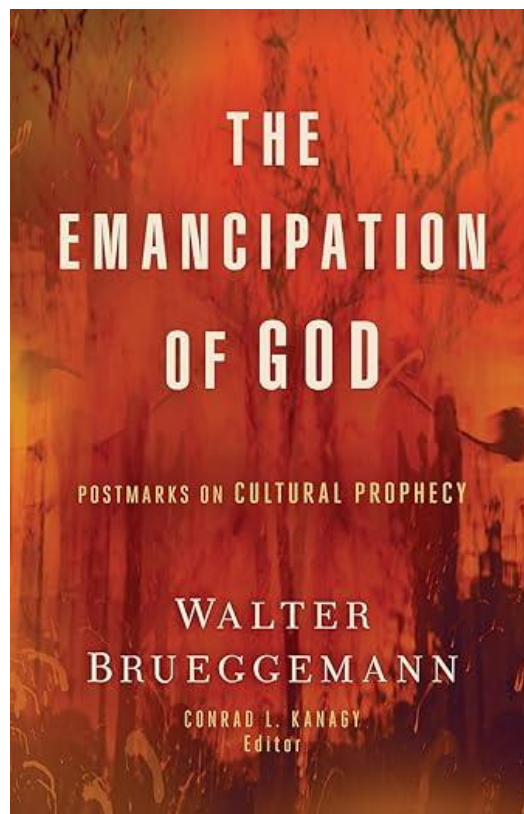


# A Reader's Guide for Individuals and Groups

## *The Emancipation of God: Postmarks on Cultural Prophecy*



Guide written by Conrad L. Kanagy

## Introduction

This Reader's Guide supports two books that share an interesting history. Published within three months of each other, Walter Brueggeman was writing the essays in the *Emancipation of God* even as I was interviewing him and writing his biography. For that reason and others, the two books fit like hand and glove.

In the first, I address the riddle of Walter Brueggemann's explosive book *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress, 1978) and reasons for its unanticipated emergence as a long-time best seller. To do so, I used the parable of the Sower and the seed: What was the soil that nurtured Brueggemann as a child? What was the nature of the seed he has been spreading for sixty years? Who received the seed and who rejected it and why? In doing so, I sought to get into the soul of this master theologian but very modest child of God.

Unknown to me, Brueggemann was at the same time writing the essays that are part of *The Emancipation of God* and distributing them as blog posts. Eventually Carey Newman, Executive Editor of Fortress Press, approached me and asked that I "put these essays into three piles and name the sections. Then write an introduction to the book and give it a title!" What fun that was!

In doing so, I found that the essays reflected in "real time" as it were, the master craftsman at the top of his interpretative and exegetical game! The essays represent a kind of laboratory where the reader gets to see Brueggemann carrying out the prophetic task and method that I had uncovered in the Walter Brueggemann's *Prophetic Imagination: A Theological Biography* (Fortress, 2013). If the biography told the reader about Brueggemann's interpretative approach to the Bible, then the second book shows Walter in his shop doing it. I put it this way in the Foreword to *The Emancipation of God* (Fortress, 2024):

*These essays allow us to experience the "role exit" of one of history's most significant theologians, who by God's grace has been given time and health to correct, redefine, deny, and affirm what he has written across six decades. Like Baruch for Jeremiah, my task as biographer was to assist and to catch the rich, sweet, and refreshing water pouring forth from the deep well of Walter Brueggemann's life. This task was more manageable on some days than others. But I soon learned that the floodgates opened if I relied on the heuristic devices that he often used in the biblical text. Once he began to encounter his life as a text to be exegeted, we quickly moved into the depths of his biographical basement.*

Brueggemann's discovery of the blog essay format was "just right" he says, for this season of his life. But one dare say "just right" for the post-modern reader as well! These essays are unlike any genre that Brueggemann has tried in the past—and of course he has tried and succeeded at many! But because he continues to ready eight to nine books each week and two newspapers a day, these essays convey the thoughts of one who sifts what he reads through six decades of theologizing and being an active observer of the church and society. He has also become more vulnerable in sharing his childhood memories, his inner life, and everyday events and experiences. "For," says Walter, "the prophetic imagination is everywhere!"

