began theological education just as Walter Brueggemann was scheduled to retire at Columbia Theological Seminary. I knew very little about the academic study of religion, probably even less about the state of biblical scholarship at the turn of the twenty-first century, yet somehow I knew enough to take every possible course with Dr. Brueggemann. After retiring, Walter continued to teach a course periodically and work from his study on campus—and he always insisted that it and any pastor's work space be called a “study” rather than an “office”! But before he retired, during his last and my first year at Columbia, I took six different courses in biblical studies, including three with Walter. In my memory, I spent that academic year much like St. Thecla as she sat in a windowsill and listened to the teachings of the apostle Paul. According to her mother's descriptive flourish, Thecla, “clinging to the window like a spider, lays hold of what is said by him with a strange eagerness and fearful emotion.” It was for me as it had been for Thecla. I imagine my mother would empathize with hers.

Longtime readers as well as those encountering Walter's words for the first time will discover in the volumes of the Walter Brueggemann Library the same soaring rhetoric, engaging intelligence, acute social analysis, moral clarity, wit, generosity, and grace that make it so enlightening and enjoyable to learn from and with Walter Brueggemann. The world we inhabit is broken, dominated by the special interests of the wealthy, teeming with misinformation, divided by entrenched social hierarchies, often despairing before looming ecological catastrophe, and callously indifferent, if not aggressively

predatory, toward those facing increasing deprivation and immiseration. In these volumes readers will find Walter at his best, sharply naming these dynamics of brokenness and richly engaging biblical traditions to uncover and chart alternative forms of collective life that promise to be more just, more merciful, and more loving.

Each volume in the Walter Brueggemann Library coheres around a distinct theme that is a prominent concern across Walter's many publications. The contents of the volumes consist of materials taken from a variety of his previously published works. In other words, I have compiled whole chapters or articles, sections, snippets for some volumes, and at times even just a line or two from Walter's publications, and sought to weave them together to create a new book that coheres around a specific theme, in this case the theme of hope in the Bible.

Familiar readers will know that Brueggemann's work is filled with edgy social critique, sharp indictments against rampant corruption, complicity, and indifference. His polemics are aimed especially at the reigning ideas, practices, and values in the global North and West, the United States in particular. But Brueggemann's pointed critiques are never isolated denunciations; they are always laying the groundwork for proposing alternatives. He repeatedly strives to imagine other ways of living, putting forward alternative visions, policy platforms, and defining values for those who are open to and hoping for such alternatives. His *reactions to reject* prevailing ideologies in the West invariably become the baseline for *proactively projecting* the shape, practices, and values characteristic of an alternative social order. For Brueggemann, God is the source and agent who makes such an alternative possible, and in the Bible he discovers revelatory texts that can instruct and inspire communities to hope for and follow that divine agent who is not determined by present arrangements.

Brueggemann's vision of biblical hope functions, first, to distance us from the whole ensemble of resources, technologies, labor, ideas, and social, legal, religious, and political relationships that organize our existence in the world and reproduce it into the future. That is, biblical hope calls out as incomplete and contingent all the ways that our lives are organized, produced, and reproduced—and thus leaves them open to change: "Hope keeps the present arrangement open

and provisional" (chap. 2, p. 15). Surprisingly, or unsurprisingly, then, hope emerges primarily among those who grieve the prevailing forces that shape our social life, and who most long for that change. Hope is therefore also an exercise in human creativity and freedom. But enlivening that creativity and freedom to transform the prevailing reality, Brueggemann claims, requires the activation of liberated human imaginations.

Brueggemann's repeated demonstration that hope necessarily involves human imagination is one of his great contributions to our understanding of a specifically biblical hope. Imagination in this sense refers to the dual capacities of human beings both *to perceive* the contradictions, exclusions, and limitations that are produced by the worlds in which they live, and also *to project* other, better realities into those same spaces. And yet Brueggemann consistently distinguishes hope from optimism, evolution, progress, and other similar concepts that can emerge immanently out of present arrangements. For him, the latter are fully compatible with and even at the heart of contemporary social arrangements that are always promising a better future—if only we could be more productive, and if only we could purchase improved, newer, and more commodities. Biblical hope is not grounded in the prevailing system that always promises and never delivers satisfaction from higher productivity and more consumption. Biblical hope is not driven by a desire for personal pleasures but is instead oriented toward what the Bible variously imagines as the common good, a flourishing public world that manifests God's *shalom*.

