The politics of biblical interpretation: A review essay

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Abstract

This article reviews four recent books that all purport to deal with politics in ancient Israel. Despite dealing with the Bible, they are all saturated with modern concerns.

Keywords

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Joshua A Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
Geoffrey P Miller. *The Ways of a King: Legal and Political Ideas in the Bible*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2011.
Yoram Hazony. *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
Michael Walzer. *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.

The Biblical narrative has long been used to articulate political positions about Jewish life. The history of Jewish philosophy, for example, is essentially the history of reading the Bible through a set of lenses supplied by the non-Jewish world, showing how the latter's ideas and interests lay dormant in the biblical narrative. Platonism, Aristotelianism, Renaissance Humanism, and Kantianism, to name but a few, have all been located therein. Jewish philosophy, past and present, is about looking to the Bible in order, simultaneously, to uncover and prove a series of connections, believed to be indelible and eternal, between Judaism and European rationalism.

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Following their Jewish philosophical predecessors, the authors under discussion here—Michael Walzer, Geoffrey Miller, Joshua Berman, and Yoram Hazony—make big promises. Their goal is nothing short of offering us the secret and hidden life of the Bible by providing the key that promises to unlock what they variously perceive to be its true or originary intent. Like Philo, like Maimonides, like Mendelssohn, to name but a few of their predecessors, they all read contemporaneous ideas gleaned from various non-Jewish contexts into the biblical narrative and in such a way that these ideas are now transformed and imagined to be quintessentially Jewish. While this essentialism may strike many readers as problematic, it is something that is of very little concern to the authors in question. Much like their premodern predecessors, Berman and Hazony (but not necessarily Walzer or Miller) claim to have uncovered veritable or authentic Judaism, an originary tradition that has the potential to address and solve modern shortcomings. However, that the right of center Tikvah Fund and Shalem Center, which I shall discuss shortly, are behind virtually all of these works is surely worthy of notice. Both of these organizations are interested in discovering and investing in what they not unproblematically call ''great Jewish ideas.'' What better way to reveal that Jews and Judaism are intimately connected to the fate of the West than to show (1) that the ''great'' ideas of the latter preexist, even if inchoately, in the Bible, and (2) that the Bible has nothing to do with its immediate Ancient Near Eastern (or, using modern parlance, Middle Eastern) context. Such claims, however, are as politically motivated as they are ultimately impossible to verify.

This is certainly not to claim that there is some objective Archimedean point from whereupon the interpreter casts his or her gaze. There cannot be, the claims of many religious to the contrary, a correct reading of a religious text. There can be better readings and there can be worse readings, but no correct reading. Modern historiography and contemporary understandings of literary theory belie the notion of disinterested interpretation. However, this carries with it the obligation of self-reflexivity on the part of the interpreter and, when this is not done with sufficient clarity and transparency, it is the task of the critic to shed light on latent information, showing if possible its investment in ideological concerns that remain hidden from the reader.

It is worth noting that the books examined here are but a spate of recent publications that seek to argue that patterns of nation formation visible in modern Europe were preexistent in ancient Israel. Such books often argue that the latter possessed a centralized monarchy that was able to exploit a concept of ethnicity to create a national identity using concepts such as monumental architecture, uniform codes of law, and the standardization of worship. Therein, kings sought to mobilize soldiers and resources with the aim of increasing power and expanding or defending borders. Steven Grosby's *Biblical Ideas of Nationalism* (2002) and Jacob L Wright's more recent *David, King of Israel, and Caleb in Biblical Memory* (2014), to name only two other works, both fit this model. Wright, for example, argues that biblical texts that mention war commemoration and hero stories served important tools in this process of ancient nation building.

My interest here is less in establishing whether or not this was the case, but in why now. Why, in other words, is there a need to remove ancient Israel from its Ancient Near Eastern setting and transform it into an ancient democracy? While the need to read the biblical narrative through a contemporary prism is certainly an ancient hermeneutic in Judaism, it is worth noting that virtually all of the authors discussed in this article in addition to the ones in the previous chapter have connections to a neoconservative Zionist

organization. I wish to suggest that some of their ideas are both structured and motivated by this organization and that their conclusions conform to that of this institution and their donors.

Before I do, allow me a few words about our sponsors. Zalman Bernstein, a venture capitalist and ardent Zionist, founded the Tikvah Fund with the ''hope that by investing in great Jewish ideas and great Jewish leaders, the heritage he cherished and the people he loved would be a light unto all nations.''[1] The Tikvah fund—with its tens of millions of dollars that helped to establish academic centers at NYU and Princeton (both now defunct), an academic book series (at Princeton University Press), quasi-academic journals (e.g. *Azure*), popular Jewish journals (e.g. *The Jewish Review of Books*), and academic conferences and workshops for students, faculty, and lay audiences throughout the North East—is in the business of manufacturing ''Jewish ideas.'' Recent seminars include ''Is Israel Alone?'' taught by Elliot Abrams and Charles Krauthammer, and ''What is Jewish Conservativism'' taught by, among others, William Kristol.

