

*Divine Presence amid Violence: Contextualizing  
the Book of Joshua*

Walter Brueggemann

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SUMMARY

Walter Brueggemann's booklet interprets Joshua 11, and particularly vv. 6-9, from the perspective of Yahweh's involvement in fighting against oppressive social structures, much in line with the peasants' revolt theory about Israel's origins. However, the text rather simply seems to speak about Yahweh's help against an enemy more powerful than Israel, also in line with comparable parallels from the Ancient Near East.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Walter Brueggemanns Büchlein legt Josua 11 aus, insbesondere die Verse 6 – 9. Dies geschieht aus der Perspektive von Jahwes Involvement in den Kampf gegen soziale Unterdrückung, und zwar in weitgehender Übereinstimmung mit der Theorie vom Bauernaufstand bei der Entstehung Israels. Der Text scheint jedoch auf eher einfache Weise von Jahwes Hilfe gegen einen Feind zu erzählen, der mächtiger als Israel ist, ebenfalls in Übereinstimmung mit vergleichbaren Parallelen aus der Antike des Nahen Ostens.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce petit livre de Walter Brueggemann étudie le chapitre onze du livre de Josué, et plus particulièrement les versets 6-9, sous l'angle de l'intervention divine pour combattre les structures sociales oppressives. Il se situe grosso modo dans la ligne de la théorie de la révolte paysanne à l'origine d'Israël. Pourtant, le texte semble bien plutôt parler tout simplement de l'aide apportée par Yahvé à son peuple contre un ennemi bien plus puissant que lui, et on lui connaît des parallèles dans le Proche-Orient ancien.

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Walter Brueggemann's booklet interprets Joshua 11 from the perspective of Yahweh's involvement in fighting against oppressive social structures. Brueggemann in many ways follows the peasants' revolt model of Israel's origins proposed by Mendenhall and Gottwald in the latter part of the twentieth century. In this, the origins of Israel stem from a revolt by those socially oppressed against their Canaanite overlords, together with a move to the highlands and establishment of a new egalitarian society. According to Brueggemann, Yahweh's victory over horses and chariots in Joshua 11:6-9 is an indication of Yahweh's action against oppressive political structures. In many ways, this is in line with what we presently would call liberation theology.

The booklet contains a number of interesting insights. However, in the view of this reviewer, the interpretation suggested by the author, while interesting, is not quite what the text actually says. The text simply states that Yahweh is able to defeat a more powerful oppo-

nent, in this case a northern coalition of kings. Chariots were a standard part of ancient warfare. In this, it clearly appears that, according to the Bible, in the time of early Israel, they were predominantly used by peoples inhabiting the lowlands (Joshua 17:15-18), in contrast to the Israelites who were concentrated in the highlands. The northern coalition is not an example of an oppressive social structure, but of people groups that are to be vanquished and destroyed in taking the land for Israel. A particularly apt parallel to Yahweh reassuring Joshua can be found in the Zakkur stela (about 800 BC), where Baalshamayn reassures Zakkur by saying (lines 13-15, from Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, Society of Biblical Literature 2003) '[e]ar not, for I have made [you] king, [and I who will (14) st]and with [you], and I will deliver you from all [these kings who] (15) have forced a siege against you!'. One may also compare with the apology of Hattusilis (thirteenth century BC), lines 22-58.

This said, the fact that there is a debate about the question of Israel's origins and that most commentators today would not give credence to the biblical presentation according to which there was a conquest does somewhat complicate the interpretation of the passage. On that line, if one of the alternative options (the other in essence being a peaceful infiltration theory), the peasants revolt theory, is accepted, as it was by many shortly after Mendenhall and Gottwald proposed the model, even if less so nowadays, there perhaps is some ground for reading the text at least partially as Brueggemann does. However, we can still ask the question if the author *intended* the text to be read in this way. The present reviewer thinks that this is *not* the case. This having been said, anyone interested in the topic is advised to read this short work for themselves and make up their own minds.

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