Brueggemann's approach to the biblical texts is similarly dialectical, attentive to how they, like we, are torn between propagating the status quo and projecting hopeful alternatives. The Bible, like its contemporary communities of interpretation, emerged out of and intervened in particular social contexts; it never simply reflects those contexts, nor is it fully determined by them. This is in part because any social context is contradictory, incomplete—not capable of fully determining anything—and also because the biblical texts themselves are open ended, dynamic, and capable of generating fresh meanings through new interpretations in different times and places. They do not have singular or even precise meanings—a hopeful prospect in itself. In Brueggemann's view, texts should be seen as shaped by but

also capable of reshaping particular social formations, open to new meanings and futures. And interpretation should, ultimately, consider how it is also rooted in, and capable of uprooting, the contexts of readers themselves. Brueggemann does all this in these chapters, which is why his work characteristically opens the biblical texts to potential collaborations with religious and political practices. His goals are never simply to grasp the past or even to understand the present, but always also seek to produce critical analyses that might participate in and contribute to future movements for social transformation, both religious and political.

Between two introductory chapters and a concluding chapter, this book is organized according to the traditional Jewish ordering of the canon of books in the Hebrew Bible, with its division into three sections: (i) the first five books (or Pentateuch) of the *Torah* (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), (ii) the historical and literary works of the *Former and Latter Prophets* (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; plus Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets), and (iii) the less cohesive set of texts known as the *Writings* (the remaining eleven books of the Hebrew Bible). Following the introductory chapters 1 and 2 laying the foundation for our understanding of biblical hope in part 1, chapter 3 opens part 2 with a broad analysis of the Torah as a collective act of hopeful imagination that sets out to form a multigenerational community shaped by wonder, the discipline of gratitude, and faithful solidarity. Chapter 3 also includes the first “Midrashic Moment,” using the traditional Jewish term for interpretation, in which Brueggemann briefly introduces readers to how a relevant text has been brought into dialogue with a past historical context in ways that have manifested biblical hope. Chapter 3’s Midrashic Moment refers to Martin Luther King Jr.’s use of Deuteronomy 34 to depict himself as a new Moses, leading his people to but ultimately not accompanying them into a promised land. Chapter 4 focuses on the early ancestral stories in Genesis narrating the tales of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and related characters whose lives were transformed by their faith and hope in God’s promises for a radically different future. Parts 3 and 4 (chapters 5 through 9) undertake broader discussions of a larger corpus of literature (as with chapter 3), alongside portions that focus on specific texts within that corpus (as with chapter 4). Sometimes the

latter offer close readings of particular passages, designated with the header “Exegetical Focus,” in contrast to sections featuring sermons that focus on specific texts, labeled “Homiletical Focus.”

Part 3 begins in chapter 5 with another treatment of hope across several biblical books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) that in Jewish tradition are called the Former Prophets. Some readers may initially think of these as historical books, but their designation as “prophets” helpfully reminds us that their stories are told from a theological perspective that construes lived reality as profoundly shaped by the expectations and agency of Israel’s God. Jewish tradition includes these books alongside the works associated with prophetic characters like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve shorter books, which the tradition calls Latter Prophets. After a short discussion of how the Former Prophets give an account of Israel’s life in the promised land that culminates in the loss of their native kingdom and land yet also offers glimmers of hope for an alternative future beyond exile, chapter 5 includes another Midrashic Moment that briefly considers the prominent role played by Elijah in subsequent traditions of imaginative hope, Jewish and Christian alike. The chapter then settles into the latter or literary prophets, delving into some of the most inspiring articulations of hope in the Bible. Chapter 6 offers an exegetical focus on the second half of the book of Isaiah, which includes some of the best poetry in the Bible. In soaring poetic rhetoric, Isaiah dares to proclaim that God has good news (see 40:9; i.e., “gospel”) for the deported people: God has resolved to perform a mighty miracle to end exile, restore the people to security in their land, and reopen their future so that they might live hopefully and obediently in restored relationship with their compassionate and forgiving God. Chapter 6 then includes a sermon on Isaiah 62:1–5 and Jesus’ miraculous transformation of water into wine in John 2.

