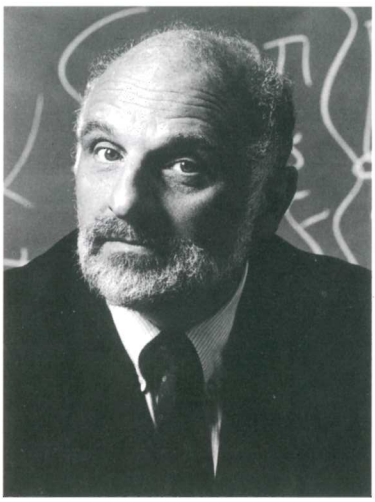


A Journey: Attending to the Abyss

by Walter Brueggemann

There is no straight-line "journey" through the Old Testament. The text strongly resists any neat schematisation that would see the complex and variegated account as a singular whole. Insofar as we may risk such a linear journey through the text at all, it is possible, and important, to start at the centre, and then to see how to approach that centre and how to depart from that centre, writes Walter Brueggemann.

Professor Walter Brueggemann is professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Georgia, USA and is author of many books, his most recent being Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy and Texts that Linger, Words that Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices.

There can hardly be any doubt that the historical and theological centre of the Old Testament is the crisis of life and faith caused by the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the raising of the Temple and the termination of the dynasty of David. The destruction at the hands of the Babylonian empire caused a huge displacement of Israelites, who in the act of displacement came to be called Jews. Some were displaced around the Mediterranean basin and some remained in Jerusalem but were nonetheless defined by a powerful sense of loss. Most prominently, leading citizens were deported to Babylon, came to regard themselves as "exiles", and emerged as the decisive force in the formation of Judaism and the reformulation of the faith and tradition of ancient Israel.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this displacement for the shaping of the biblical traditions. On the one hand, this experience was a shattering of all that had been treasured, including the shattering of long-trusted theological traditions of buoyancy. On the other hand, this experience of displacement became the matrix for fresh and daring articulations of hope that became the driving force for the continuation of the community. So deep and so staggering was the experience and memory of exile that it is fair to say that all subsequent Jewishness is profoundly marked by this displacement, that is both remembered and liturgically re-engaged.

Much of the Old Testament is an account of the life of Israel with God prior to the displacement. It is likely that these older traditions were put in place precisely to illuminate "the coming crisis" of displacement. We may consider three large components of the tradition that constitute decisive points in Israel's journey of faith.

First, Israel's foundational memory in "The Torah", the five books of Genesis–Deuteronomy, constitutes Israel's most sacred text and Israel's decisive model of self-understanding. These memories are taken to be the most elemental disclosures of God's way with the world and God's way with Israel. In a variety of different ways, these traditions are of covenant, a relationship of mutuality between God and the world (see Gen. 9.8–17) and God and Israel (Ex. 24.3–8). In these traditions, God has pledged durable fidelity and has summoned the world and Israel to singular loyalty and obedience.

The narrative account of this covenantal relationship includes the memory of the ancestors in Genesis 12–50, the chosen family led by God on the way to a land of promise, the rescue of the community of slaves from Egypt (Ex. 1–15), the sustenance of Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 16–18; Num. 11–36), and the promulgation of the commandments of YHWH as the non-negotiable conditions for the land Israel is about to receive (Ex. 19–Num. 10). All of these several traditions attest to the wondrous and inexplicable ways in which God has sustained and guided Israel to well-being.

Second, at the death of Moses (Deut. 34), and the crossing of the Jordan (Josh. 3–4), Israel begins a new phase of its life in the land of promise. A narrative account is in Judges–Kings, also given in a rather different version in 1 and 2 Chronicles. This narrative, made up of many pieces, concerns the way in which Israel occupied and governed the land that was God's gift to it, land that turned out to be endlessly problematic. The narrative candidly reports on the ways in which God's generosity to Israel was variously distorted, distrusted, and exploited. The focus of the narrative is upon the

extraordinary person of David and his family dynasty that reached its apogee in his son Solomon and ended in a fizzle as the waywardness of the dynasty was seen to be decisive in the loss of land and city in 587. Thus as Genesis–Deuteronomy is about God's gift to Israel, Judges–Kings is about the forfeiture of that gift through disobedience.

