


God of All Promises

A Poetic Pilgrimage
through Genesis



WALTER BRUEGGERMANN

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“Walter Brueggemann’s *God of All Promises* provides a devotional lens to explore the book of beginnings. Intentionally theological, these reflections model a way for us to, in his words, ‘pray back’ to the text. Moreover, the poetic form of each entry reminds us of the ways in which the Bible is inherently poetic, dialogical, and invitational, calling us into a space where we can be challenged, surprised, delighted, sometimes troubled, but always transformed. This is a great resource for individual and group study.”

—Judy Fentress-Williams, Dodge
Professor of Biblical Interpretation,
Virginia Theological Seminary

“What a tremendous gift the late Walter Brueggemann has bequeathed to the church. His poetic and prayerful reflections on each chapter of Genesis are insightful, heartfelt, and profoundly edifying. In these pages, Brueggemann models a way of engaging Scripture that makes it come alive—opening its divine wisdom and revealing its deep relevance for our lives today. I wholeheartedly recommend *God of All Promises* to all who love Scripture and to any who long to love Scripture but aren’t yet sure how.”

—Greg Boyd, Senior Pastor, Woodland Hills Church

“Brueggemann powerfully and elegantly crafts insights into Genesis. His poetic words draw us in and shake us up. He reminds us that faith’s peculiar language shall form our reflections and deepen our prayers, if we let it. This book is a beautiful companion to his beloved *Genesis* commentary!”

—Clover Reuter Beal, Co-pastor,
Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church

“Forty-three years ago, Brueggemann published his robust commentary on Genesis. Now, toward the end of his life, he has returned to Genesis with the fresh eyes of a poet, ‘praying back’ the text to God. Brueggemann offers a prayerful way of living into the text, and we receive it as his parting gift.”

—William P. Brown, William Marcellus McPheeers Professor of Old Testament,
Columbia Theological Seminary

“This rich collection testifies to Brueggemann’s abiding love of the Hebrew Scriptures and his wisdom about spiritual formation. His expositions of Genesis texts are saturated with poetic drama, theological depth, and ethical honesty. This book is beautifully suited for Bible studies, devotional reading, and discussion groups eager to link biblical theology with contemporary issues.”

—Carolyn J. Sharp, Professor of Homiletics,
Yale Divinity School

“In these pages, Brueggemann helps us hear Genesis again with wonder and honesty. His poetic prayers slow us down long enough to notice a God who keeps creating, calling, and promising right in the middle of our disorder. This book is a companion for anyone who wants Scripture to shape not just their thinking but their hope.”

—Josh Kingcade, Senior Minister,
Preston Road Church of Christ

“A devotional, a prayer book, an intimate reflection on the deep stories of our faith in conversation with the God we meet in Genesis: a gift. Read this as a

pastor preparing to preach on these texts, read this as liturgy in worship as a prayer of the people, read this as a person of faith longing to connect with the God that sometimes seems so strange and yet so wonderful in these ancient stories. Brueggemann spans the distance between ancient and present, speaking words on our behalf that connect us as a family of faith across the generations. Above all, this book testifies to Brueggemann's life work as a biblical scholar: an act of faith seeking understanding, to both obey and plead with the God we meet in Scripture."

—Carolyn B. Helsel, Associate Professor
in the Blair Monie Distinguished Chair
in Homiletics, Austin Seminary

"These 'prayers and probes' have been inspired by one last reading through the book of Genesis by a master exegete, who, as it turns out, is also a master poet. How appropriate! This little book is a treasure, left to us unexpectedly by one who has taught us much. And in this last contribution, he continues teaching. One can almost hear his voice when reading these prayers, like one following Professor Brueggemann on a poetic pilgrimage one last time through the text he loved so well."

—Bill T. Arnold, Paul S. Amos Professor
of Old Testament Interpretation,
Asbury Theological Seminary

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*In remembrance of
Allen G. Wehrli,
my first teacher in the book of Genesis*

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PREFACE: PRAYERS AND PROBES



When I began work on this manuscript, I had in mind only to compose prayers in response to the specificity of the text. I have found it possible and useful, in my own practice, to pray back the Bible to the God who dwells therein. I soon discovered, however, that there are texts in the book of Genesis that do not lend themselves readily to pray back. For that reason, I have added probes—critical reflections—alongside prayers and meditations. Thus, in some texts in the book of Genesis, I have offered a probe into the plot or the characters of texts or into the way in which narrative art performs in the texts. Probes allow me to push and poke and tease the text in order to see what it may yield to such insistence. I have not made a sharp distinction between prayers and probes in each chapter because I believe that both are exercises in engagement with the text, with the God of the text, and with the people who live in and from the text.

