Over the course of his prolific scholarly career, Walter Brueggemann has constantly probed the testimonies of the Hebrew Bible, offering fresh readings of texts that challenge the assumptions of contemporary ideologies. In this collection of essays, edited by Davis Hankins, the consistent refrain of Brueggemann’s thought is once again manifest. This work contains a selection of eighteen lectures and essays, four of which have not been previously delivered or published elsewhere.

The volume is divided into four parts. Part I, “Poetic Cadences that Create Hope,” contains five essays dealing with the subversive possibilities of Israel’s poetry and the hope that it offers in contrast to the contemporary “memo-writing culture.” Part II, “Narrative Complexities that Challenge,” presents five essays that deal with the concept of amnesia, that is, the temptation and danger of forgetting the ancient and sacred narratives of exodus and covenant. Part III, “Legal Covenants that Coalesce,” contains three essays that consider the move from covenant narrative to policies for community life. Part IV, “Imaginative Provocations that Compel,” concludes the volume with five essays and summary reflections that draw out the implications of the Bible’s alternative narrative and calls to action for contemporary issues.

The essays in Part I, “Poetic Cadences that Create Hope,” all revolve around the theme of the Bible’s narrative of hope in opposition to our culture’s narrative of despair. Brueggemann identifies this despair as an ideology he terms “military consumerism,” that is, “a preoccupation with satiation and self-indulgence about commodities that is reinforced by a military muscle that aims to protect our entitled advantage in the world” (p. 23). This narrative, he insists, clearly “holds no human future for us” (p. 23). However, Israel’s literature presents a counter-narrative of hope, for it is the dramatic performance of engagement with God. This dialogical encounter is a practice of hope because it presents God with the honest reality of pain and grief, calling God to account as covenant partner and seeking transformation.

Yet Israel’s poetry was not without problematic ideology of its own, Brueggemann states. He describes the imperial ideology within the Songs of Zion and evident in the regime of Solomon. The hope in these texts is “misbegotten,” Brueggemann argues, because it lends theological legitimacy to its self-serving interests of bolstering the urban elite. Yet the ideology of the Songs of Zion takes on a different resonance in light of the reality of exile. Israel’s exilic experience demonstrates the failure of an ideology of exceptionalism,
Brueggemann insists, as “the hard, flat ideology of the Songs of Zion turned out to be no way forward, and increasing numbers of the faithful could see the unbearable contradiction between that certitude and the reality of colonial status” (p. 82). Yet these psalms at the same time point to a way beyond such misbegotten hope insofar as the disconnect between their claims and the reality of life in exile offers a warning against the limits of all ideologies of exceptionalism.

Brueggemann’s point about exceptionalism as an ideology in both the ancient world and contemporary era is made vociferously and repeatedly throughout the book. Thus he offers strident critique of Solomon and the monarchical inclination towards acquisition and monopoly, as well as of “military consumerism” in American policy and culture. While Brueggemann has a fair critique of the dangers of excess in acquisition or exercise of power, he overstates his case by implying that the “commodity system,” as he terms it, is entirely bankrupt or that military power inevitably has imperialism or exploitation as its end. During the Second World War, for example, American military power was deployed towards the cause of human freedom in the face of totalitarianism. One of the strengths of Brueggemann’s writing is the way in which it encourages readers to view the contemporary landscape through the lens of the Bible’s rhetorical world. Nonetheless, there are certain limits to the analogies that can be drawn between ancient empires and modern democratic societies. Moreover, exceptionalism is a thoroughgoing theme in the Bible and cannot be so easily restricted to Solomon’s acquisition or the perspective of an urban elite. The prophets, to whom Brueggemann frequently appeals in support of his critique, also advance a form of exceptionalism in their own critique of monarchical power because of a conviction that Israel’s election carries with it covenant obligations for both God and God’s elect.

Each of the essays in this book follows a rhythm of setting out a contemporary issue, engaging in close reading of a biblical text, and concluding with a brief gesture back to the contemporary context. It would be interesting to hear Brueggemann draw out even further the implications of these close readings for contemporary issues. For example, chapter 6, “Food Fight,” opens by describing the crisis of hunger in contemporary society related to food production, consumption, and distribution, as well as the related crisis of spiritual hunger. The chapter offers extensive reflection on biblical ideologies about food. On the one hand, he finds that Pharaoh is “the agent, symbol, and metaphor for a food system that is rooted in anxious scarcity and enacted in accumulation on the way to monopoly” (p. 141). Solomon, too, embodies an ideology of scarcity, accumulation, and monopoly. On the other hand, the prophetic tradition represents a strong critique of such ideologies of accumulation, and