Part 4 takes up the topic of hope as it is variously illuminated in a number of books collected in the grab bag of texts known in the Jewish canon as the Writings. After discussing several groupings of texts that find hope in changing circumstances, chapters 7 and 8 focus on Daniel, referred to by Brueggemann as “the quintessential book of hope in the Hebrew Bible” (chap. 7, p. 102) because of the courage and freedom that the protagonists display through their unqualified faith in God’s providential care over world events. Chapter 7 takes

up the familiar stories in Daniel 2–4, including the antipatriotic yet hopeful story of the fiery furnace in Daniel 3 and the courageously hope-filled interpretations of Nebuchadnezzar's secret and enigmatic dreams, respectively, in Daniel 2 and 4. Chapter 8 then considers the narrative about the Jews' strategically resistant initiation into high Babylonian society in Daniel 1—taking an open and hopeful stance as they learn Babylonian culture, names, and knowledge while remaining unsullied by the empire's junk food—along with the apocalyptic visions in Daniel 7–12, which offer visions of God as a mysterious yet controlling agent over history in whom the faithful may trust and hope. Chapter 9 offers an exegetical and homiletical focus on the psalms of lament, which occupy nearly one-third of the Psalms. If Daniel is the quintessential book of hope, the lament psalms are the paradigmatic poems of hope, moving the reader from dire need, danger, and despair, to hope, joy, and thanksgiving. The sermon at the end of the chapter brings this movement to life through the surprising parable Jesus tells in Luke 18:1–8 about a destitute woman who pesters an indifferent judge until he grants her the justice that she had been denied; her insistent appeals, Brueggemann suggests, are a belated version of the prayers that one finds in the lament psalms.

Finally, the book concludes with a chapter that is ostensibly on “missionary preaching,” yet is directly tied to our theme of hope. Brueggemann defines missionary preaching as the articulation of and invitation to participate in the radically alternative kingdom of God, and ranges across much of the Old Testament to show how different texts and traditions articulate biblical hope in a variety of distinct themes, concepts, and metaphors that prevent the stifling of interpretive imagination.

On the heels (we hope) of a global pandemic, amidst havoc wrought by increasingly extreme climate change, in the context of ongoing war, violence against Black and brown bodies by state agents and rogue terrorists, a surge in anti-Semitism and fascism around the world, the ever-widening chasm between superrich billionaires and dispossessed masses, I hope that this book's theme of hope will find a warm reception among many of us who are sorely tempted to despair. Moreover, I hope that these ancient biblical texts, with Brueggemann's magisterial expositions, will energize readers

and spark imaginations in all who desire and are willing to work together toward an alternative and better organization of social life. Why should labor and production continue to serve the superrich? Why should human survival continue to depend on selling one's labor? Why shouldn't states serve those who are displaced, immiserated, infirmed, neglected, and abused? Why are so many regimes still organized around exploitation, inequality, and the devaluing of labor? The world we inhabit does not have to be the way that it is. May we never lose hope.

