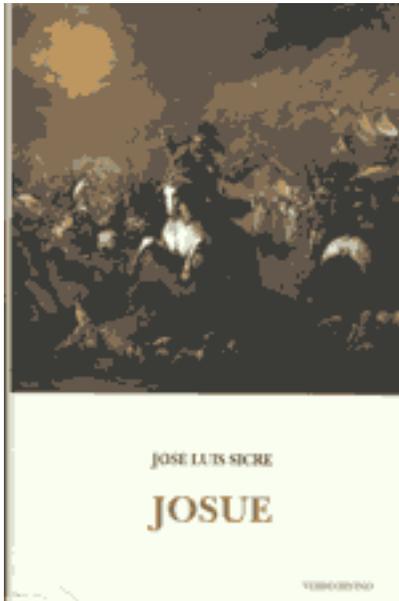


RBL 03/2004



Sicre, Jose Luis

Josue

Estella: Verbo Divino, 2002. Pp. 520. Hardcover. No Price Available. ISBN 8481694886.

Christoph Uehlinger
University of Fribourg
Fribourg, Switzerland CH-1700

I.

This is a major commentary on the book of Joshua, published in the leading Spanish-language commentary series *Nueva Biblia Española* by its main editor, José Luis Sicre, who teaches at the Theological Faculty of Granada. The format of commentaries written for the *Nueva Biblia Española* series compares quite closely to the North-American *Word Biblical Commentary* series. It generally follows a historical-critical approach, with a focus on form criticism and tradition history, complemented by a qualified interest in literary matters and theology. Considerable space and depth are reserved for extensive bibliography and the critical discussion of secondary literature and other authors' opinions.

Sicre's commitment to earlier scholarship on Joshua is evident on every page, but most clearly in the care he takes in relating issues of historical geography and archaeology for which he himself does not claim particular expertise. Much to his honor and such self-acknowledged limitations notwithstanding, the author wants readers to be informed about virtually any issue ever raised in scholarship on Joshua since the nineteenth century. The commentary is thus more interested in solid documentation and clear exposition of long-seen problems than in aiming at originality or in satisfying fashion-of-the-day exegesis.

Quite refreshingly, Sicre announces from the very outset of his book that he will not elaborate a new redaction-historical hypothesis of his own nor give a detailed account of how, when, and along how many stages the book of Joshua came into being: “the simple attempt to sketch the formation of a single story (the crossing of the Jordan river, the fall of Jericho) supposes so many sources and stages that, when one envisages that task for the whole book, the results would be indigestible and highly hypothetical” (19, reviewer’s free translation). Thus only the redactional history of Josh 2 and 6 are discussed each in an excursus (117–19, 192–94); while the results look respectable and certainly merit the attention of other scholars, Sicre himself was not convinced that they allowed him to draw more general conclusions and proceed along the same way in other chapters.

The book is divided into two parts. First, an introduction (21–76) discusses the usual matters, though often with a personal touch: (1) general characteristics (“a strange and admirable book”); (2) name and main protagonists of the book (“God [rather, 220 times YHWH], Joshua, Moses [“the most omnipresent dead man one can imagine”], the people”)—one misses a paragraph or two about pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land, who despite the often passive role they have to play in some narratives are important protagonists, however failing, in others; (3) content and structure—not the most convincing section for this reviewer, who would have expected more elaboration on structural implications of the book’s belonging to larger literary horizons (i.e., Deuteronomy + Joshua, the Deuteronomistic History, the Hexateuch, etc.); (4) author and redactional history; (5) relationship to Deuteronomy and additions of Priestly origin; (6) textual problems—a chapter that one would have wished to be exposed at the very beginning, since all other issues are dependent on the textual basis; and (7) moral problems raised by the book; and finally, its relation to history.

The second, larger part provides the actual commentary to the book of Joshua (77–498). This part moves along the book’s main sections and narrative subunits, each commentary section being organized according to a standard format (bibliography, translation, notes on text and translation, structure, diachronic and synchronic approaches, followed by a contentual and theological commentary proper).

There are seven excursus (on various matters such as redaction history, the designations of the ark, the lists of subdued peoples of the land, or the Levitical cities). Indexes (499–520: subjects, authors) may help the layperson or scholar alike to rapidly locate what is of particular interest to him or her. Extensive bibliographies are given both in the final section of the introduction (70–76) and at the beginning of every section of the commentary.

II.

“A strange and admirable book”: within a few paragraphs Sicre manages to provide his readers with some fundamental orientations regarding his own, literary-theological approach to Joshua. The book is considered strange by Sicre because he thinks that, after all, it almost systematically contradicts the expectations of a modern reader. Were we to look for a book on warfare and conquest, we could only be deceived: the book sums up the conquest of the promised land in just two and a half chapters, while giving much more space and attention to the detailed description of the allotment of tribal lands. Thus the book of Joshua’s main concern is clearly not warfare realism, in contrast both to ancient war accounts and modern movies.

