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“Compte-rendu du livre de Rachel Havrelock, The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible (Princeton University Press, 2020)”

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Review of Rachel Havrelock, *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020. 245 pp. ISBN 9780691198934

Rachel Havrelock's multifaceted and highly stimulating book is in many ways an attempt to redeem or rescue Joshua—"the Hebrew Bible's most violent book" (10)—from the modern readings that have produced, and continue to produce, negative political effects in the modern State of Israel. (The author emphasizes that the focus on Israel is not meant to divert attention from equally problematic uses of Joshua in other modern contexts and chiefly reflects the country's status as the most prominent case study in the 20th century, with far-reaching implications for the 21st [22].) Havrelock's political stance is clear from the outset: she is opposed to the "occupation" of the Palestinian territories and in favor of political, social and economic justice in Israel/Palestine. Equally clear is that her primary motivation in this book is not bibliographical erudition or the in-depth philological study of biblical texts but rather the conviction that scholarly enquiries can be relevant to our contemporary world, helping us to think and act differently.

The book has four chapters and a conclusion, which provide a fresh analysis of Joshua (Chapters 1–2), examine its modern readings and impact (Chapters 3–4), and reflect on a possible way to overcome the nationalistic interpretations that are still common in Israel today (Conclusion).

Chapter 1 deals with Joshua 1–12, which describes a successful and even triumphant process of conquest, depicts the Land as emptied of its native inhabitants, and celebrates the unity of the people of Israel gathered around their "national" leader, Joshua. In contrast, Joshua 13–24, which Havrelock scrutinizes in Chapter 2, describes a much more uncertain and muddled process of settlement, with the Israelite tribes struggling locally to gain control over their allotted territories and forced to forge alliances with Canaanite groups that they could not expel. Havrelock rightly notes the book's contradictions, which point to divergent traditions that were interwoven at some stage of the redaction process. She argues that the redactors' purpose was to promote national unity and a centralized state, maybe against the background of the Neo-Assyrian threat to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, but that we can nevertheless discern in the book ongoing processes of local negotiations between different types of power and social structures (including the tribe, clan, and family) and forms of resistance to state formation.

Chapters 3 and 4 address the interpretations of Joshua that developed in Israel from 1948 onward, especially at Ben-Gurion's Bible seminar in the 1950s and within the settlers' movement after 1967. Havrelock shows how the book has been read with the contemporary State of Israel and its wars in mind and how, conversely, modern interpretations have shaped numerous aspects of Israel's self-definition as a state, as well as its policies vis-à-vis Israeli Arabs and Palestinians. She identifies a parallel between what she describes as a project of state formation in Joshua 1–12 and Ben-Gurion's use of the founding story of the 1948 Independence War—seen as a reenactment of the conquest of the Land under Joshua—to unite Jews with different origins and languages to create a new nation (98, 159, 163). After the Six-Day War of 1967, however, Ben-Gurion's "biblical territorialism" (106) proved to have paved the way to the settlers' movement. In Chapter 4, Havrelock examines how the rhetoric and political consequences of territorial maximalism are rooted in Joshua's narrative. Yet according to Havrelock, the new settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, far from contributing to national unity, undermined the cohesion of Israeli society and the nation-building that lay at the heart of Ben-Gurion's vision (172), leading to the emergence of counterreadings of Joshua such as that of S. Yizhar, who held it up "as a mirror in which Israelis should recognize themselves with consternation" (201).

Finally, the conclusion focuses on contemporary politico-economic issues in Israel/Palestine, especially the management of natural resources such as water. It highlights the problem of private companies that appropriate these resources and provide settlers (or Israelis in general) with privileged access to them (on the role of private companies in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see also 183, 189, 195). Havrelock argues that abandoning “privatized nationalism” (233) in favor of local and public management of these resources by all the inhabitants of a given area could be a promising path toward peaceful coexistence.

Havrelock’s argumentation is lucid, engagingly written, well documented, and full of brilliant insights. She clearly demonstrates that Joshua’s impact on Israeli public policies, the settlers’ movement, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can hardly be minimized, and her careful analysis of the various, often diverging interpretations of the book in a modern context is welcome and useful.

Her own reading of Joshua, however, is less convincing. Since Havrelock’s study is intended for a wide audience, it is a pity that it does not provide a general outline of the biblical book, which would have helped the non-expert to grasp its narrative structure and appreciate the arguments that are made about it. In her attempt to contrast the two parts of Joshua, Havrelock associates women and the household with its second half, mentioning Rahab only in connection with Joshua 13–24 (68–73), even though she also features in Josh 2 and can be interpreted as the polar opposite of Achan in Josh 7. While Rahab (a Canaanite, and a prostitute at that!) is the good outsider through whom Israel comes into being as a nation settled in its land (as rightly noticed by Havrelock at 70 and 72), Achan is the bad insider whose disobedience to God endangers the nation. This contrasting pair significantly undermines and complicates the “nationalist” discourse of Joshua 1–12, even before we get to the book’s second part.

More significant reservations concern one of the main claims of Havrelock’s interpretation of Joshua—namely, that ethnic language in this book points to political and social rather than ethnic antagonisms, and specifically that “Canaanites” refers to those who opposed the process of state formation and national unification (see 10, 28, 51, 61, 80). This is an interesting suggestion but one that is hardly substantiated by any evidence, since Joshua and other biblical texts obstinately describe non-Israelite groups in ethnic and religious terms (with only rare exceptions, such as Delilah in Judg 16:4 [see 233–234]). While biblical rhetoric is certainly not to be taken at face value, any alternative reading must rely on the biblical evidence itself or we run the risk of simply projecting our own views onto the ancient texts. Havrelock does not always avoid the pitfalls that she so masterfully identifies in the writings of others, and at times ideology seems to motivate her reading of Joshua. While she rightly highlights the passages in Joshua that allude to coexistence between Israelites and Canaanites (in addition to Rahab’s clan and the Gibeonites, see Josh 13:13, 15:63, 17:12–13, 23:4), she minimizes the significance of the fact that according to Josh 17:13, the Canaanites were subject to a tribute, and thus to economic exploitation (87). Can we really consider, on the basis of such passages, that “the tribes of Israel blend[ed] with their neighbors” (144)?

Finally, even though the book of Joshua fosters the image of a united nation at war, I fail to see how it describes a process of centralized state formation, since it doesn’t mention “national” institutions at all. There is neither a capital city nor a central sanctuary yet, and “the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel” of Josh 24:1 certainly refers to representatives of the tribes. It seems that the only elements that bind the tribes together are the Torah/Covenant, the figure of Joshua (who has no successor), and the Levites/priests, whose cities are spread throughout the tribes’ territories.

Yet these reservations should by no means obscure the many merits of Havrelock's book. While I remain unconvinced by her interpretation of Joshua and the notion that it may provide a model for resolving the modern conflict in Israel/Palestine, her attempt is thought-provoking and her analysis of the contemporary situation extremely rich and illuminating. Ultimately, this book should be mandatory reading for anyone interested in how the Bible has influenced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict up to today.

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