Parallel to the narrative history of Judges–Kings, the journey includes a corpus of prophetic literature that covers roughly the same data (especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah). This literature has arisen from a series of poetic figures who are strewn along the royal time-line who eloquently and savagely re-characterise Israel's life from a covenantal perspective. While the kings of Israel and Judah must be pragmatic managers of land and power, the prophets characteristically speak in poetic idiom "from God's side", about the departures of royal Israel from the claims of covenant; they anticipate, moreover, the sanctions of covenant that will inescapably be enacted in the life of Israel.

The juxtaposition of kings and prophets against a backdrop of the fundamental claims of Torah constitutes a most peculiar self-presentation on the part of Israel as God's loved, judged people. Every people must have pragmatic managers. But Israel understood that the poetic dissenters (prophets) are not disruptions of their public life, but they are constitutive voices in the true character of Israel and, in the end, it is the prophets who tell the truth about Israel's life with God in the world. Thus, it is prophetic disclosure against royal obduracy, informed by Torah traditions, that brings Israel to the abyss of displacement. All of these traditions together lead to the exile, making the singular insistence that Israel's life in the world must be lived in response to the God who gives life and commands obedience. Israel did not adequately respond in obedience, it is asserted, and so the abyss of exile. Everything early moves to this moment of harsh and inescapable dislocation.

The remarkable reality of the "journey" of the Old Testament is that it did not come to an end with the deportation. There emerged a hard-won, much chastened community of faith after the exile that became the carrier of old covenant traditions in the form of Judaism. Whereas the "storyline" before the exile is clear and singular, the "plot" of Judaism after the exile is much less clear and singular, no doubt reflecting the tentative situation of a community scarred and sobered by displacement.

We may identify four emerging accents in the recovery from exile that constituted Judaism:

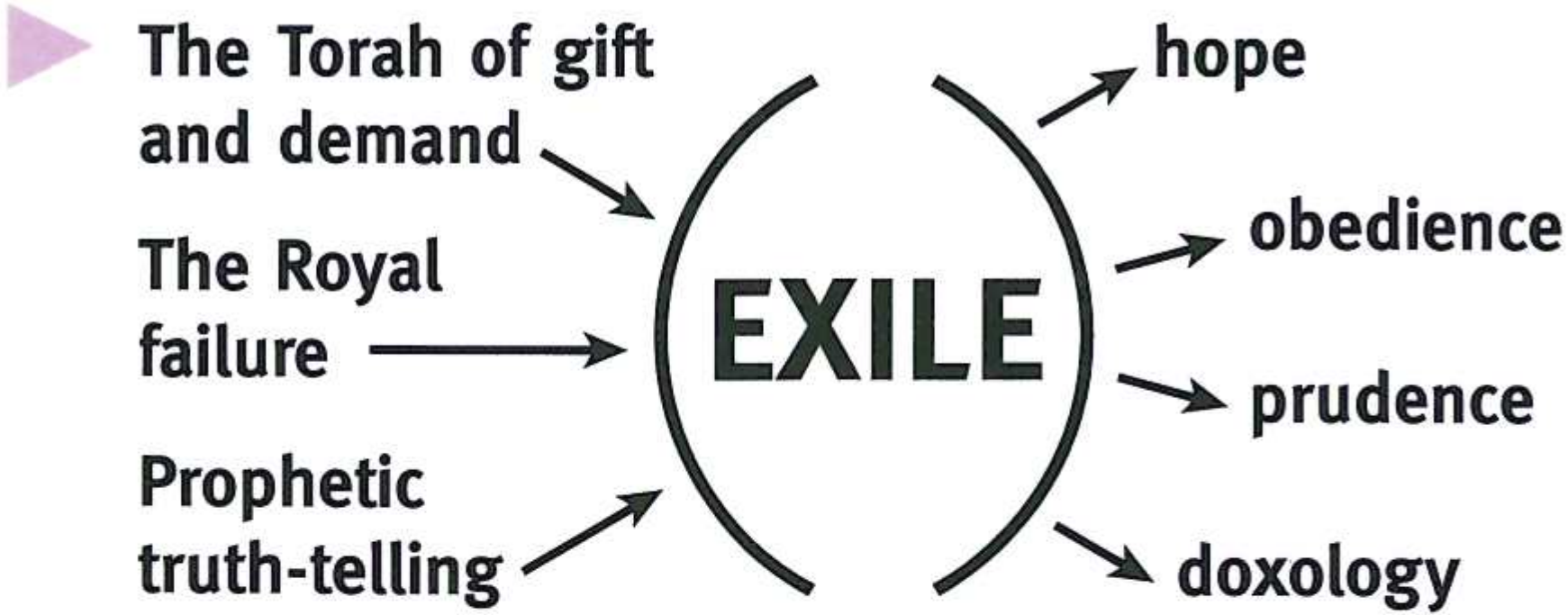
First, that there was a continuation of a faithful community at all is due to the fact that Jews became radical hopers who refused to give in to the defeat of circumstance. In the very midst of the dislocation there welled up remarkable poetic figures (see Jer. 29–33; Ezek. 33–48; Is. 40–55) who envisioned God's new restorative acts toward Israel that would give Israel "a future and a hope". Judaism became a community that counted decisively upon the resilience of God who would, soon or late, override circumstance in order to create a situation of well-being. Equipped by their poets, this community is one of indefatigable resolve "for this age and the age to come".

