

[Filler on Havrelock, 'The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible'](#)

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Rachel S. Havrelock. *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. xiv + 245 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-19893-4.

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Before opening *The Joshua Generation*, many readers might consider becoming reacquainted with the biblical book of Joshua. I expect there are few readers with Havrelock's sweeping knowledge of the text, particularly, as she notes, given its general unpopularity from antiquity onward. The classical rabbis engaged the book far less than other prophetic books, and Western moderns have largely neglected it as well. Early on, Havrelock quotes George Steiner's evaluation of Joshua as "the least attractive text in the canon," a text that displays "tribal arrogance and cruelty with undoubted relish" and is "brimful of malediction and triumphalism" (p. 22). But her book about the book is deeply compelling, a model of close reading, and rather politically subversive (this is a compliment) in its relentless depiction of Israeli statesmen consciously attempting to construct a Bible-authorized state.

Readers expecting to leap right into a sustained analysis of Israeli state politics and the question of (what Havrelock calls with refreshing matter-of-fact-ness) the Israeli occupation of Palestine will have to wait. The substantive introduction opens with the recently deposed Prime Minister Netanyahu's biblical citations, and Havrelock describes the book as a "story of how the biblical figure of Joshua entered modern political life" (p. 5). But instead of then launching into contemporary political analysis, Havrelock first takes us back to the sources; the book's first two chapters are chiefly a very close reading of the major themes, events, people, and linguistic markers of the book of Joshua.

I would like to consider Havrelock's method of close reading in some detail, as it should really be a model for scholars doing similar kinds of analysis. The brilliance of Havrelock's careful (and very readable) excursion through Joshua depends on her ability to weave together multiple kinds of analysis in the right proportions. First, Havrelock is a Bible scholar, well schooled in a variety of theories about the authorship, dates, and historicity of Joshua and surrounding texts, and she is adept at integrating this scholarship into her reading. It is clear that her analysis of the book's political afterlife does not rise or fall on questions of its historicity and authorship, but she takes care to mark notable linguistic features in the text, or moments when she finds a point of historical scholarship relevant; as she says, "suppositions or fictions about ancient authors may be as valid a context as any other" (p. 13). More crucially, given the political critiques embedded in her book (of which I will say more shortly), Havrelock does not imagine that a given historical or philological argument, no matter how scholastically persuasive, can (or should) serve as a "corrective" to some controversial political expression of the text. That is, she does not attempt to address Israeli politics through historicist assertions of what the Joshua text "actually" means. This thoughtful acknowledgement of the

limitations of historical scholarship's ability to materially intervene in modern politics is not as self-evident as one might hope.

Second, Havrelock's use of literary theoretical scholarship—feminist, postcolonial, Marxist—is consistently judicious, making the Joshua text's details more vivid instead of disciplining them into the shape of some theory. Consider, for instance, her reading of the Canaanite harlot Rahab and the Israelite spies sent to survey the promised land in the opening chapters of Joshua. Anticipating the impending invasion and destruction of the land's current inhabitants as the Israelites and their God advance, Rahab secures safety for herself and her family by agreeing to harbor the spies in her home and release them safely into the land without informing the Canaanites; propelled from Rahab's window on a red cord, the spies descend down to the ground. Here, Havrelock's use of both feminist literary theory and modern theories of state building draws the implicit metaphor of the episode to the surface; as she notes, "Rahab appears to give birth to the nation of Israel as she propels its spies from her window on a scarlet cord" (p. 72). Having made the metaphor visible, Havrelock can convincingly argue that "the people of Israel come into being in a local, Canaanite space and ... the alliance of households is what makes the state possible" (p. 73). Her lively attention to the text's details, deftly moving between the text and various interpretive apparatuses, is the triumph of the book.

Havrelock's clear and colorful readings also allow her to establish the broader textual-political claim that accompanies her into the contemporary period. The book of Joshua is commonly understood to be a thoroughgoing narrative of conquest, destruction, and annihilation (features that likely account for much of the text's unpopularity). But Havrelock notes that in fact the second half of the book of Joshua reveals a land "wherein the tribes of Israel blend with the very peoples they were just said to have exterminated" (p. 23). Far from a newly emptied land, the latter chapters of Joshua describe a Jerusalem divided "until today," the Israelites interacting in a variety of ways with the (notably non-annihilated) native inhabitants, and everyone living amidst an array of shifting political alliances, internal conflicts, and geographical disputes. The book of Joshua, Havrelock concludes, seems to be an ostensible account of conquest that in fact "preserves what it wants to deny—the plurality of constituent groups and presence of neighbors resistant to the national formation" (p. 23).

It is with this provocative framework in place that Havrelock moves from biblical text to modern state. Her third chapter, the pivotal point of the book, is grounded in an uncommonly fascinating episode: Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's creation of a Joshua "study group" at his home in 1958, the ten-year anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel. Comprised of prominent Israeli military leaders and ministers as well as noted biblical historians and archaeologists, the elite study group forged a "modern Israeli form of biblical criticism" that combined textual interpretation with the conscious intention to build a unified Israeli narrative from the account of the Israelite conquest (p. 107). Ben-Gurion's goals, Havrelock argues, were quite clear; she quotes his astonishing introductory assertion to the study group: "[O]ccupation, settlement, tribe, nation—I doubt if a scattered and divided people that has no land and no independence could know the true meaning of these words and their full content. Those who do not engage in conquest cannot know what is involved in the act of conquest. It is the same thing with settlement" (p. 109).