Special thanks to Stephanie, Miller, Nathaniel, Judy, Ron, and Vicki, who give me abundant reasons to hope. Everyone at Westminster John Knox, especially Julie Mullins, continues to delight me with patience, support, and helpful interventions. I'm not sure where I would be professionally without my many ongoing collaborations with Brennan Breed, but I surely am thankful for them, each and every one. Naming some neglects so many, but I want to mention a few people whose work continues to inspire and energize my thinking: Adam Kotsko, Adrian Johnston, Alenka Zupančič, Anna Kornbluh, Brent Strawn, Elaine James, Francis Landy, Joan Copjec, Joe Weiss, Rick Elmore, Sean Burt, Slavoj Žižek, Sylvie Honigman, Thomas Nail, Tim Beal, Tod Linafelt, Todd McGowan, and Yvonne Sherwood. I do not know every one of these folks personally, but each has personally impacted me profoundly. And once again, thank you to Walter Brueggemann, whose constant support is like an apple of gold in the silver setting of his unsurpassed brilliance, creativity, and energy.

Davis Hankins  
Appalachian State University  
June 15, 2022

**PART ONE**

**Introducing Biblical Hope**



## Chapter 1

# The Bible as Literature of Hope

*T*he Jewish Bible, the Christian Old Testament, is fundamentally a literature of hope; yet, at least in Christian circles, the Old Testament has such a caricatured reputation as a tradition of law, judgment, and wrath. I want to explore this tradition of hope, as I judge it to be a very odd phenomenon, a problem in the Western tradition, and a great resource for our present cultural situation.

The Old Testament voices the oldest, deepest, most resilient grounding of hope in all human history, a hope that has been claimed by both Jews and Christians, but that is also operative beyond those traditions in more secular modes. The hope articulated in ancient Israel is not a vague optimism or a generic good idea about the future but a precise and concrete confidence in and expectation for the future that is rooted explicitly in YHWH's promises to Israel. In those promises, which are text specific, YHWH has sworn to effect futures of well-being that are beyond the present condition of the world and that cannot, in any credible way, be extrapolated from the present. The remarkable act of hope that permeates the Old Testament lies in the fact that the promises Israel heard and remembered link together the character and intent of YHWH, the creator of heaven and earth, with the concrete, material reality of the world. YHWH's promises characteristically do not concern escape from the world but transformation within it.

The dominant intellectual tradition of the West, that of Hellenistic philosophy, out of which has come the ground of reasonableness for science, is not a tradition of hope. It is a tradition of *order* that seeks to discern, understand, decipher, know, and, if possible, master and

control. Thus the biblical tradition lives in considerable tension with the dominant intellectual tradition and often has not had its full say. It is clear that *order* and *hope* are not about the same thing, nor are they easily held together. It is clear that both order and hope are essential for viable human community. We are in a season when the *urge for order* seems nearly to squeeze out the *voice of hope*. For that reason, for us to reflect on this tradition of hope is an important exercise.

Jews (and Christians after them) are a people of hope, but they can be a people of hope only if they are not alienated from and ignorant of their tradition. Therefore it is important to identify the shape and substance of that hope. In this chapter I will consider the main texts of hope, and in the next I will explore three major issues related to them.

Israel's hope is based on the character of YHWH, who utters promises and whose utterances Israel has found to be reliable. Indeed, the very nature of YHWH, as confessed by Israel, is to make promises and to watch over those promises to see that they come to fruition (see Josh. 21:43–45). Thus the Old Testament is an ongoing process of promise-making and promise-keeping. YHWH's promises tend to be clustered in four particular portions of the Old Testament text: the ancestral narratives, the covenant blessings in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the prophets, and the Psalms. Furthermore, I begin by distinguishing seven elements of hope literature in the Bible, not all of equal power or significance. This catalog suggests how pervasive, even definitional, are the hope dimensions of this faith.

1. The ancestral narratives of Genesis 12–36 are replete with promises (a) that YHWH will give land to Israel and cause Israel to prosper in the land, where fertility is assured, and (b) that the nations will be blessed (see Gen. 12:1–3; 28:13–15). Von Rad and Westermann have established that the Genesis narratives are essentially narratives of hope.<sup>1</sup> The overriding substance of this literature is a promise from God that is open ended in its scope and definitions and is brought to fulfillment only by the fidelity of God. The substance of the promise is variously an heir, a great name, a new land, a community of blessing among the nations.<sup>2</sup>

Alt has shown that the God disclosed in the Genesis narratives is a God who makes promises and who keeps them.<sup>3</sup> This God is not to be linked in any way with totemism or the primitive religions that the historians of religion and the structuralists consider. Paul Ricoeur

has shown that from the very outset this God, unlike so many around, is not an abiding presence but a speaker of a new word who breaks open all that is settled, routine, and conventional.<sup>4</sup> This is a God of *kerygma*, of a message that transforms reality.