Many of these ideas that the Tikvah Fund seeks to articulate, not surprisingly, are ones Israel shares with America. Democracy, freedom, equality are so-called virtues common to both of these countries and would seem to be predicated on their common myth of origins as found in the Bible. The Tikvah fund also gave the money to help establish the Shalem Center in Israel, with its first president being one of the authors discussed below, Yoram Hazony, a friend and confidant of current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Hazony, among other things, appointed former hawkish politician Natan Sharansky, to be the director of what is now known as the (Sheldon) Adelson Institute for Strategic Studies at Shalem (see Hughes, 2013: 109).[2] Virtually all of the authors discussed here and in the previous paragraph have had fellowships and have received subvention grants from either Tikvah or Shalem (see Hughes, 2013: 108–112). While it is certainly worth noting that Shalem Center has recently undergone changes to make it less ideological with the hope of becoming a respectable liberal arts college in Israel, the authors associated with Shalem that are examined here were involved with its more ideological iteration. Regardless, however, of whether Shalem is free of ideology, its connection to the vision of Tikvah remains clear: isolating Jewish ideas.

Jewish ideas, and their contribution to the history of the West, form the cornerstone of a more recent and neo-conservative inflected Zionism. In an earlier work Yoram Hazony laments how ''the professors and their students'' in Israel followed the ''Zionism'' (his quotations) of Martin Buber and, in the process, succeeded in de-judaizing the Jewish State. He excoriates the current cultural establishment in Israel for having

> turned the Jewish state's cultural institutions to continuing this task, ''critiquing'' or discrediting virtually everything that was precious to Israel's founders: from historians obsessed with exposing the invidious character and crimes of Labor Zionist settlers; to artists with their ghastly assault on traditional Jews and the defense forces; to novelists fixated on the Arab claim to the land and images of Israel's future annihilation; to a court system bent on replicating Canadian legal institutions; to screenwriters and dramatists issuing one savage attack after another against the country's heroes . . . Israeli culture has become a carnival of self-loathing, offering little from which one could construct the renewed Jewish civilization that was to have arisen in Israel, or the restored state of the Jewish people that was the dream of its founders (Hazony, 2000: 338–339).

To correct these abuses, Hazony left his position as an aid to then Deputy Foreign Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and founded Shalem College. This would offer an antidote to the

liberal ''professors and their students'' at places like the Hebrew University. Hazony also acknowledges that,

> It is only in books, journals, and other serious intellectual creations, which take years to circulate and decades to digest, and in universities, seminaries, and schools, wherein the views of the individual are refined over long years of effort, that stable and profound ideas can be worked into the fabric of the mind (Hazony, 2000: 335).

We are now close to two decades on from Hazony's pronouncement, and are now beginning to see the books and journals—subsidized by right-wing organizations—that seek to be ''worked into the fabric of the mind.'' Hazony's self-declared desire is to return to a Ben-Gurionist tradition of Jewish statecraft that emphasizes

> the upbuilding of the IDF and the value of Jewish military self-reliance; the constant efforts at securing Jewish immigration and settlement; the cultivation of ever-deepening relations on every level with the Jewish Diaspora, the strong diplomatic tilt toward the West; and, above all, the belief in Israel as the guardian-state of the Jewish people (Hazony, 2000: 328).

The goal is nothing short of creating the intellectual justification of a Jewish state that is committed to the ideal of Jewish strength in the service of Jewish interests and aspirations. Recent years have seen the political fallout of this in the rise of nation-state bills in Israel that seek to emphasize the Jewish ethnic character of the state by, among other things, making Hebrew the only official language, ensuring a Jewish majority, and establishing Jewish law as legitimate. Influenced by neo-conservative trends, a new group of Zionists, among whom Hazony is a major player, seek to establish Israel's standing as *the* nation state of the Jewish people based on modern political theory that recognizes the principle of the self-determination of peoples as the most appropriate organizing principle.

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Since I am neither a scholar of the Bible nor a political scientist, my goal is not to judge these books by their conformity to either the biblical text or contemporary political theory. Instead, I write as one interested in hermeneutics and the ideology of interpretation. Before I examine each book in turn, allow me a few general comments that link them. Primary is that all the books under discussion here must, to paraphrase the subtitle of Berman's book, show how the Bible ''broke with ancient political thought.'' The waft of apologetics travels not far behind such claims. That we have Jewish scholars arguing for the uniqueness of the Bible should strike us as no less problematic than were we to have a religiously motivated Sumerian arguing for the uniqueness of ancient Sumerian religious literature by interpreting it to conform to modern Western values.[3] Again, the real question here is not that such individuals are making such claims, but why they desire to do so in the first place.

This, in turn, raises another and equally important issue, one from which it is virtually impossible to escape—that of eisegesis. Since neither ancient Israel nor its neighbors had the term or the category ''political,'' taxonomic and ontological uniqueness is extremely problematic to determine if it is to be based on a set of terms that lie outside the scope of ancient Near Eastern political thought. How, framed somewhat differently, can the religious traditions of ancient Israel break with that of its neighbors over anachronistic terms and categories?