Two features of my exposition may be noted. First, I have attempted a more or less poetic rendering of my response to the text. I have done so in order to reflect the deliberate elusiveness of the text that invites us to pause as we read. In that pause,

- we may engage in critical reflection on the text,
- we may engage in appreciation of the art form of the text, or
- we may take the text as a script for prayer and meditation.

I have intended to provide ample space for the reader to exercise freedom with the text and to let that freedom be in the service of our common growth in faith.

The reader will notice, second, that I have concluded each exposition with a brief closing prayer and an “amen.” Such an ending, of course, reflects our common usage about prayer. But where I have done a probe rather than a prayer in the exposition, I have also used the “amen” in order to assent, as fully as I can, to the instruction of the text as I have understood it. Where such an assent does not ring true for the reader, it can be safely disregarded.

It is, of course, commonly recognized that the book of Genesis falls into two unequal parts:

- a rendering of the world in chapters 1–11, and
- a rendering of the chosen family in chapters 12–50.

The two parts are linked in the text by the assertion of God’s blessing, most especially God’s blessing to Abraham. That blessing has on its horizon all the families of the earth, thus humanity beyond the scope of Abraham’s own family. We may take that reference to “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3) with reference to the fulsome genealogy of Genesis 10.

This twofold articulation of the reach of God's good governance in both realms is echoed in the statement of faith of my own church, the United Church of Christ. That statement (that has official standing but no normative insistence) voices the call of God in a way not unlike the two parts of the book of Genesis:

- God calls the worlds into being;
- God calls us into the church.

These two formulations together affirm the call and work of God both in creation and in the more specific community of faith.

When I think about a poetic engagement with the book of Genesis, I most gladly call to mind the poetic iteration of the early chapters of Genesis by B. Davie Napier in his wondrous rendering *Come Sweet Death: A Quintet from Genesis* (Pilgrim Press, 1981). I was able to hear Napier read his moving rhetoric at Eden Theological Seminary as the work was being published. In any case, I pause to salute Napier for his earlier book *From Faith to Faith: Essays on Old Testament Literature* (Harper & Brothers, 1955). I read that book as a middler at Eden Seminary; it provided for me a major impetus for my decision to pursue Old Testament study, a decision I have never regretted. As I recall, Napier's book is an early English-language probe from the work of Gerhard von Rad that had not yet reached English translation.

I am glad to dedicate this book to the memory of Allen G. Wehrli, my first Old Testament teacher. Wehrli had studied at the University of Halle under Hermann Gunkel. He had, like

Gunkel, a deep interest in the way narrative functioned in the Bible and in particular in the book of Genesis. In my first semester of Old Testament introduction with Wehrli, in my junior year in seminary, he regaled us with his well-told biblical narratives. But he deceived us. We thought he was just telling stories that he rendered as an art form. Only later in graduate school did I discover that he had presented to us Gunkel's complete taxonomy of the narrative *Gattungen* (genres) in the Bible. Wehrli was also my first teacher of Hebrew, and he managed us with uncommon patience. As I studied with him later in his years of teaching, so also was my father his student at Eden Seminary in Wehrli's early years of teaching. In some formal way I was appointed as his successor in the faculty of Eden Seminary, but he was in truth a master teacher who had among us no real successor. (I am glad to say that his learned son, Eugene Wehrli, was also my teacher and then my colleague, neighbor, and friend, who eventually became the president of Eden Seminary.) No doubt the church lives by the benefit of such teachers who bless our lives with their learning, their passion, and their cunning faithfulness. My debt to Allen Wehrli is immense and continuing.

It is my hope that these brief expositions will serve the church well in the nurture of our common faith with energy and courage for our common ministry.

Walter Brueggemann

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING



These poetic and prayerful meditations on each chapter of Genesis draw on Walter Brueggemann's enduring faith, cultivated over a lifetime of study and love for the Scriptures. Each reflection brings together theological and devotional insight in the form of a poem, crafted to offer readers deep anchors for their own faith. Brueggemann's inquisitive explorations wrestle with the text and with both the grace and failings of our humanity, drawing out the themes of God's persistent, loving purpose in the midst of our beautiful and troubled worlds, then and now.