The most dramatic examples of this powerful promise are related to Abraham. In Genesis 12:1–3 Abraham is summoned by this speaker of promise to leave his natural habitat and to go in naked trust to a different place, a place not even yet identified.<sup>5</sup> In 18:1–15 it is asserted, by means of a rhetorical question, that nothing is impossible for God.<sup>6</sup> It is promised that this God has the power to make things new by his promise, so new that birth displaces the long-standing and hopeless barrenness of Sarah and Abraham. The stories are not magical or supernatural in any conventional sense. Rather, they are recitals of the memory of the inexplicable happenings that have gone on in this family of hope. One can see how such memories enable this community to hope against all data and to believe that the *hopelessness* of the data never rules out a different *possibility*. God can indeed work a newness against all of the data. God can shatter the known world in order to establish a new historical possibility. Jews and Christians cling to such an affirmation.

Israel is portrayed as a people who sometimes doubt and resist this wonder of God, but on the whole, Israel in these narratives is ready to receive the word, trust the promise, and act in hope. Indeed, Israel's history in these early tales consists in responding to such impossible words and being willing to depart the known world on the basis of such a summons. That is what we have meant by a recital of "God's mighty deeds." In these tales the central dynamic of biblical faith is established. In the very character of God there is a push and an impetus to violate, overthrow, and depart the established order for the sake of a newness not yet comprehended or in hand.

2. The promises take a different form in the covenant blessings related to the Sinai traditions (Lev. 26:3–13; Deut. 28:1–14). Unlike the promises of Genesis, the blessings are part of a *quid pro quo* arrangement, so that the promises to Israel are assured when Israel obeys the commandments. In this tradition, the commands are the condition of hope.

3. The prophetic texts of the eighth to sixth century BCE, in lyrical promise passages, state the themes of promise, hope, and trust even

more baldly.<sup>7</sup> The prophetic promises look beyond the present and anticipate a new arrangement of the world “in the days to come.” Here they are not encased in old narratives; they are poems that have no intent other than to tell the story of the future. These promises are not predictions but are rather acts of faithful imagination that dare to anticipate new futures on the basis of what YHWH has done in the past. They characteristically begin with “Behold, the days are coming,” or “In that day.” This rhetorical pattern affirms that there will be a day of turn in which the dominant order of things as we have known it will be terminated. God has no final commitment to the present ordering of things, which will be drastically displaced by a wholly new order. The new order is not at all to be established by human plan, human knowledge, or human power. It is the inscrutable, irresistible work of God. Again, as in the Genesis stories, the push and impetus come only from the mystery of God and from nowhere else.

The themes of prophetic hope are fairly constant. There is nothing here that is private, spiritual, romantic, or otherworldly. It is always social, historical, this-worldly, political, economic. The dream of God and the hope of Israel are for the establishment of a new social order that will embody peace, justice, freedom, equity, and well-being. Thus, not only is the tradition formally hope filled, but also the substance of that hope is clear. In some ways the substance of the hope as *a new social world* is even more radical than the formal claim of promise itself.

While the promises occur at various places in the prophetic literature, they are particularly clustered in the exilic materials, such as Isaiah 40–55, Jeremiah 30–33, and Ezekiel 33–48. We may cite from those as well as other examples of these prophetic visions.

(a) Perhaps the best known is the vision of peace in Micah 4:1–5, which for the most part is reiterated in Isaiah 2:1–5.<sup>8</sup> Its phrasing is well known:

[T]hey shall beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.