The result is that, despite claims to the contrary, all four thinkers ultimately read their own concerns—political and other—into the biblical narrative. In so doing, they use

categories with a distinctly modern provenance and make them exist, both tenuously and artificially, in select passages from the Bible. Terms such as ''religious,'' ''secular,'' ''governmental,'' ''economic,'' and ''egalitarian,'' however, are *not* autochthonous to either the Bible or the Ancient Near East. They are decidedly our terms. The concerns of biblical authors/redactors, it is worth repeating, are not our concerns, and when we read our concerns back onto them, we risk flattening both their multidimensionality and multivocality. Certainly Berman can claim that Biblical exceptionalism anticipates American exceptionalism, and that the laws of land distribution lead to the Emancipation Proclamation and Homestead Act in the United States, but what do we do with the Bible's theocracy, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia?[4] And what about how appeals to the Bible sanction all of these unsavory matters today? All of these reveal problems of both anachronism and selectivity.

Since most of these individuals are not particularly interested in the redaction history or even the political or social history of ancient Israel, they force the text to stand outside of history and contemporaneous contexts. That the Deuteronomic reforms might have been a power grab to centralize the power of the kingship is never entertained, for example, because monotheism as ideology, akin to any other ideology, gets in the way of a story with an important moral for the present. Such a story, moreover, may not go over well with the next generation of Zionist leaders.

The biblical narrative, thus, becomes a canvas upon which one can construct whatever one wants, within reason. This is because the biblical authors (including the final framers) were neither philosophers nor political theorists, and the terms that function as leitmotifs throughout these works—''political,'' ''religious,'' and ''secular''—would have been both foreign and incomprehensible. Despite this foreignness, at least two of the several books examined here are determined to show how the West (although this often seems to be little more than code for the United States) owes much to its biblical heritage. Whereas earlier generations were content to show how the West was composed of two spiritual trajectories—the ''religious'' from ancient Israel and the ''political'' from ancient Greece—the authors here wish to nudge the latter off its pedestal and show that the Bible also affords an equally rich, if admittedly nascent, political teaching. Their goal is to illumine this dormant system, uncovering in the process a rich and untapped legacy. However, the fact that the biblical narrative can support, often simultaneously, so many—often divergent—interpretations, perhaps says less about the biblical text than it does about our need to find meaning in it.

Of all the books under consideration here, Walzer's is certainly the most levelheaded and the least apologetic. Walzer, the doyen of living American political philosophers, sets out ''to examine the ideas about politics, the understandings of government and law, that are expressed in the Hebrew Bible'' (ix). Framed somewhat differently, he seeks to read the biblical narrative as if it were a political text like any other. This, of course, is an extremely difficult task because, as Walzer himself duly notes, the Bible is decidedly *not* a political text and the very term or category ''the political'' is as foreign as it is anachronistic to the writers of its many narratives.

This difficulty, however, does not impede Walzer. On the contrary, he takes it as a challenge to reread or read afresh a familiar text outside of more traditional cultural and religious contexts. The results prove to be as fascinating as they are problematic. Whereas the other works examined in this article will boldly claim to have figured out the ''real'' meaning of the biblical narrative, Walzer's hermeneutic is, refreshingly, uncertain and tenuous. Unlike the others, he writes that his goal is neither to find biblical proof-texts or precedents

for his own politics nor "to construct a pretty picture or an apologetic account of biblical politics (x)." Instead he proffers a reading that takes into account select events from Sinai to the Second Temple period that prove to be tremendously insightful even if they are ultimately impossible to verify.

Walzer's uncertainty means that he is not interested in a, let alone *the*, "proper" reading of the Bible. He can claim, for example, that monarchy "is a form of normal politics, whereas the prophets defend an abnormal politics that is sometimes admirable and sometimes not (68)." This is a far cry from Hazony's claim that the prophets are, in effect, proponents of natural law. Whereas earlier interpreters, such as Yehezkel Kaufmann, want to see in the Bible a "primitive democracy," Walzer resists such apologetics and instead argues that we have "no historical account" of such a political system (192).

But this lack of historicity is a double-edged sword, as Walzer himself claims with reference to the Bible's frequent mentions of the so-called "elders." We know so little about these individuals, he acknowledges, "that we can construct the real world of the Bible in any way we wish" (193). And this is precisely what he proceeds to do. This, of course, brings up a larger problem. Just how historical is the Bible? If many of the books were written and then redacted at the royal court by propagandists for the monarchy, why should we assume that these works reflect what "really" happened? That the Israelites come to Samuel with the request for a king, according to Walzer, "means that he can't be a king like the kings of all the other nations (54)." Why not? Why can we not assume that such a story, one forged in the ideological crucible of the Davidic court, was crafted to reflect his divine right to rule—a right to rule, moreover, that puts it firmly within, not outside of, its Near Eastern context?

Walzer's promise to treat the Bible "warts and all (x)," however, this does not mean that he does not, on occasion, return us to the trope that the Bible breaks with its immediate social, cultural, and religious milieux. He can write, for example, that biblical and Mesopotamian kings were committed to a similar social ethic to take care of the poor (something that Hazony or Berman would certainly have a problem admitting), yet what "seems to distinguish biblical Israel is the collective character of its commitment (209)." But I am not convinced that this is the case and, evidence to the contrary, it is unsupportable.

