In a postapartheid and postcolonial context, the book of Joshua has become problematical, as the formerly colonized tend to associate with the Canaanites’ plight in the stories. Dora Mbuwayasango, in her reading of Joshua in The Global Bible, argues that the book renders the relationship of the people of God to the world disconcerting because the indigenous inhabitants are destroyed with divine sanction and that the picture of God becomes alarming as he is portrayed as acting in a partisan way, favoring one nation (Israel) and demanding the extermination of others (several groups of people inhabiting Palestine at the time).

What can one do with the ideology of divine entitlement in the book in the aftermath of colonialism? For example, can the narrative of Josh 11 say something to the current Zimbabwean context of land repossession and black financial empowerment according to which firms under white control earning more than $500,000 a year should cede control into black hands? Given the history of colonialism (in its concomitant scramble for land) and postcolonialism (in its often violent land-restitution program that appears to benefit those in power) in Zimbabwe, the answer to this question would probably hinge on an interpretation of power, or, in Brueggemann’s metaphor, access to “horses and chariots.” The postcolonial discourse in Zimbabwe would have it that the West still has power over
the horses and chariots and that redress is needed in order to empower those who were
dispossessed during the colonial period. Yet those who are required to give their land and
businesses do not have strong ties with colonial powers and feel rather deserted by the
colonial power twenty years ago at what is called “independence.” Nonetheless, they
benefited from colonization, and their access to land and production can be regarded as
“white privilege.” What if the redistribution simply results in a new privileged group
closely related to those who have access to “horses and chariots”?

What does one do with the text in this regard? Is there anything redemptive in a story
that compels the Israelites to act against horses and chariots and burn down some towns?
An answer to this question will depend on who possesses the horses and chariots in
Zimbabwe.

Brueggemann wants to keep the revelatory power of the text, albeit a problematic
conviction and open to a variety of meanings (ix). His point of departure is the following:
“The revelatory power of the text is discerned and given precisely through the action of
interpretation which is always concrete, never universal, always contextualized, never
‘above the fray’, always filtered through vested interest, never in disinterested purity” (ix).
In other words, Scripture as revelation does not present the reader with a final disclosure
but presents the reader with an ongoing act of disclosing “that will never let the disclosure
be closed” (xi). Revelation did not stop with the production of the biblical texts. Its
disclosure takes place in each act of reading. Given that knowing is contextual, that
contexts are local, and that knowledge is pluralistic, the outcome of the reading of a text
of terror may differ from context to context. The acceptance of Brueggemann’s reading
strategies will depend on whether one accepts the contextual nature of the biblical text
and reading process as opposed to a positivistic sense of universality attributed to the
Bible as revelation.

In what follows in the book, Brueggemann provides the reader with his understanding of
a difficult text thick with ideology (10) but nevertheless with revelatory power. The book,
with physical small dimensions and ninety-four total pages, has seven chapters. But
Brueggemann has written many books and essays, so that this booklet cannot be read
without taking his entire work into account. The latter is somewhat frustrating to the
reader not knowledgeable about Brueggemann, but it can serve as a primer to read other
works. I enjoyed reading this book, and I can agree with most of it. However, the socio-
political situation in Southern Africa where the instability of Zimbabwe impact directly
on the social well-being of South Africa made me question Brueggemann’s reading of a
text of terror. His reading assumes a perpetrator and a victim. For it to work in another
community, a certain level of identification needs to take place. In a postcolonial situation
such as in Zimbabwe, it is not easy to determine who are victims and perpetrators.
In chapter 1 Brueggemann considers social-scientific criticism and literary analysis in relation to the revelatory character of the biblical text. The combination of the two provides an interaction with the text that enables an ongoing conversation where the canon is taken seriously but not taken as a settled, coherent account of reality (10). The reason is that there are no innocent formations or readings of Scripture: “every faithful witness and interpretation is to some extent filtered through and impinged upon by the interpreter” (7–8). Every text and reading carries an interest whose truth is voiced from a particular perspective. The resulting question is not what the text says but rather what the text and interpretation seek to achieve (8).

In chapter 2 Brueggemann pursues the matter of revelation in context with specific reference to Josh 11. He wants to understand in what way a text of violence can be understood as revelation. He distinguishes three aspects. First, he looks for a direct reference from Yahweh, of which there is very little in Josh 11 (only in v. 6). Second, he asks what the characters take as revelation; third, he inquires into the way the entire text can operate as revelation (12). But Brueggemann is very clear that he is not equating a direct reference to universal applicability. He says: “In our text, what Joshua and ancient Israel took as revelation may provide a clue for our hearing of the text as revelatory. But the two may not be identified or equated” (12).