Mic. 4:3

Micah then adds a shrewd economic note from the perspective of the peasant community (which is not in the Isaiah parallel) about the cost of such anticipated disarmament:<sup>9</sup>

[T]hey shall all sit under their own vines and under their own  
fig trees,  
and no one shall make them afraid.

v. 4

The poet recognizes that serious disarmament requires a lowered standard of living, so that rapacious greed ends, taxes can be reduced, and people are satisfied with a little, just a vine and a fig tree. Yet they are in safety and well-being. The poem is an incredible act of hope. One cannot see how one can get from here to there, either in the ancient world or in our own time, but such hope is precisely a “conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).

(b) A second, very different promise is found in Isaiah 19:23–25.<sup>10</sup> It is the most sweeping geopolitical assertion in the Old Testament and can be heard in all its radicalness if one listens with an ear to the present situation in the same geographical locus:

On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.”

In this remarkable vision the poet takes the words properly applied only to beloved Israel, words like “my people” and “work of my hands,” and applies them to other nations that are in fact enemies.

The dream is for a time when the barriers of fear, insecurity, and inequality have been overcome, when there is free access among the nations who are traditional enemies. Again the hope of biblical faith is incredible, for one cannot see, among ancient empires or among contemporary nation-states, how this can come about. But Israel at its best, when informed by its memory, lives toward a vision that is as certain as is God’s own word (cf. Isa. 55:10–11).

(c) In a very different idiom is the vision of Ezekiel 34:25–31:

I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live . . . securely. . . . The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. . . . You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord GOD.

This is a promise of a covenant of *shalom*, of well-being and prosperity. The promise moves in two rather remarkable directions. On the one hand, it has a hope for the restoration of creation, the renewal of the ecological process, so that the field and the earth will bring forth abundantly. On the other hand, this renewal has a political component. The banishment of “wild animals” may be read literally or as a metaphor for rapacious political power. The breaking of “the yoke” means an end to oppression. The promise thus articulates restoration for both history and nature, for both politics and fertility, in which all relationships will be as they were envisioned in the uncontaminated anticipation of the creation narrative of Genesis 1.

(d) Finally, the promise of Isaiah 65:17–25 is the most sweeping of the prophetic promises I will mention. It begins with these words (vv. 17–18):

For I am about to create new heavens  
 and a new earth;  
 and the former things shall not be remembered  
 or come to mind.  
 But be glad and rejoice forever  
 in what I am creating;  
 for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
 and its people as a delight.

As the promise continues, the new heaven and new earth are characterized by a new economic order in which none will usurp the produce of others, by a new order of health without death in childbirth and with no infant mortality, and by a new understanding with God such that God shall be present and available at every point of need. This poet has dreamed the most undisciplined, liberated vision of them all. The prophets are resolute and unanimous. The way it is,

is not the way it will be. It is promised that there will be a decisive change in the shape of human life on earth.

4. In the Psalms we may identify two rhetorical practices of hope. First, in the great psalms of enthronement (Pss. 93; 95–99), the coming rule of YHWH is celebrated and welcomed by all creation:

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
 let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
 let the field exult, and everything in it.  
 Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy  
 before the LORD; for he is coming,  
 for he is coming to judge the earth.  
 He will judge the world with righteousness,  
 and the peoples with his truth.

Ps. 96:11–13

This large public doxology is matched by the second rhetorical practice, a much more intimate practice of faith in which individual Israelites voice complete hope for the future because of their unqualified confidence in YHWH:

The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
 whom shall I fear?  
 The LORD is the stronghold of my life;  
 of whom shall I be afraid?

Ps. 27:1; see 30:4–5

All these texts and their various images attest to Israel's conviction that YHWH has promised and intends to enact a new well-being for Israel and the world. YHWH's promise characteristically concerns peace, security, prosperity, fruitfulness, righteousness, and justice, which will come in the earth, not because of any claim the earth has, but because the one who utters promises in the hearing of Israel is the creator of heaven and earth, who is known in Israel to be reliable. Thus in the wondrous promises of Isaiah 2:2–4, Isaiah 11:1–9, and Micah 4:1–4, YHWH promises that the present earth will be healed by YHWH's own fidelity. Israel is therefore certain that YHWH will overcome every impediment and defeat every resistance to the well-being that YHWH intends for the world.