The two books—*The Prophetic Imagination of Walter Brueggemann* and *The Emancipation of God*--might be read and studied together or read separately. However the reader chooses, reading them both in proximity to the other will tell a tale that neither one does completely on its own. The biography reveals the "basement" of the master theologian and the set of essays the master at work in that basement. In fact, I argue that at ninety years of age Brueggemann's clarity is keener than ever. The experience of writing his biography he says, "has helped me to see my life as a whole. Indeed, you have enabled me to see new vistas!" he exclaimed once to me.

I note in the Foreword to *The Emancipation of God*:

*As I read and reread the twenty-five essays in this volume, it seemed to me that the axe with which Walter grinds away at the biblical text has only become sharper and freer in cutting through the false reality that has deadened and disabled and muffled the church. After ninety years, Walter recognizes that he is freer than ever. Freer to speak his mind. Freer to see clearly. Freer from the distractions of everyday life of an earlier season. Brueggemann emancipated! Brueggemann unfettered! Brueggemann gone wild! But no more emancipated or wild than the God he has walked with for so many decades and in whose presence he has lived. We should be grateful for the freedom that this prophet is experiencing and the lack of inhibition he reveals in these essays.*

Across his ninety years, the central focus on the gospel as emancipation has crystalized for Brueggemann and is reflected in the three parts of the book and this guide: *The Emancipation of God*, *The Emancipation of the Church*, and *The Emancipation of the Neighborhood*. For where all three become realities, the kingdom of God will come in its fullness! The prophetic imagination will finally be realized.

This guide is meant to help individuals or groups to dig deeper into the biblical text, the God of that text, and their communities of faith. This guide is organized around the three themes of *The Emancipation of God*, drawing upon the biography of Brueggemann for greater illumination and understanding.

## **Part 1: The Emancipation of God**

This set of essays reflects a theme that has been ongoing for Walter Brueggemann throughout his life. At one point in our interviews, he identified five separate pivots that he experienced during his nine decades. He noted that all these pivots were movements from some form of moralism or legalism to emancipation. And this makes sense, given that one of his favorite texts in the Bible that he comes back to time and again, is that of the deliverance of God's people from Egypt.

The placement of the first essay—"The Emancipation of Interpretation"-- in this section was very intentional. While it is about Walter's affirmation for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in the church, it is more broadly one of the best places to find Walter's description of how to exegete or interpret the biblical text.

While it's going to be easy for folks to get hung up one way or another on the issue of LGBTQ+, I encourage the reader to spend more energy looking at Walter's description of what he calls the adjudication of biblical texts. The gist of his approach is that we must be honest about the social position from which we read the biblical text. This is something that I teach in my introduction to sociology course frequently, that our social position in the world determines how we see the world, how we understand what is true and real in the world, and certainly how we read the biblical text. I especially appreciate Brueggemann's honesty and humility in this description.

### **Questions for Part 1**

As you consider Brueggemann's exegetical or interpretative approach as described in this first chapter, you may wish to reflect on the following questions:

1. In what ways do you find Brueggemann's approach to reading the Bible helpful? What is new to you about what he shares?
2. What might be the outcome for our faith communities if we were all honest about the impact of our social statuses and positions on our reading of scripture?
3. To what extent does Brueggemann's exegetical approach challenge the way you have read the Bible in the past? Can you imagine yourself stepping into this way of reading the Bible? What difference might that make in your own reading and study of scripture? In your life with God?