Concerning characters, Joshua foremost among others appears to be an utterly fictitious and construed figure, “one of the most unrealistic characters of the Hebrew Bible,” according to Sicre. Equally unrealistic, though shaped according to well-known biblical standards, are the Israelite people, most of whom remain an anonymous mass. No victims are counted among them except thirty-six men who died at Ai and Achan, who is punished for his wickedness. Again, this is against the rules of epic literature, which would have insisted on more battle accounts and examples of military heroism. Instead, the book of Joshua as read by Sicre displays soberness, a primarily theological interest, and a remarkable logic. Things are told and happen according to narrative requirements and theological purpose, not military strategy. Conquest (a campaign to the south, another to the north) is related as if drawn on a (mental) map by an ancient theorist, certainly not a practitioner, whether of actual warfare or only of ancient Near Eastern military accounts.

Incidentally, “The reader is left alone to wonder why the center is almost left out, as if it had not actually to been conquered at all” (22, my translation). This observation sounds very promising, particularly in the light of settlement history and given the fact that the center preserved from actual conquest by Joshua corresponds (1) to the heart of the Persian province of Yehud and (2) to the province of Samaria. Unfortunately, Sicre’s commentary does not seem to explore this question much further. While certainly not blind to history, Sicre is ultimately more interested in theological matters and thinks that the book of Joshua serves primarily such a purpose. Hence there is not much history to look for:

No doubt, the author relied on only a few traditions, which in most cases were devoid of [historical] value. This explains the numerous problems encountered by the modern historians. In sum, the book of Joshua is typical example of theological historiography, prophetic or however one may call it. The author’s

essential aim is to demonstrate a religious truth (God has accomplished His promises) and to exhort the people to be faithful to the Lord. This type of historiography does not exclude political mobiles, but such intentions do not convert it into what we would have to regard as authentic historiography. (70)

The implied disconnection between political ideology and theology does not sound very convincing for a literary work whose essential formative stages must be looked for in the Persian (and possibly early Hellenistic) period. At that time, theology per se was still to be invented. I would hence recommend not to detach assessments of the theological dimension of the book of Joshua from the search for a plausible sociohistorical context.

III.

Had I one point of criticism to raise, it would be the following: rather than develop what could have been an original reading perspective (i.e., a literary analysis taking into account the particular point of view of those central areas of the Palestinian hill country that are not the theater of actual conquest), Sicre's commentary remains too heavily bound to the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical-critical research. While it is perfectly legitimate and even necessary for an author to state and document his debt to earlier scholarship, a commentary should distinguish itself from a research account, which is a scholarly genre of its own. Sicre frankly admits in his introduction that he was sometimes inclined to abandon the task when struggling with heaps of secondary literature on Joshua over many years. But was it really necessary to recount long-gone discussions of scholarship regarding, for example, the historicity of Joshua's covenantal gathering at Shechem (Josh 24)—an issue that I would regard as definitely obsolete on the eve of the twenty-first century—when more recent approaches focusing on Josh 24 as Persian-period “fictional” literature have opened up so much more enlightening perspectives based on the analysis of literary structure, rhetorical strategy, and historiographic horizon? Similarly, given the author's sympathy with the historiographic approach to the book of Joshua recently defended by John Van Seters and others, would not readers have been better served by a few additional explanations and possibly parallels quoted from ancient Near Eastern historiographical literature than by extensive presentations of long-gone hypotheses once developed by Pfeiffer, Fohrer, or de Vaux, for which today—with all respect for the genius of their time—no one really cares any more? Finally, while I acknowledge Sicre's explanations of links between Deuteronomy and Joshua, I miss a somewhat equivalent in-depth discussion of the relationship between Joshua and Judges, where some material obviously duplicates the Joshua text while other represents rather competing traditions.

Among the more convenient features of this commentary are detailed lists and observations regarding phraseology that accompany virtually every narrative unit. Thanks to these, the alert reader can quickly make up his or her mind about the literary horizon of any given pericope. Similarly, the respective literary profiles of text sections that must evidently stem from different hands are easily distinguished thanks to these lists, such as when one compares the two final chapters of the book. The lists are but one example of the many useful tools embedded in this commentary. It is a strong feature of this book that throughout his commentary Sicre is keen to provide his readers not only with multiple theories and interpretations but even more with a clear perception of the primary “raw” data.

To sum up, Sicre has rendered an immense service to Spanish-speaking exegetes and lay readers alike, while at the same time providing colleagues in other regions of the world with a substantial commentary that serious students should not ignore. This is a mine of information for reliable reference, quick information on opinions expressed by many different scholars, and often-inspiring insights by Sicre himself, including soberly written, sometimes rather hidden but always well-considered theological intuitions.