As the Old Testament develops, Israel's hope in YHWH is verbalized in two particular ways. On the one hand, Old Testament faith

is *messianic*, believing that YHWH will dispatch and empower a particular human agent who will enact the new age that YHWH has promised. Thus, hope is “this-worldly,” inside the present ordering of creation. On the other hand, Old Testament faith also developed in an *apocalyptic* mode, a cataclysmic hope that YHWH will effect YHWH’s new world without any human agency. Despite their differences, both traditions attest to the coming “rule of YHWH” in which all creation will be ordered for YHWH’s intent of peace, security, and justice. The later traditions of the Old Testament do not choose between these modes of faith, but hold them together in tension.

5. The great prophetic hopes are pushed one step further later in the faith of Israel as prophecy becomes apocalyptic.<sup>11</sup> Apocalyptic is the most extreme form of hope in the Bible, and the most misunderstood. Some do not understand that this is poetic imagination and instead want it to be a hard prediction to be assessed in detail. Such a view misunderstands both the character of the literature and the nature of hope in the Bible. The biblical way of hope is to dream large dreams about the powerful purposes of God, but they are not designs, blueprints, or programs. To make them such is to deny God’s free governance over the future.

Apocalyptic literature is not pervasive in the Old Testament, but it flourishes in the period between the testaments.<sup>12</sup> Zechariah 14:8–9 offers a characteristic hope for Israel:

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter.

And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one.

This imagery is so radical that it is pushed outside the historical process. In this anticipation the waters of life flow like the rivers of life in Genesis 2, but now the source is the holy temple city. The great vision is that YHWH, the God of Israel, will rule the nations. This hope is not unlike prophetic hope, except it is more extreme and has become cosmic. The canvas for Israel’s hope cannot be contained or domesticated within the historical process. It must be as comprehensive as the lordly splendor of YHWH.



6. In both prophetic and apocalyptic texts we are presented with the overarching metaphor of biblical faith, namely, the kingdom of God, the rule of God, the ordering of life according to the purpose and will of God.<sup>13</sup> This hoped-for kingdom when God's will is fully visible will displace all the orderings and kingdoms of life that now claim our allegiance (Rev. 11:15).<sup>14</sup> The metaphor of the kingdom is a radical, revolutionary metaphor that stands in judgment over all the power arrangements presently available. The promised kingdom places all current arrangements in jeopardy. The coming of the new age and the new governance of God is at the heart of biblical faith. It has roots in the Sinai covenant, which Buber has seen to be a radical political assertion. It is the overriding context of the prophets, who expect and insist that God's rule take public and visible form. The metaphor comes to its most poignant expression in the tradition around Jesus. His life and teachings embody that rule of God, evident in his teachings (Mark 1:14–15), in his acts (Luke 7:21–23), and in his parables. In response to this massive tradition of hope, the church prays regularly that God's kingdom come on earth, as in heaven.<sup>15</sup>

7. Finally, of the dimensions of biblical hope I will mention, both Jews and Christians wait for the *Messiah who is to come*. Too much time has been wasted on Jewish–Christian conflicts over this hope.<sup>16</sup> What matters is that Jews and Christians hold firmly to the conviction that one will come from God who will “mend the world.” How and when and who that will be is not a proper issue for these convictions of hope. For the theme of hope, it does not matter greatly that Jews wait for a first coming and Christians wait for a second coming. Jews and Christians stand waiting together.

At the center of that common faith is a contrast with the nonbelieving world. That world does not wait for the Messiah but for Godot, who never comes. Against such despair these convictions of faith know about a coming one who precludes resignation and despair. Indeed, the worship and theology informed by these convictions are largely a reflection on that staggering concrete act of hope. That hope is a reading of history against the common reading that leads to hopelessness. But, because God oversees history, it is affirmed that present shapes of reality and power are all provisional, kept open for the other One, not yet here but very sure to come.