4. As you think about the formation of your beliefs about God, the Bible, and the Christian life, where did they come from? Who or what most influenced your theological formation?
5. How have your beliefs theological perspectives changed over time and what contributed to those changes? What theological pivots have you made and why?
6. Sociologists suggest that it is important to suspend our values or bracket them at times to more effectively listen, learn, and grow. This does not mean that our values are not true, real, or important, but we so quickly defend them without listening to other possibilities. What makes it difficult for Christians to suspend their values and beliefs to listen to the other? What in Brueggemann's essay might help us to do that more readily?
7. Brueggemann's history of growing up in the German Evangelical Pietism tradition has had much to do with his interpretation of the biblical text. Chapter Two of his biography goes deep into that religious tradition and the way it set him up to love, read, and interpret scripture as he describes in the first essay. In fact, Walter is very consistent throughout his life in his approach to the biblical text.
8. Reflecting on his biography and particularly the second chapter, what is it about German Evangelical Pietism that contributes to Walter's embrace of theological positions that many would call progressive but which he rejects as being such. The German Evangelical tradition gave wide latitude to theological differences. Why? Might it be possible to reconstruct such tolerance in the church today?
9. In his biography, Brueggemann notes that he is disappointed that his habitat was among progressives because they have given up on the Bible. What do you think he means by this statement? What about his way of interpreting Scripture is different than both the way progressives and the evangelicals often read the scripture? What have both sides missed seeing in Brueggemann's approach, according to the biography?

10. I argue that Brueggemann's reading of scripture represents a third way as it were for the church to find space for differences in describing and defining what is essential versus nonessential. To what extent do you agree about this being an alternative?
11. How is the history of German Evangelical Pietism different than your own faith tradition's history? How is your own faith tradition's history influenced the way you read the Bible and what you believe? What does your own faith tradition bring that is a value to the way one reads the scripture and to the theological positions that one embraces?
12. In the biography I note that pietism has had a difficult time in modernity or the modern world. Why is this the case? Why is the kind of German Evangelical Pietism of Walter's tradition not more prevalent in the current landscape of American religion? What accounts for the loss of pietism within the Christian Church?
13. Are there elements of German Evangelical Pietism that appeal to you and that she would like to see represented more in your own faith tradition and local congregation?
14. Brueggemann's theology contains certain qualities about which he is very consistent and that are repeatedly reflected in what he writes today. One of these is the sovereignty of God. In Brueggemann's biography I talk much about this quality and the struggle between Walter and Terry Fretheim at Luther Seminary over this question of the sovereignty of God. As you read the remaining essays in Part One, where do you see the sovereignty of God reflected?
15. Brueggemann repeatedly offers hope for our despair regardless of whether it's the loss of biodiversity or the rise of new empires around us. On what basis does Brueggemann declare this hope? In other words, where does hope come from for Brueggemann? Where in your own life and faith community do you need hope? As you listen to Brueggemann, how does his own hopefulness help you to see in new ways the challenges, difficulties, grief, and pain which you are experiencing?

16. Brueggemann remains consistent in his definition of the prophetic imagination, which he often describes as the willingness or the capacity to host an alternative world to the one that appears to be in front of us. I once asked Walter whether this wasn't exactly what Hebrews 11 described as faith. He chuckled and said yes. In the essays of part one, where do you see the prophetic imagination of Walter Brueggemann? Point to some specific essays and examples within them where he draws upon faith and this alternative prophetic reality for issues and problems of today.
17. Brueggemann is a poet. He argues that all prophets are poets. Why do the poetic and the prophetic go hand in hand? Where do you see Walter exhibiting poetic license, as it were, in his interpretation of the biblical text? Where do you see him exhibiting poetic license in his descriptions of God? Does any of this poetic license give you discomfort or challenge your taken-for-granted views of faith, theology, God, and the Bible?
18. Brueggemann's poetic gift can best be seen in his prayers that he wrote for the biography (Chapter 6) which I call the secret to who Walter is. Where do you see in those prayers the prophetic imagination? Where do you see in those prayers an emphasis upon emancipation? Where do you see in those prayers an emphasis upon the sovereignty of God?
19. Which of Brueggemann's prayers most speaks to where you are and why?