The biggest problem with Walzer's book, however, is his consistent use of terms that would have been completely foreign to the authors of the Bible. Although he acknowledges this in his Preface (xii), his subsequent use of terms such as "secular" and "religious" in a document whose surrounding environment had no such understanding of such terms is still jarring.[5] He writes, for instance, that the law succeeded in making the Israelites "something less like a political nation and more like a religious community or congregation (124)." But the authors of the Bible, like the ancient Israelites from whose ranks they came, would find this non-sensical. This is not to say that we can only describe others in ways that they would recognize. It is, however, to call attention to the artificiality of the terms used in this description—terms that are so foreign they potentially become meaningless. The result is that we learn less about what the Bible means than about what we want it to mean.

In *The Ways of a King*, Geoffrey P. Miller also contends that the Bible is, when interpreted properly, a work of political theory. The narrative from Genesis to 2Kings, he argues, provides the setting upon which the Biblical author could afford to reflect upon political ideas such as human society, land, law, and the meaning of a good and decent human life. Such reflections, for Miller, are tantamount to the essence of the book, the unique contribution of the Bible to Western society. "The Bible," he writes, "not the Greeks, may be the West's oldest political philosophy (11)." His goal is to tease this philosophy out of the text

and, as a result, uncover its hidden recesses. It is certainly worth noting that Miller, like all the authors discussed here (with the exception of Berman), is neither a scholar of the Bible nor ancient Israel. He is, tellingly, a professor of law with an interest in ancient law and government.

In order to know what he has to find, Miller opens his study with a definition of what he means by political theory. The term, for him, "refers to the idea about the nature, scope, and legitimacy of the government (14)." Although the Bible may be a "spiritual" text (15)—though I know of no Jewish thinker before the twentieth century who would use this term—this still leaves "room for other interests (15)". Because the mise-en-scène of Genesis to 2Kings involves glosses that we today consider to be the domain of political theory, he reasons not only that the Bible must be interested in this topic, but that it also forms its *raison d'être*. Since "government and law were ubiquitous in ancient times, as they are today, it would be surprising if the Bible did not take an interest in these topics (15)."

But where exactly is this theory to be found? Rather than exist discursively, in the way the topic exists in the political theory of Plato, Aristotle and those they inspired, Miller argues that the Bible couches such theory in narratives (16). The stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's ark, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Aaron, Joshua and others present, on his reading, "a coherent, logical, and sophisticated analysis" of political philosophy (16). This is neither an easy nor a straightforward endeavor, however, because—as he correctly notes—in order to make such stories confirm to political theory one must engage in the activity of translation. Miller's hermeneutic, then, is to "first interpret elements of the narrative as standing for political or legal ideas. Only after performing this step can the reader understand the concepts being addressed (17)." Such comments, however, beg the question: who says that the act of political or legal translation is either the best or most obvious way to read these texts? If narratives are, as he notes, so flexible, why must they be reduced solely or even primarily to political models?

As with all the other works discussed here, we see biblical multivocality reduced to univocality. The story of the expulsion from Eden is now translated to the rather obvious claim that a decent society cannot develop under the conditions of anarchy (27). Likewise, the books of Samuel and Kings are translated to mean that "despite its flaws, monarchy is the best form of government provided that constitutional limitations are placed on royal authority (27)." Such translation, however, borders on reduction. It is a reading, moreover, that ignores much of the later rabbinical interpretation on such matters as society, justice, and monarchy in favor of a rather flat interpretation based on modern conceptions. Once we reduce the biblical narrative (or any narrative, for that matter) to a topic that is anachronistic and that, as a result, must be translated into or out of the text, problems such as these necessarily ensue.

Miller decides to refer to the term "author" to refer to the many writers and redactors of the Bible. While he is clear that he is doing this for the sake of convenience, it nevertheless adds a support to his argument that the Bible becomes a text of politics in the same way that Aristotle's *Politics* does. The use of nomenclature, in other words, allows him to "translate" all of the narratives that deal with politics in such a manner that they provide a single and connected narrative. But if we take the opposite argument and contend that the mythic events within the Bible come from many hands writing in disparate times and places, a unified account becomes less feasible. Admittedly, there is much precedence in the Jewish tradition for reading the Bible as a unified, if uneven, document. However, whereas the rabbis saw God as the source of the narrative with the result that it became full of infinite

meanings, there is a tendency in the works described here to turn the Bible's richness and polysemy into a parable about law, government, morality or even rugged individualism.

To go into a little more depth, Miller reads the expulsion narrative as one of movement from anarchy to government. "The author demonstrates this proposition," he writes,

> in a specific setting and then generalizes the argument to claim that life without government and law will be intolerable under all plausible assumptions regarding human character and endowments. Government and law, on the other hand, do constitute a basis for a good and decent life, although their efficacy is limited by extraneous factors such as ethnic rivalries and linguistic divisions (250).

As we saw with Walzer, however, and as we shall see in the other books examined below, the Bible neither knows of the term nor the concept of government. That Miller wants to claim that it does says more about him and his own set of interests than it does about the biblical narrative itself. That we can also read the same narrative as a reflection on mortality, on the loss of innocence, a reliance on language or even the nature of parental indifference reveals to just what an extent the biblical narrative refuses to be locked into a simplistic or univocal interpretive strategy.