Now that the state has been established, Ben-Gurion seems to assert, the book of Joshua may become intelligible at last. But, of course, Ben-Gurion does not leave this to chance; it is incumbent, in

Havrelock's words, that "contemporary Israeli citizens would realize biblical promises as the reborn People of Israel sovereign in their ancient homeland" (p. 97). The study group, therefore, has a dual function: to "sanction and justify the actions of the state as legitimate and, to a certain degree, blessed" (p. 107) and to construct, from the raw materials of the text, a new, unified narrative of what modern Israel means, based on the template Joshua provides; this narrative, presumably, would "trickle down" to the disparate array of people inhabiting the state and bind them together—at least, the Jews. (Palestinian citizens of Israel, necessarily cast as the disposable biblical Canaanites, remained subject to Israeli military law until 1966.)

Her fourth chapter draws out these persistent tensions by looking at the influence of the Joshua narrative during and after the 1967 war and Israel's subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Whatever real or perceived unity the Joshua narrative could impose on the Jewish inhabitants of the early state, it could not survive the war and ongoing occupations, which have revealed or created divisions between various constituencies of the state proper: hilltop messianists, secular bourgeois settlers, Palestinians both within and beyond the Green Line, soldiers and refuseniks, opponents and supporters of the West Bank wall (and, of course, diaspora Jews, whose liberal Zionism seems to countenance the "original" 1948 conquest of the land and Palestinian dispossession but not the more recent and controversial structures of the territories). Havrelock suggests that in light of these fissures, "Israel society has come to depend upon recurrent war and a massive wall complex intended to bind Israeli communities as much to exclude Palestinian noncitizens" (p. 163). These bonds are stretched thin.

Readers may find this chapter somewhat less interpretively precise than the previous; where Havrelock made acute observations of the Joshua text in the context of early Israeli statecraft, this latter chapter employs more general characterizations of settlers speaking in a "Joshua locution" or acting with "Joshua spirit." The chapter does, however, effectively consider the political geography of the occupied territories and its justification in Joshua's assertion that—even if the land was definitely not emptied of Canaanites, and the inhabitants' lives are full of land negotiation and protracted dispute—God is assuredly a partisan for the Israelites, and the land is theirs.

It should be clear by now that Havrelock's work is underwritten by a thoroughgoing critique. Her most explicit and sustained normative arguments only emerge in the extended conclusion (titled "End This War") where she introduces a rather unexpected (to this reader) set of considerations: geopolitical questions about water rights and access, desalination technology, watershed privatization, and the catastrophic collapse of the Coastal Aquifer, the chief source of drinking water in Gaza. Havrelock argues that this persistent water scarcity, in a contested desert land on a warming planet, provides an opportunity for a "reformulation of the public as those who draw from a common water source—rather than as ethnonational subjects" (p. 215). In Havrelock's vision, this (literally) refreshing shift may also be biblically authorized. Despite the aggressions of Joshua's first chapters, "its second half presents a mix of peoples, tribes, claims, and households present in shared regions. The picture is not utopian—skirmish and competition continue—but a decentralized system with loose alliances and variant sites of sovereignty is justified by Scripture as much as militarized Occupation" (p. 233). In this way, the multiple peoples inhabiting this contested land might find mutual ground. As Havrelock asks hopefully at the end, "what if we consider the demographics not in terms of national struggle, but in terms of the water resources necessary to sustain the population at current and future junctures?" (p. 238).

I suspect, however, that the more implicit political critique of the earlier chapters will prove more controversial for many readers. Although Havrelock generally lets her subjects speak for themselves, her reintroduction of the Joshua text in the context of modern Israeli state building advances an understanding of Israel counter to some of the Jewish world's most dominant assumptions or fantasies. Most fundamentally, her focus on the 1958 study group relentlessly denaturalizes the idea of the state, its significance, and its trajectory, as we see how consciously Ben-Gurion and his hermeneutical compatriots tried to create textual-political cohesion based on Joshua's conquest. Of course, this same process of denaturalization could apply to the reigning mythologies of any modern state; states and borders are human constructs after all. But in our fraught contemporary public discourse around political Zionism (in and out of academia), Havrelock's obvious dismissal of a "natural" relationship between the biblical commonwealth and the modern state is a meaningful political act. The artificiality of this self-understanding is underscored by her sustained analysis of some of the group's chief actors and their particular interpretive, archaeological, and military debates; the textual and political conclusions of this group were highly dependent on who sat at the table, as opposed to any inherent expression of the biblical book. In Ben-Gurion's study group, it proved difficult to determine the meaning or significance of the Joshua text even on its own ancient terms; the question of what the text should mean for modern statecraft (and why must it mean anything at all?) is assuredly more difficult. And yet, Havrelock asks rhetorically, "what is [modern] Israel without Joshua?" (p. 202). As Havrelock brilliantly demonstrates, the answer to this question in the context of modern nation-states was, and is, by no means as self-evident as many Jews (and Christian Zionists, and American politicians) would wish. The challenge of Havrelock's book is the willingness to look this question squarely in the face.

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