## **Part 2: The Emancipation of the Church**

In the Spring 2020 I create a podcast entitled the dismantling of the church or a church dismantled. This podcast came out of my research 15 years ago where I had used Brueggemann's work on Jeremiah to ask the question of whether God might be in fact dismantling the church because of our failures in God's mission. I used Walter's interpretation of the exile of the people of Israel to Babylon as my metaphor for thinking about the exile of the church in our current existence.

In 2022, in a phone conversation with Walter, I asked him about that thesis, that God might be taking part the church. Not destroying the church but deconstructing the church so that we might be more faithful in God's mission to the world the



“God so loved” and so loves still. Walter was immediate in his affirmation that God is dismantling the church. Walter went on to say that the crucifixion of Jesus was the ultimate dismantling of God. So, if God would allow God's self to be dismantled why not God's church for the sake of the world?

Which sets up the first essay in Part Two entitled “Saved in and through Weakness.” It's an essay in which Walter appeals to us to consider that it is when we are weak that we are made strong. That even God comes in weakness and came in weakness. Walter is fond of saying that God comes from below, from underneath and behind and takes us by surprise. So often God does not show up as we anticipate God would. Walter includes a citation of my work in this essay.

I've thought for a long time that this dismantling news is a good word for the church. That it's in times of crisis and when things are falling apart that change can actually take place, when we are most amenable to change, when we are most flexible and open to new ways of doing things. And yet we hesitate or try to resurrect some lost past. And so often in doing so work against the Spirit who comes to tear down and pull apart. As you consider this essay here are some reflection questions for discussion.

### **Questions for Part 2**

1. To what degree is this idea that God might be dismantling the church a new one to you? What do you think about it? Where do you see dismantling occurring in your own congregational context? Have you ever thought about the possibility that God is doing that work of dismantling?
2. If indeed God is dismantling the church, how might we will be working against the Spirit rather than with the Spirit in the dismantling work? If you think about the congregational context in which you live, what might dismantling look like if you became proactive about it rather than reactive or resistant? What may God be calling you to pluck down and to take apart so that you might be more effective in God's mission?
3. Why are we so resistant to the idea that God's business these days might be to take apart the church? When God came to king Hezekiah and told him that God's people would go into exile, Hezekiah sighed with relief that at least it would not occur in his lifetime. To what extent is our resistance to God's dismantling work in

the church going to create problems for generations to come? What might our resistance mean for their realities?

4. What examples in scripture point to this truth that it's in weakness the God is most at work? Why is it so true that we often must suffer loss or experience pain to be pliable for God's work? What do we see in scripture about the consequences of resisting God's work even when that work is difficult to understand?
5. How is the idea that God works in our weaknesses and in our suffering and pain consistent with Walter's understanding of the prophetic imagination? Can you think of examples in your own life or congregation where you grew through pain? Where you moved forward because of difficulties?
6. How is the dismantling of the church good news for the church? How does it offer the church hope?
7. As you consider the essays in Part 2, which ones must speak to where you are currently as an individual or a congregation? Which ones do you most resonate with and why?
8. Which of the essays most challenge the way you've thought about God or the biblical text or the church? If Brueggemann were available to you, what would you want to ask him about any of the essays in this part?
9. As you reflect on the biography of Walter Brueggemann, and his theological movements across the decades, particularly his embrace in the 1970s of liberation theology, how does this commitment show up in these essays? Walter says that he has become increasingly concerned about economic injustice across the years of his work. Where do you see him addressing injustice in these essays?
10. To what degree does Walter's focus on economic justice and justice for those on the margins challenge your own views of God's justice and of the mission of the church?
11. Where do you resonate with Walter's perspective on justice? Where would you challenge his perspective?

