

Book review

Ron Guengerich

Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now, by Walter Brueggemann. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

Walter Brueggemann, with his usual lucidity, makes an invaluable contribution to explorations of Sabbath by examining a variety of Scriptures within the Hebrew Bible that discuss the importance and practice of Sabbath. He locates Sabbath at the core of biblical faith and biblical theology. First he offers a treatment of Sabbath as a critique both of the ancient cultures with

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which Israel interacted and of the dominant culture in our contemporary world.

The title—*Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*—continues the *leitmotif* that Brueggemann has persistently and vigorously developed throughout his writing: the faith of Israel—continued by Jesus—is a subversive and radical departure from the imperial system of the dominant culture,

whether that be Egypt or Babylon or Rome or the United States. For Brueggemann, Sabbath is one crucial and central factor in living out this radical, subversive, energizing perspective. Sabbath is the day every week when we are called to renew our imagination and strengthen our relationships in a leisurely way that brings blessing to us and to all who join us in this formative day. For Brueggemann, Sabbath is not seen as a law, a proscription to be obeyed, but rather as an identity-forming blessing and a memory-enhancing opportunity.

This book is eye opening as it integrates Sabbath as a core value and central practice into the very fabric of biblical faith and the covenant community. Siang-Yang Tan, in *Rest: Experiencing*

God's Peace in a Restless World, observes that rest has many facets: physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational.¹ Sabbath touches on all these aspects, but Brueggemann focuses his reflections especially on the relational aspects of Sabbath, a day of stopping, as a day of rest.

Brueggemann's thesis is that the Sabbath commandment—the fourth of the Ten Words—is the pivotal point of this covenant document. It is what connects the First Word (the remembrance and awareness of what God has done) with the Last Word (a new covenantal society in which the greed, anxiety, and covetousness of the empire are replaced by neighborly concerns). Not only is Sabbath the pivotal point within the Ten Words, but it remains a focus within the ongoing discussions of the Torah and the Prophets.

The first and last chapters form the envelope for this book. Brueggemann examines Sabbath in relation to the first and the last words of the Ten Words. The First Word focuses on the relationship and expectation of singular allegiance that Yahweh expects of his people: “You shall have no other God's before me.”

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This is an allegiance based on Yahweh's deliverance of the slaves in Egypt from Pharaoh's restless, oppressive imperial system. Yahweh's deliverance is pure grace, and Sabbath itself is a day of grace. The Tenth Word summarizes the alternative perspective of the covenant in which covetousness is replaced by neighborly concern and respect.

Brueggemann sees Sabbath as a benefit and blessing that sets the covenantal community of Israel apart from the imperial systems that compete for Israel's allegiance and attention. The Sabbath “command” is seen as a descriptive core of Israel's commitments rather than a prescriptive restriction that hampers Israel's freedom. Sabbath is a day of delight and freedom that is to be experienced by humans and livestock, by insiders and sojourners. As is typical for Brueggemann, here too he explores the interface between the biblical text and the contemporary world.

The middle three chapters observe concerns for the relational aspects of the covenant community as Sabbath reappears in the

prophetic warnings and critiques of the alternative community's forgetfulness of Sabbath (and its basis) and of this community's proclivity to become like the other nations, like the empire from which Israel had been delivered. These three chapters focus on additional commentary about the Sabbath in the Torah (especially in the restatement of the Ten Words in Deuteronomy 5:12–14) and in the Prophets (Isa. 56:3–8 and Amos 8:4–8).

Brueggemann's comments integrate these passages with other biblical passages that articulate the ease with which Israel is enticed into practices and perspectives of the surrounding imperial cultures.

This short, synthesizing volume gives us a delightful examination of diverse texts concerning Sabbath and a cutting critique of the ways that we today, by not "remembering the Sabbath," are adopting a life of dis-ease, forgetfulness, and anxiety. This volume deserves to be read and reread, examined and discussed, and brought to communities of discernment for strategizing about how we can reappropriate Sabbath as part of the fabric of our weekly lives.

Note

¹ Siang-Yang Tan, *Rest: Experiencing God's Peace in a Restless World* (Vancouver: Regent College Pub., 2000), 27–33.

About the reviewer

Ron Guengerich is beginning an extended Sabbath/sabbatical (also known as retirement), in which he is preparing to recycle himself into new uses of his time and energy. He has spent the last thirty years as a seminary and college teacher of Old Testament, and as a pastor in Kansas, Ohio, and most recently in Goshen, Indiana, where he and his wife Ruth live.