Israel's capacity to trust these promises of YHWH is the substance of faith. Trust in YHWH's promises is not a particularly "religious" undertaking, but rather concerns living differently in the world. As the Old Testament looks beyond itself to what YHWH will yet do, that powerful expectation for God has been addressed variously by Jewish and by Christian interpretive traditions. No single tradition has a monopoly on the promises of YHWH, and no single tradition is the designated custodian of hope.

This catalog of biblical texts shows that hope belongs centrally and decisively to biblical faith. There is no way around it, if one takes the Bible seriously. These faith communities of Christians and Jews live in a passionate and profound hope that the world will become the world God intends, the world for which we yearn.

Viewed from the perspective of the dominant (and dominating) operating assumptions of our cultural context, the massive statement of hope contained in these texts seems foolish or, if not foolish, at best irrelevant. That is, it doesn't seem to touch the "real world," which appears so permanent. The promises belong to a different rationality and are presented precisely by poets and storytellers who operated (from our modern perspective) with a quite doubtful epistemology.

The dissonance in the juxtaposition of hope and reason needs to be taken seriously by us. The tradition of hope (Jewish-Christian faith) does not stand next to the tradition of reason (and science) in a chronological way, as though the hope tradition is primitive and has been superseded with the coming of modern knowledge. Nor is it the case that the tradition of hope can be bracketed out in a corner somewhere, as if it were a private religious mode separated off from the great public questions of power. The hope tradition is alive and addresses the realities of public life. It moves with an alternative reason of a different sort, which might be called "historical reason."<sup>17</sup>

The issue of the juxtaposition of hope and knowledge is at the heart of the crisis now to be faced in our culture. The traditions of *scientific knowledge and power* seem oddly alienated from the traditions of hope.<sup>18</sup> The tradition of hope means a relinquishment of control over life, not in the sense of life being out of control, but in the sense of governance being entrusted to this Holy One whom we cannot explain. This hope does not consist of losing control, but relinquishing it in trust.<sup>19</sup> It is thus an important question in our society about

what happens if the managers of scientific knowledge can no longer entertain serious, concrete hope beyond our knowledge. Under such conditions, control becomes defensive and perhaps oppressive. The tradition of hope has its powerful say now among those cut off from scientific power and alienated by scientific norms of context. *The substance of biblical hope*, reflected in these texts, is a new world of justice, equity, freedom, and well-being. This hope has nothing to do with progress, for what is promised is wrought in inscrutable ways by the gift of the holy God where we least expect it.<sup>20</sup>

A strong case has been made that a defining mark of a postindustrial, technological world is despair, the inability to trust in any new and good future that is promised and may yet be given. Insofar as despair marks the current social environment of faith, to that extent hope is a distinctive mark of faith with dangerous and revolutionary social potential.

### Questions for Reflection

1. *Kerygma* is a message that transforms reality. As you explore our current realities, what do you witness as needing transformative change? What needs to be made new in your life, your community, the world?
2. Brueggemann calls the prophetic promises “acts of faithful imagination” that will usher the vision of God anew into our own spaces and contexts. Often our own imaginations may limit us in our work toward transformation. What is hindering your imagination? How are you opening yourself up to the imagination and creativity of God?
3. The hopes found in the Bible, from prophecy to apocalyptic texts, are vast and varied as characters experience life and suffer because of oppressive institutions and war. The prophets spoke both in terms of help to come in this world, through the human agency of a messiah, and imagining a final cosmic restoration. Where do you fall on this spectrum of hope, in our current context?
4. There can be a fraught tension between the concept of hope and the dire realities that the traditions of reason and scientific knowledge point toward. It can be difficult to look for signs of hope when we so often experience the polarized extremes of willful ignorance on the

## 14 Hope Restored

one hand and doomsday portrayals on the other concerning issues like climate change or gun violence. In the midst of realities like this, how do you encounter the “biblical hope” Brueggemann describes, of giving over a sense of control to a God who can be trusted to bring about a new order of things?