Joshua A. Berman's *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* was published in 2008 and would seem to have been a catalyst for the other works under discussion here. Unlike the others, however, Berman is the only one formally trained in biblical studies. This training though does not stop him from engaging in a similar hermeneutic. For Berman, the Bible is primarily "a document of political and social theory (1)." Breaking with the idea that ancient Greece is considered to be the font of modern political thought and that the Bible is the source of monotheism, he attempts to show that the religious and the political must be viewed holistically in the latter if we are to understand it properly. With this in mind, Berman sets out to show that the Bible not only compares favorably, but is in fact far superior, to the political teachings of Plato and Aristotle who have become the foundation of so much political philosophy in the West. Whereas the Greek thinkers were critical of democracy and equality, the primary politico-theological message of the Bible is one of egalitarianism. Whereas the writings of the Greeks are predicated on the necessity of social hierarchy, it is only in the Torah that we find a deep commitment to a "homogenous and egalitarian polity (169)."

Berman, thus, sets a major task for himself. Not only will he find such modern values as social democracy, liberalism, and human rights in the biblical text, he must also translate such values into a set of "native" terms and concepts. And this is precisely the problem: He must take a set of criteria that *modern* Western political thinkers have deemed to be good and beneficial to the operating of society and show how they sit in pristine or raw form in the biblical narrative. The multivocality and richness of this text now becomes subsumed under an overarching message of equality and rejection of social hierarchy, both of which are grounded in the major theological shift that the Bible introduces to the world stage.

In order to produce such a reading, however, Berman has to remove the Bible from its Near Eastern context and show how it either anticipates or influences some of the great ideas in Western political thought, from Machiavelli and Hobbes to those who created the American Constitution. Whereas other Near Eastern texts are products of their times, thereby reproducing divine rights of kings, class-based societies, and fickle gods, the Bible hovers above other texts on account of its eternal message of equality. An example of this should suffice for the present: "Scanning theories from Roman jurists through

Montesquieu," he writes in his Introduction, "I conclude that the kernel of a theory of [governmental] checks and balances that one may adduce from a reading of Deuteronomy is suggestive of formulations we do not encounter again until the writings of the American founding fathers (10)." Biblical exceptionalism, lo and behold, naturally leads into American exceptionalism. Just as ancient Israel broke with the monarchical despotisms of its neighbors, it is implied, America did the same with its European cousins.

While acknowledging that the Bible speaks with many voices, Berman writes that his goal is "to tune into a certain egalitarian voice that reverberates across the tradition, particularly within the books of the Pentateuch (7)." He further differentiates between biblical religion and Israelite religion. Whereas the latter refers to the *actual* practices of Israel, the former represents the *ideal* vision "that one may derive from a reading of the texts (7)." This reading, for Berman, highlights ancient Israel's "egalitarian program in light of the geopolitical domain of the ancient Near East," something that is grounded in Israel's theological shift. This shift revolves around the covenant narratives that "*implicitly* suggest that the whole of Israel—not its king, not his retinue, not the priests—bears the status of a subordinate king entered into treaty with a sovereign king, God (9, my italics)." By examining a series of texts reflecting the political and socioeconomic experiences of other cultures in the region (e.g. Mesopotamian, Hittite), he not surprisingly concludes that only in Israel is every "common man" endowed with the status of a subordinate king.

But was ancient Israel egalitarian? As someone who is not a scholar of the Bible, I shall leave it for others to marshal evidence to the contrary. All I can say, however, is that one reading of the Pentateuch provides a highly stratified class system with God at the top and, in descending order, king, priests and levites, Israelite men, Israelite women, slaves, foreigners, and so on. Egalitarianism, in other words, is in the eye of the beholder and not necessarily in the text in question.

Unlike Walzer, Berman writes as an apologist. He eschews Walzer's warnings that the Bible expends no systematic effort to think about the realm or the activity of the political. "Biblical Israel," writes Walzer is, "a religious culture, whose texts are legal, historical, prophetic, liturgical, sapiential, and eschatological—never explicitly political (Walzer, xii)." Despite his political reading of the biblical texts, however, Berman seems to be motivated by concerns that are decidedly religious. Although ancient Greek theorists were not truly egalitarian, according to Berman, because they only took into consideration a select body of males, he is willing to overlook the exclusion of women from the polity, whether real or ideal, of ancient Israel. While he acknowledges this exclusion, he nevertheless implies in good apologetical fashion that it may not be as jarring as it first appears because "at some junctures, as in the collective address of the entire polity (second person plural 'you'), it *may* be that men and women are addressed in equal fashion" (13; my italics; and see the criticisms in Ackerman, 2010)."

Nowhere does he consider that the egalitarianism that he sees reflected in the Bible can just as easily be framed as religious absolutism. Berman opens Chapter 3 up, for example, with an explanatory anecdote of the "common man": Just as the Bible empowered the "common man" of Israel, the Homestead Act of 1863 enabled the "common man" in America to acquire assets and, thus, made people equal before the law. This, writes Berman, "underscored the philosophy that there is no equality without equity (81)." But, like so much of his narrative, the reader (or, at least, this reader) feels like s/he is only getting part of the story, that which conforms to a particular agenda. What about all of the First Nations peoples that became disenfranchised and deprived of their rights in order to make

"equity and equality" possible for Whites? This, of course, leads to the big question: Was Ancient Israel any different? Ditto for modern Israel?