You may choose to engage these reflections in a few different ways. They can be used for individual devotion and study or in a group setting. It is helpful to read the poems alongside the text of Genesis, whether before, after, or interspersed with the reflections—whatever helps to illuminate your experience of the biblical text. For group discussion, you could meet weekly and discuss a few chapters at each session or hold a longer study if you wish to cover one chapter per week. You may also consider responding creatively as you read, individually or as a group, by journaling, writing your own poetic interpretations, or engaging

imaginatively through painting, drawing, sculpting with clay, making a collage, or whatever creative approach you would like. Each poem opens with a thematic epigraph from Scripture and ends with a closing prayer to deepen reflection and guide your devotional and study time. Visit www.wjkbooks.com/Promises to download a free book club guide for group discussion and individual reflection.

The foundational stories of the families of faith in Genesis are rich, strange, troubling, and inspiring. With Brueggemann as our guide, we can see how God's good governance, faithfulness, love, and care have continually formed God's people to be a blessing to all, summoning us beyond strife and grief into God's audacious, holy promises.

ON READING GENESIS 1



*When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.*

(Ps. 104:30)

At the outset there was you;
only you in your majestic splendor;
only you ready in your generative love.

And then from you
heaven and earth as your domains,
night and darkness as your zones of governance,
chaos turned to ordered life.

You loved the world
stooping down to evoke plants: corn, petunias,
poison ivy;
bending low in your gentle summons to animals:
kangaroos, rabbits, alligators;
reaching in, you dreamed the fish: lobsters, cat-
fish, and tiny minnows.

You did not quit your work until you came to us;
when you blessed;
when you blessed in our gender identity;
when you gave authority to manage the earth,
to preside over plants with care,
to host your animals with attentiveness,
to protect your water creatures great and small.

You blessed them; you blessed us;
you saw that it was good; your words are “Very good!”
And then you rested, enough work, enough
creating, enough presiding over newness!

And we—we receive your blessing of mercy;
we breathe in your breath of life;
we receive your teeming world of creatureliness;
we receive the power to care for it . . . or not;
we receive your permit to rest as you rest.

We pledge before you that we will accept our creatureliness from you
with its freedom;
with its authority;
with its responsibility.

We will manage so that the other creatures can see
your image,
in seeing us at our best.

We praise and thank and bless you . . . only you . . .
you alone.

*Giver of life abundant, we are on the receiving end of
your dazzling gifts.*

*We receive your gifts gladly and are grateful for your
good generosity.*

*We are glad to be among your many well-beloved
creatures. Amen.*

ON READING GENESIS 2



Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

(Gen. 2:24)

How great thou art!
You breathed out your power and vitality.
You blew your life-giving breath on our skeletal structure.

Our bones received your vitality and we became
alive
to you and
to the world.

You in your lordly authority give us work to do;
you reach us with only two words:
to *serve* the garden of delight,
to *keep* the plantings of life,
to serve and to keep, a strange notion of dominion!

You give us the work of prospering the whole of creation.

In that moment we become responsible for the health of all creation.

You give us dominion,
freedom to manage creation,
a capacity to name and touch the other creatures,
the burden of cherishing creation.

You give us companions,
a woman for a man,
a man for a woman,
a lover for a lover.

We begin our new life
with power, vitality, well-being, authority, energy.
We are before you;
We are in the world;
We are unhindered; our lives are unhindered in
work, in freedom, in companionship.
We gladly accept our vocation as your agents of
blessing.
Because of us, the world has a chance for well-
being.
We bask in your greatness;
We celebrate the good work you give us;
We rejoice in the life you make possible
as we stand as sign of your good governance.

*You are the God of companionship, and you will us to
live in trusting relationships.
For good, trustworthy companions who sustain us day
by day, we give you thanks.
We take their fidelity to us as an expression of your
durable loyalty to us. Amen.*

ON READING GENESIS 3



*“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;
I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”*

(Luke 15:18–19)

There was a whisperer in the garden of delight.
It was an inexplicable *bias* that pursued us day
and night.
It whispered counter-thoughts to us,
pushing us outside our easy innocence.
The voice of whisper made us double-minded:
 we intended to do the work God gave us to do;
 at the same time we now thought otherwise.
We wondered if we had to do the work.
We reasoned that we were entitled to more than
 that.
We had wants and desires beyond God that
 seemed to us like needs.
We gave in to our wondering eyes,
 to our greedy hearts,
 to our untamed appetites.
In an instant of such unwarranted self-assertion,
 we felt a new sense that Freud would term “shame.”
 We knew a deep embarrassment that Luther
 would call “guilt.”
The very God who loved us into being came seek-
ing us.
 We, in our embarrassment, hid, hoping to conceal
 ourselves.
 We blamed each other; we blamed the whisperer.
 We made every excuse we could imagine.