Second, alongside this eloquent anticipation, Judaism after the abyss of exile resolved to take seriously the demands of covenant that had been so badly distorted and disregarded in the earlier royal period. Under the leadership of Ezra (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah), the Jewish community is reconstituted as a community of Torah obedience; serious members of the covenant community took the commands of God as a daily reality of life, "meditating on the Torah day and night" (see Psalm 1.2). This passion for Torah has often been caricatured as "legalism" in Christian misrepresentation, when in fact it is a resolve that faithful response to the will of God is the daily sine qua non of the community of faith. This impetus toward obedience led to the codification of old traditions of holiness and justice in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and produced what became "Rabbinic Judaism", an endless responsibility for reinterpretation of Torah for the sake of contemporary obedience.

Third, along with the ethics of Torah, there was a more worldly form of ethical reflection undertaken by the scribes. While the world was ordered "religiously", this worldly enterprise focused on "wisdom", on the codification of more-or-less secular learning that sought to discern the nature of reality. Thus, wisdom teaching is as close as ancient Israel approximates to "scientific method", in which the scribes sought to identify and articulate the "regularities and givens" of life that made different forms of conduct prudent or destructive. A most notable feature of this tradition was its remarkable candour about lived reality. While the Book of Proverbs buoyantly locates the norms that constitute viable human conduct, the Book of Job is alive to the dissonance of reality, and the book of Ecclesiastes seems to end with an agnosticism on deeper issues of ethics.

Fourth, the traditions of hope, obedience, and prudence are capped by the powerful doxological tradition reflected in the formation of the Book of Psalms. The Book of Psalms includes, not unlike Job, songs of protest and complaint about the dysfunction of life. All of that, however, is framed by vigorous and exuberant praise, culminating in Psalms 145–150. These songs portray Israel's readiness to cede itself over to God, and its readiness to abandon itself in gratitude and amazement to God. Israel sings of the one who is in the midst of the world in fidelity and generosity, and who is resolved to remain faithful until all is well in the coming age. Such doxological affirmation is a profound act of devotion to God, but also an act of resistance, a refusal to give in to the deathly reality of circumstance.

This way of rendering the journey of faith permits a provisional schematisation: (over).


The Torah of gift and demand
The Royal failure
Prophetic truth-telling
EXILE
hope
obedience
prudence
doxology

There are signs that the Old Testament is self-consciously put together in this way in order to make a theological statement even though, as said at the outset, one must not press the point. This journey is rooted in lived experience. But it is now presented in artistic, highly stylised form that is somewhat removed from the experience. The purpose of such artistic presentation is not only that this movement "into and out from" should be remembered, but that it should be knowingly replicated as the way this community always lives in God's presence.

That replication has immense and durable power:

1. The twentieth century Jewish experience of the diabolical Shoah (as displacement) and the new state of Israel (as restoration) is surely a reflection of that old pattern of death and new life.

2. In Christian appropriation, always derivative and never displacing the Jewish tradition, there is no doubt that the crucifixion of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus are understood theologically and liturgically as the re-enactment of the truth of God's life with the Jews.

3. This pattern, deep in Jewish tradition and derivative in Christian tradition, is a way to health in public and in personal life; healthy life consists in losing what is treasured and receiving back what is newly given as a surprise. Faithful communities of men and women endlessly re-enact this journey. As we do so, we notice how profoundly counter-cultural all this way of life is:

It is counter-cultural to be sent into the abyss because dominant culture will always prefer denial.

It is counter-cultural to be brought out of the abyss to new life because dominant culture will always settle for despair.

The shape of the Old Testament is a powerful, God-given alternative to the pattern of denial and despair. It is a truth peculiarly Jewish, here and there appropriated by others in faith.