A question we have to raise, if not answer, is why does Berman try to link Deuteronomy with the founding fathers? Where does it get him and what does he truly argue? It would seem that his primary audience is American readers and his goal is to show that the United States and Israel share a biblical legacy and are unique onto themselves. The stress on the political, unsubstantiated by the works themselves, seems to press a point about a modern political alliance.

Finally, many theorists of religion argue that comparison is a politically charged activity, one motivated less by understanding than by apologetics to protect that which one holds dear. The reasons for comparison are rarely if ever made explicit because, if they were, the agenda for undertaking such comparison in the first place would be clearly exposed. In the final analysis, we have to ask why a Fellow at the highly conservative Shalem Center (at least it was when he was there, and while it has toned down its rhetoric somewhat, it is still in the same business of procuring "great Jewish ideas") compares his living text with those of other ancient Near Eastern cultures and finds the latter wanting. If we could conjure up an ancient Hittite who was deeply religious and ask him to compare the *Enmerkar and En-suhgir-ana* with other texts in the area I am sure that he could find precedents in his own texts for pretty much everything that we hold dear in the modern world.

Most problematic from my perspective is Yoram Hazony's *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*. Hazony, the former Rector of Shalem Center claims to have unlocked the philosophical antechamber of the Hebrew Bible. Claiming to be the first individual to have done so, he believes that the Bible has quite simply and egregiously been misunderstood over the past two millennia. He lays the fault for this clearly at the feet of early Christian interpreters, such as Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 225), who incorrectly read the Bible as a work of revelation as opposed to reason. This artificial dichotomy succeeded in suppressing—and, for him, continues to suppress—the Bible's true teaching and meaning (3). For once we read these works using "an alien interpretive framework" we actually "destroy" them and "delete much of what these texts were written to say (3)." As someone who is convinced of the veracity of his own interpretation, Hazony never entertains the notion that his "rationalist" prism might be no less distortive or alien.

Hazony does not just blame the likes of Tertullian and the early Church fathers for misreading the Bible. He also faults the modern university. With its love of the Greeks, the modern university (again he can invoke the trope of "the professors and their students") has largely failed to attend to "the ideas that the Hebrew Scriptures were written to advance (18)." Rather than focus on these ideas—not surprisingly, they will also turn on notions of freedom, universalism, and natural law—many courses and programs devoted to the Bible in the contemporary university focus more on editorial, literary, and historical questions, thereby further contributing to the reason-revelation dichotomy. "If approached with appropriate respect and common sense," he opines, then the manifold texts that comprise the Bible will "be quickly found to have at least as much reasoned discussion and philosophy to offer as many others who have long been studied as philosophers (12)."

In order to correct these lacunae and to aid "thousands of well-intentioned professors," Hazony presents us with his work, a modern day guide for the perplexed to offer "clear direction" to those interested in reconciling philosophy and the Bible (22). As many Jewish

philosophers have done before him, he offers us a monograph to think anew with and about the Bible. This, in his words,

> will permit scholars, educators, and interested lay persons to better understand what is happening and what is at stake, and, hopefully, to take part themselves in the enterprise of retrieving the ideas of the biblical authors and bringing them into a more open dialogue with the ideas of the Western philosophical traditions than has been possible until now (21).

Yet, surprisingly, Hazony is not interested in the earlier Jewish philosophical tradition—there are no references in the main text to any previous Jewish philosopher. If he indeed means this as an introductory work, this omission is surely telling. My sense is that he does not invoke earlier Jewish philosophers because, for him, they interpreted the "wrong" kind of philosophy into the biblical narrative. Even though his own natural law interpretation is remarkably similar to (and as problematic as) Mendelssohn's, the latter is surprisingly never mentioned.

As with Walzer and Berman, we again run into the dilemma of retrieval vs. placement and of exegesis vis-à-vis eisegesis. Despite this, not only does he remain assured that *the* original voice of a monolithic Bible is "retrievable," he alone possesses unique access to it. To do this, he uses the analogy of finding a recipe for medieval pot pie (48): even if this recipe is over a thousand years old, he claims that we can still determine its meaning. It makes no difference whether the author was a poor commoner or the Queen of England, he writes, because "the meaning of the words on the page will remain more or less stable." But meanings do not remain stable, and the interpretation of even a recipe for a medieval pot pie will revolve around translation, hermeneutics, and the rhetoric of authenticity.

Hazony divides his work into two parts. In Part One, he offers an interpretive framework for reading the Hebrew Scriptures as a work of reason and philosophy as opposed to revelation. This includes a discussion of what exactly the Bible's internal structure consists of, what it is meant to communicate, and how prophetic utterances advance arguments of a general nature. At the center of his argument in this part is that the History of Israel, spanning Genesis to the book of Kings, is a work written to prevent the disappearance of the Jews as a people after the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem and their exile from their land. At the heart of this History is the Law of Moses, which as the Mother of all legal codes, proscribes "life and the good for all mankind (23)." This, according to Hazony, means that the History of Israel—the first half of the Hebrew Bible—establishes moral, political, and metaphysical principles of a general nature. (If they were not general, they would automatically cease to be philosophical.) Following this, he shows how the prophets—rather than be masters of literary expression—also sought to advance arguments of general and universal significance.