But none persuaded him. He fated us to a harder life.

He left us vulnerable, exposed, driven, displaced. At that last moment, he clothed us in protection.

But still we were on the outs, excluded by our choices,

We forfeited the innocence that had been a gift we now threw away.

In that moment we discovered that the giver of all good gifts was more than just kind.

The God who summoned the earth had a gritty purpose.

Our violation of that gritty purpose has left us on edge, on guard, endlessly at risk.

We may have known better, but we refused and blew it.

And now here we are!

You, Lord of our families, must ache as we ache when we know of the fractures in our most treasured relationships and when we notice the violence among the nations. In your ache restore us to the well-being of your good purposes. Amen.

ON READING GENESIS 4



*How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
(Ps. 133:1)*

Before tribe, before nation-state, before empire,
there was the nuclear family.
God intended that family of sisters and brothers to
dwell in unity.
Mostly we do not!
Mostly sisters and brothers dwell in uneasy rivalry,
competing for love, or honor, or attention, or
property,
competing
sometimes in legal action;
often in verbal abuse;
occasionally in physical violence.
Brothers become adversaries,
sisters become competitors,
siblings become rivals, all after the same benefits.
And then violence:
violence of Whites against brothers and sisters of
color;
violence of Israelis against Palestinian sisters and
brothers . . . and vice versa;
violence of clans and tribes and nation-states,
violence unending, uncurbed, undisciplined,
unlimited.
And then we are asked:
Where is your brother?
How is your sister?

We find ourselves accountable, having to give answer,
for long generations of violence,
for greedy practices of usurpation,
for the ugly disposal of siblings.

Mostly we ignore the question asked by the Lord of
our family.

Mostly we keep busy, avert our eyes, and pretend we
did not hear.

But late, in the quiet, we know we must give answer,
too late for forgiveness,
too soon for restoration,
too heavy for bearing.

And so we live in a world of vengeance;
the killing must go on;
the violence must continue;
the bloodletting is endless.

We wish we were numb to it;
except that the question penetrates our defense
and our denial:
where is your sister?
how goes it with your brother?

We spend our days brooding in resistance in a
remote land.

Either that, or we join the party, welcoming the
long-lost sibling into the family, the inheritance, and
the well-being.

That either-or pursues, no matter where we flee.

*We know that we cannot love you whom we have not
seen when we do not love our brother and sister whom
we see. Give us generosity of spirit that we may over-
come our alienations, and live in well-being with our
siblings, even those so unlike us. Amen.*

ON READING GENESIS 5



*I am reminded of your sincere faith,
a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice
and now, I am sure, lives in you.*

(2 Tim. 1:5)

We come from a long line. That long line stretches way, way back,
back behind our memory,
back behind any record,
back behind any traceable genealogy,
all the way back, back to the beginning.

That long linkage is filled out by many characters playing many roles.

No doubt those many characters in many roles continue to be operative through us,
continue to be roles we may adopt,
continue to be characters we may reperform.

We have many options from that long linkage.

Among them is “the image of God,”
for all those in the linkage, “the image of God”
has been
insistent,
indelible,
unending,

“image of God” loaded with power, authority, generativity, and responsibility.

We may choose otherwise, but the image persists.
Perhaps every family has somewhere in its memory an Enoch—

who walked with God,
who embodied grace and dignity,
who performed godlike generativity and generosity.

We remember Enoch among us so good and so wise
that he never died but was “taken.”

We could choose to reperform this Enoch, walking
with God.

Or we notice that our line runs toward Noah,
Noah (*noah*) who brought us “relief” (*n̄hm*).
He relieved our family from worry, vexation, and
hard labor.

We could be yet another Enoch in our linkage,
“walking with God.”

Or we could be yet another Noah, bringing relief to
our long family.

Or mostly we could join the long line of the almost
forgotten,
for whom the story is not more than “lived . . .
died . . . forgotten.”

We are always choosing our family role,
our peculiar assignment,
our place in the genealogy.

However we choose, we share the identity.

We carry the blessing.

We have life from the God who created us,
every one of us,
the crooks, the healers, the lowlives, the bless-
ers, the slobs.

It is a long line, and we belong in it,
with a chance to turn toward the blessing giver
and receive.

*God of our years and our generations,
God of our memories and our hopes,
we pray for your gifts of sustenance and steadfastness
that we may walk in the ways of faith,
bring glory to you,
and well-being to our earth. Amen.*