Thus the question in chapter 3 is how to interpret verse 6 as revelation as it is God’s only speech in Josh 11. Brueggemann argues that verse 6 provides a very lean mandate that addresses the simple, most important issues, namely, a military threat of monarchical power against a peasant Israelite community that lacks military technology (22). It is violence of the peasantry against weapons of a city state (23). He says it “is not a summons to violence..., but only a permit that Joshua’s community is entitled to dream, hope, and imagine freedom and is entitled to act upon that dream, hope, and imagination” (24). They acted for the sake of their own social destiny. But how far does this disclosure go? Brueggemann says it has credibility only in that community (26), since it lives very close to the actual experience of the community. The revelation is an act embedded in the social community. However, revelation in verse 6 is not self-disclosure of a deity but authorization by which Joshua (and Israel) is legitimated for their own acts of liberation (30). Israel is given permission to act in order to create new possibilities.

Whereas horses and chariots are regarded as instruments of subjugation and thus in need of destruction, cattle and spoil are of a different nature. In chapter 4 Brueggemann deals with the massive destruction that takes place in Josh 11. He distinguishes between the direct speech from Yahweh in verse 6 about horses and chariots and the indirect speech through Moses about cattle and spoil (35). The latter revelation is regarded as a reference to older Torah memory (Deut 20) that the community must interpret. So, to the question
whether God mandates such violence, Brueggemann answers by first putting the question in a context: in the interest of Israel’s survival, both revelation in the memory of Moses and the immediate revelation, impediments of domination can be removed. However, it is tightly circumscribed and provided with a context.

But what do readers who stand outside the narrative do with the text? In chapter 5 Brueggemann discusses what he calls revelation and canonical reading. He says: “The struggle reflected in Joshua 11 is how this community, so vulnerable and helpless, can exist and function against the kings and their powerful tools of domination” (44). He refers to four narratives where horses and chariots symbolize hostile, oppressive royal power (49) that Yahweh counters with his own power. To Brueggemann, these four narratives offer a different mode of presentation than the flat descriptive accounts of royal power that is rather stating the obvious. These four narratives reveal that “faithful imagination is more powerful than dominating technique” (51). Revelation comes forward when what is hidden from the kings is disclosed by the prophets who see and know another kind of power. This disclosure dismantles the sure, managed world of royal technique and certitude (51). But Brueggemann sees a correlation between the mode of expression and the mode of power. The imaginative narrative is stronger than the descriptive mode. The former articulates the decisive direction of the historical process (53). The contrast serves as a warning to Israel not to become an agent of domination, which in effect happened with Solomon who got horses and chariots and lost narrative (53).

The key point for Brueggemann is that the power of Yahweh is stronger than the royal power of chariots and that Israel knows not to emulate these royal modes of power, knowledge, or language (54–55). In chapter 6 he discusses other texts proclaiming Yahweh’s sovereignty over royal horses and chariots.

Brueggemann reads Josh 11 as a tale of a transformation from domination to inheritance wrought by Yahweh’s sovereign will through Israel’s bold obedience (61). In chapter 7 he provides his final view on the narrative in four points: (1) Yahweh is disclosed as a God who will invert the historical process and give land to the landless, although the troublesome part is that it happens in concrete human ways such as burning and hamstringing of horses; (2) this disclosure is embedded in Israel as a community of marginality; (3) a structural resonance with the text can only be struck from the perspective of communities of marginality in our time, such as third-world communities of faith to whom “God’s great promise of land and justice is indeed linked to concrete human acts against horses and chariots” (64); (4) for those who are part of the power of horses and chariots, the narrative is taken to be a disclosure “from the other side” (64), warning that this kind of power is not secure against God’s force for life. In the text, the
disclosure is aimed against the domination of the Canaanites, whose powerful city-kings “were undone by the command, permit, and warrant of Yahweh” (65).

Is Zimbabwe a third-world community of marginality whose land-reform program constitutes God’s promise of land and justice? If disclosure is embedded in the community and if reading is not innocent, the answer to this question will be determined by the reader’s ideology. In terms of the effect of colonialism and the grabbing of land that went with it, any land-restitution program will make sense as a measure of justice. But the reality is different when those who possess the land are discursively reduced to nothingness in order to facilitate the repossession of land by those who also have access to the postcolonial horses and chariots. What Brueggemann does not bring into the equation is the view from the Canaanites themselves. The story turns them into the perpetrators receiving their just deserts, and it appears that Brueggemann accepts the story’s judgment over them. An uncritical view toward the ideological slant of the story creates problems for Palestinians in the twentieth–twenty-first centuries.

Given the complexity of the effects of colonialism and the execution of land restitution, the determining of the perpetrator and victim so that the narrative may find a structural resonance in a similar community of marginality is fraught with difficulty. But Brueggemann is correct in saying that no reading and writing is innocent. Although I am firmly rooted in white privilege as a result of colonialism and in a process of recognizing that privilege and the subsequent change it demands in a postapartheid South Africa, the concrete human actions one reads about in the text as well as in the newspapers cast a shadow over the ethics in the narrative of Josh 11 as well as any reception of that story.

Walter Brueggemann’s book was a good read, and I am not finished with his reception of the story. His book is not a conclusion. It evokes, invites, and offers (7) further contemplation.