Part Two provides a series of case studies to support the analytical framework he developed in Part One. We, thus, encounter five interrelated studies that examine the metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and political philosophy of the Hebrew Bible. An examination of one such case study should suffice to show his argument. In "The Ethics of the Shepherd," Hazony focuses on the Cain and Abel story in the book of Genesis. Whereas other ancient narratives, according to him, focus on heroes of royal or noble birth, the Bible is unique (in both the taxonomic and ontological sense of the word) in that its heroes are all shepherds or outsiders. This forms the backdrop to the story of Cain and Abel: whereas Abel is the

archetype of the shepherd who does not conform to what the state deems good, Cain is the archetype of the one who submits to it. As a good capitalist, Abel

> *resists* with ingenuity and daring, risking the anger of man and God to secure improvement for himself and for his children. Abel represents the life of the shepherd, which is a life of dissent and initiative, whose aim is to find the good life for man, which is presumed to be God's true will (108, his italics).[6]

Hazony declares that God—as someone "not particularly impressed with piety, with sacrifices, with doing what your fathers did before you (109)"—rewards Abel as he punished Cain. Hazony, however, conveniently fails to mention that God is very much a fan of piety, sacrifices, and tradition as the Temple Cult surely attests.

As in Berman's work, we again see a sharp ontological gap between what is going on in Israel and that which occurs in the context of the rest of the Ancient Near East. Whereas the latter employ "ethics"—I put this term in quotation marks because, as far as I am aware it is both non-native and anachronistic—"toward the maintenance of the state," Israel takes care of the individual. Political independence implies that Israel must live as a nation of nomads. Israel's ethical independence from the coercive despotisms of its neighbors assures its citizens (I intentionally use the modern term) "freedom and dignity (110)." In this regard, biblical ideas even trump those of Plato and Aristotle, which "begin with the individual *as part of the state that governs him* (130; his italics)." The trope of the Jews as the harbingers of ethical monotheism to the world, one that leads naturally to neo-conservative interpreted American values of individualism, is as ideological as it is tendentious. Hazony concludes the chapter, once again, with a not unsurprising apologetic message: "the Mosaic law is indeed held to be the key to a just and prosperous life, and this because it is so much in conformity with the natural law that even from the perspective of the shepherd, who examines its strictures from the outside, it can be accepted and obeyed (137)."

But what exactly is natural law? And how does the Mosaic Law conform to it? Like all those before him, most notably Mendelssohn, what do we do with those aspects of Judaism that do not conform to reason? How does not eating pork or having a cheeseburger conform to natural law? Why am I commanded not to wear a suit from Armani Collezioni, whose expensive weave produces a lovely fabric? Equally problematic, Hazony then wants to universalize this particularist message because, if it cannot be universalized, it cannot be philosophy. So whereas other nations of the Ancient Near East—and note that he never tells us which ones—have tribal or national gods and reflect only on the good for a particular nation, Israel is universal in its outlook! The gods of the Ancient Near East confront the one, true God of Israel and are found wanting: "The attempt to gain insight into the will of the God of Israel ceases, in other words, to be an attempt to gain insight into what will be good for the Jews alone, and becomes an investigation into the nature of the moral and political order in general (59)."

Instead of interpreting the diverse works of the Bible, Hazony reads into it that which he wants to find. Modern virtues of freedom, dignity, natural law, and others reign supreme. For him, "the law of Moses, alone among the laws of the nations, is fitted to man's nature and directed toward his well-being (23)."

The result is a rather heavy-handed reading of Hebrew Scriptures. This becomes clear when he discusses prophetic utterances. In order to fit his model, such utterances have to be shown to be, at root, rational, "to stake out clear and consistent positions on the subjects

they treat (83).'' In this capacity, Hazony claims to have finally figured out the biblical use of metaphor. Biblical metaphors, according to him, aim ''to make difficult subjects *easier to understand* for the broad audiences to whom prophetic oratory was, in the first instance, intended to appeal'' (85, his italics).'' Metaphors, in other words, simplify and do not complicate; their goal, on the contrary, is to clarify. While this may sound good in theory, it tells us precious little. Metaphors are often so obscure that one can use them, as the history of biblical interpretation well attests, to read into the biblical text any number of competing ideas. Hazony, for example, uses them to make his point that the biblical text is rational and philosophical, that it is concerned primarily with ethics, morals, and political behavior. However, one could take them the opposite way and argue that such tropes are anti-rational or anti-philosophical. Indeed this was precisely at stake in the Maimonidean Controversies that wracked Jewish communities in Europe in the Middle Ages.