12. Where in Walter's prayers in chapter six of his biography do you see a call for justice?
13. Walter is keen to say that the mandate of justice for the church must emerge from the biblical text and cannot stand on its own. This is one of the problems he has with progressives again, where he sees them taking up the mantle for justice without being grounded in the biblical text. What scriptures come to mind when you think about God's call to care for those on the margins? Who are on the margins in your community and in your church? What would it look like for you to engage in greater justice work on behalf of these individuals? Where have you already been doing this? What has been the impact on your church and community? To what degree is justice part of the mission of your own life and congregation?

### **Part 3: The Emancipation of the Neighborhood**

In the third part of *The Emancipation of God*, I intentionally placed the essay entitled “The Pathetic Imagination” at the front end of this last and final part of the book. Walter told me the story behind this essay and sent me a note asking “what do you think of this?” Of course, I thought it was amazing!

It was in a conversation with someone about the prophetic imagination that a slip of the tongue caused Walter to say the “pathetic imagination.” And since Walter sees the prophetic imagination everywhere he looks he saw an opportunity in that slip of the tongue a way of reflecting on the opposite of the prophetic imagination. And so, in this essay he begins to explore what it means for the Church to have a pathetic imagination. And of course, he doesn't have to look far. For so much of the church in North America and Europe aside from immigrant churches African American churches and other churches of color, our imagination has become quite pathetic.

On the one hand progressives and members of mainline traditions are quickly abandoning the church and failing to offer a biblical view to their children. As Walter says, “have given up on the Bible.” On the other hand, evangelicals are defensive about their diminishing status and respond by protecting their space. They fortress themselves against the enemies from without, having forgotten that the greatest enemy is within us and among us. And that sometimes we are our

greatest enemy. Church walls don't keep the enemy of our souls at bay. It's interesting to me that the church spends so much time trying to keep certain groups out, not remembering or realizing that in fact most of those folks don't want to join the church anyway. Our efforts to keep ourselves pure are so often a waste of our time and God's resources.

To have a pathetic imagination is to fail to see God's alternative reality in front of us, and to fail to host that reality among us. The pathetic imagination is a failure of faith and a failure of hope, and so it's no wonder that the church has invested its energies and resources in political figures and political movements. It has lost its hope and faith in God. As Jesus so reminds us, we can't serve God and mammon, with mammon a proxy for willingness to jump on the bandwagon of whoever offers us the greatest protection.

### **Questions for Part 3**

1. As you consider this chapter on the pathetic imagination, where do you see such an imagination present in your own life or in your congregation or your denomination? What might God be saying to you about flipping the pathetic imagination over and then embracing a prophetic imagination.
2. You might want to take some time as individuals to write down or to draw an illustration of what the pathetic imagination of your congregation looks like. Discuss this and then write or draw what the prophetic imagination would look like if you embraced it.
3. Describe the lenses through which we so often see the world that prevent us from seeing or hosting God's alternative reality or Kingdom realities? What fear and anxieties get in the way of our faith and our hope?
4. Later in the Fall, 2024, Brueggemann and I will release a book entitled *Poverty in the Promised Land: Neighborliness as Resistance and Restoration* (Fortress, 2024). This book is based upon the work of Matthew Desmond, sociologist at Princeton University who in 2023 wrote a bestseller entitled *Poverty, by America*. In that book Walter responds to Desmond affirmatively but with a theological framework for calling the church to address the needs of the poor and to embrace a new neighborliness. Walter refuses to believe that poverty is beyond our reach to address, but recognizes

that it must be addressed at the local level in our communities and neighborhoods. I once asked Walter why he still loves the church, after all that he has seen of its ugliness, abuse, and hypocrisy. He quickly replied, “Because the church is the only place that still tells the story and where the church is doing its work neighborhood is always being cared for.”

5. What story is your church telling your neighborhood? What messages are you broadcasting to your community? And to what extent are you caring for your neighborhoods? I used to ask our congregation repeatedly, “If this church building blew up and disappeared would anybody miss us? Would anybody ask where did that church go? Would anyone be sad to hear the way it disappeared? Would our disappearance make any difference in the community?

What about your congregation? If you disappeared would anybody notice? If you disappeared would anybody care? Would the welfare of your community decline because you were no longer part of it?

6. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in chapter 29, encourages the people to settle down and to make themselves as comfortable as possible in the enemy city. He encourages them that if they bring Shalom to their neighbors Shalom will come back to them. Which also must mean, that if we do not bring Shalom to our neighborhoods, there is no Shalom in our congregations either. How is your congregation bringing Shalom to your local neighborhood?
7. As you consider the remaining chapters in Part 3, where do see them connecting with a call to neighborliness and to the offering of Shalom to the world?
8. Which of the essays do you most appreciate and why? Could you lead your group through a discussion of that essay and how it applies to your community of faith?
9. As you consider Brueggemann's childhood formation, where did his concern for neighborliness come from? What might be missing in our own theologies that prevents us from being as focused on the neighborhood as Brueggemann is?

10. As you consider the prayers in Walter's biography that I wrote (Chapter 6), where do you see his concern for neighborliness, for the restoration of the neighborhood, for the Shalom of God?
11. As a preacher I often shared with our congregation that we exist for the sake of the world that God so loved and so loved still, and that this calling should be our primary one as a congregation. I'm not sure that that message sold well or that it was enduring. What did we see in scripture that supports this message that I preached? And what gets in the way of us fulfilling that call.
12. As I noted in Brueggemann's biography, he's fond of saying that "words create worlds." I show how throughout his life wherever he went he created community. Despite being an introvert, he found a way to be a neighbor to everyone he interacted with, colleagues, pastors, students, other scholars, and more. Where in his biography did this desire and need to create community come from? What drove this need? Was it psychological? Was it theological? Was it something else?
13. I often consider the signs that church's place along the street and what their signs say to passersby, and I sometimes wonder for whom the signs were created and why they're even placed there? So often they reflect a world that is irrelevant to the passersby and maybe even irrelevant to church members themselves. How does your own congregation utilize words to define itself? To define the community around you? To define the world that God has called you to and the mission you've been called to? Have you thought about the audience to whom your words speak? What language do you need to change that is familiar to you but irrelevant to others?

## **Conclusion**

14. From your reading and discussion, what are the most important takeaways for you from this study on emancipation? How has the focus on emancipation challenged your previous understandings? Have you experienced the kind of emancipation that Walter describes? What would it be like for you to be free in your congregation and for your congregation to be free?

15. I grew up in a religious culture in which freedom was looked upon as a negative quality that violated the expected conformity to the church. It's taken me many years to throw off some of the baggage related to that perspective. But in finding my own kind of emancipation, particularly since I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2017, I've discovered new freedom to take risks, to voice my perspective, to care less about what others say or think about me, and to enjoy the freedom for which we have been set free as followers of Jesus. But it was only as I was stripped of my sense of strength and independence that I discovered such freedom. I suspect that it's only as the church is stripped of its status in the center of this society and finds itself again on the margins, that we will find true freedom to be who God called and created us to be and to fulfill the mandate to love the world as God so loved the world.

What experiences have led to greater freedom for you to be an authentic individual? Where do you continue to experience a desire for greater freedom? What are the barriers to your experiencing an emancipatory breakthrough?

16. Finally, as you consider who Walter Brueggemann is based on his biography and what you've read in *The Emancipation of God*, how would you answer the question: What has made Walter tick? What have you discovered in the basement of Walter's life? What do you most appreciate about Brueggemann? What most challenges you about his speech and his words?

17. As I described in the introduction to the biography, I wrote Walter's story because I needed it. Has Walter's biography met any need that you had you weren't even aware of? If so, what is it and can you share it with others in the group?

18. When I asked Walter what he most wanted to be remembered by, he quickly noted that it would be the psalms of lament. In some ways, Walter was always lamenting. When we think about the prophet Jeremiah, he was known as the crying prophet. Where in Walter's story do you see him grieving? What in the biblical text causes him to grieve? How has living out of that grief enriched his message to the church? How has his own lamenting and grief been used by God to bring healing to others?