Again, as we saw with Walzer, these are all modern terms that reflect a different set of concerns than that which confronted the biblical authors. But terms such as politics, ethics, freedom, dignity, and so on all have distinct genealogies that emerged in times far removed from those of the Bible. To read them into that text ultimately leads to distortion. Like any good exegete, this means that Hazony's reading of the biblical narrative says more about him and his own concerns than it does about some inherent or fixed meaning that anchors the Bible. Indeed, this mistake creates as big a problem as it seeks to solve. And that is: What exactly does he mean by reason? In an appendix, entitled "What is Reason? Some Preliminary Remarks," he concludes with the problematic phrase:

> As soon as one recognizes, as I have suggested, that metaphor, analogy, and typology are in fact means by which the author of a work can establish positions with respect to general causes or natures, it becomes much easier to say that the great majority of biblical authors, and perhaps all of them, are indeed engaged in reason (273).

This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, metaphor, analogy, and typology are precisely the hermeneutical tools that Christian exegetes—those whom he was quick to blame for the misreading of Hebrew Scriptures in the first place—used to make the "Old Testament" conform to their image of what they thought the text should be. Second, on this reading or by this quasi-definition, every work is, at least potentially, a work of reason. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Don Quixote*, *The Zohar*, Ibn Arabi's *Meccan Revelations*, the short stories of Borges, and so on can all be read in the same manner. But because they can all be read in the same manner and because they can all be forced into the same interpretive grid, this shows that the grid is ultimately one of eisegesis as opposed to uncovering an ancient and originary message.

The question immediately arises for me: What is the purpose of all this? Why the need to conflate the rich and polyvalent meaning of the Bible to a rather heavy-handed and tone-deaf reading grounded in the anachronistic notion of the political state? Modern Jews, he is correct to assume, can and ought to see in the History of Israel, and the biblical narrative more generally, a call to survive. However, his implication is that this survival can and must take place within the political framework of the Zionist state grounded as it is in the political framework established by ancient Israel. Returning to the metaphor of the shepherd, of which he is so fond, has tremendous political implications. Is the modern nation-state of Israel a state that does not have to play by the rules set out by international jurisdiction? Or is it so sui generis that it becomes superior to its Near Eastern neighbors and its legal obligations and religious texts?

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In the final analysis, all three of these works function as primary sources despite the fact that they masquerade as secondary ones. These works, in other words, do not tell us about what the Bible really means, but about what a set of scholars want it to mean. In this they can all sit quite comfortably at the end of the long and ever expanding set of Jewish thinkers who want the biblical narrative to conform to a set of ideas that are, what we might call, ''non-Jewish.''

Not unlike other Jewish thinkers, these individuals look to the Bible to support or legitimate their own understanding of what Judaism is or should be. Like their predecessors, they share the belief that there is something the matter with contemporaneous forms of Judaism. It is too irrational or too superstitious, too conservative or too liberal, too unscientific or too legal. Jewish philosophers, speaking generally now, all long, in one way or another, to return to a pristine past that is unilaterally pre-valued as essential and beneficial, the norm against which contemporary social forms may be judged and found wanting.[7] They gravitate toward the legitimating vision of philosophy, as it were, in order to arrive at pre-philosophy and that which can be signified as authentically Jewish. We see this, for example, in Maimonides' desire to return to a period of pure intellectual contemplation or Franz Rosenzweig's appeal to an authentic past, what he calls an *Altjudentum*, in which Jewish life was believed to be in sync with the pure rhythm of revelation. What these appeals have in common, I suggest, is the assumption that certain aspects of human culture and experience are somehow perceived to be distinct and immune from historical pressures.

All must resort, in other words, to metaphor, allegory, and eisegesis. Though Walzer's is certainly the most informative of the works examined here, even he, too, must ultimately read the Bible against the grain. In the final analysis all situate the Bible comparatively with contemporaneous legal and mythic codes from the Ancient Near East. Whereas the former is understood in various ways to be inspired and truth-bearing, the latter remain a collection of myths that reflect nefarious political and philosophical ideas that the Bible in its unique vision transcended. Perhaps there is good reason why universities in general and programs in Bible Studies more generally do not engage in the sort of activity that Berman and Hazony do: ideology. These individuals, supported as they are by neo-conservative private foundations, are not engaged in innocent or value-neutral scholarship. They have ideological claims to stake out and they do so using heavy-handed hermeneutical strategies that ultimately prove tone deaf to the beauty, creativity, and multivocality of the biblical narrative.[8]

Notes

1. Online at https://tikvahfund.org/about/founder/
2. www.adelsoninstitute.org.il
3. Here I am reminded of another Tikvah-funded book that is little more than an *apologia* for Orthodoxy (See Gelernter, 2009).
4. In this regard, see the comments in Ackerman (2010).
5. A good study that seeks to show how the ''secular/religious'' dyad has been used and abused may be found in Fitzgerald (2007: 71–108).
6. It is also worth pointing out that Hazony's glorified Abel is not the synagogue goer so much as the settler entertaining risk.
7. This is the argument of Hughes (2014).
8. I would like to thank Reader One for a number of good suggestions to improve this piece. I am also grateful to a productive telephone conversation with Rachel Havrelock, who encouraged me to

send this out for publication after it had been commissioned (and rejected!) elsewhere for being too political. I also acknowledge the helpful comments provided by the editors of the journal.

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