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The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought

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Charles Prior

This is a short book on a big topic. It seeks to challenge the standard narrative of European political thought, by offering a sharply revisionist account of its foundations. Broadly speaking, this narrative depends on a process of secularisation, whereby modern (meaning 'secular' and 'liberal?') conceptions of rights and the state emerged only once religion was subtracted from the normative values that governed public life. Nelson turns this story on its head, arguing that it was the early modern European encounter with Hebraic sources that fashioned the conceptual foundations of modern political thought. He has produced a formidably erudite study, written with remarkable economy, clarity and grace.

The book fits within an expanding historiography that is concerned with what G. Lloyd Jones described as the 'third language'.⁽¹⁾ In the past decade, a number of valuable studies have built upon early work by historians such as Jones, Kitty Cohen and David Katz. Some of these are concerned with 'political Hebraism' – the use of the Hebrew Bible and certain rabbinic commentaries as sources of precept. Others have explored the phenomenon of what contemporaries described as 'Judaizing?', that is, the application of Hebrew learning and culture to features of religious and political life.⁽²⁾ This interest is all the more remarkable, given widespread and sometimes virulent anti-Semitism. However, no reader of early modern sermons, political pamphlets or bulky texts like Hobbes' *Leviathan* or Harrington's *Oceana* will have failed

to notice the presence of references to Jewish sources.

Nelson begins with a compact and useful introduction to this vital facet of European intellectual history. Before the 'Hebrew revival', humanism was strikingly secular, and derived its maxims of politics from Greek and Roman authorities. This all changed with the Reformation, which led scholars to look again at the Hebrew Bible, as well as the collection of other texts – the Tractates, Targums, and midrashic works – which formed part of the broader exegetical corpus of Hebraism. The teaching and formal study of Hebrew also emerged in this period; Henry VIII established Regius Professorships of Hebrew at Oxford and Cambridge, but in this sense England lagged behind the Continent's adoption of a solidly trilingual curriculum, as well as the translation and production of Hebrew texts. Christian Hebraists read these texts rather narrowly, having little use for the moral and customary laws of the ancient Hebrews. Instead, they came to focus on specific aspects of the legal and political life of ancient Israel, and found in the Bible a divinely-instituted political constitution and commonwealth. This was the Hebrew republic.

The crux of Nelson's argument is how the 'rediscovery' of the Hebrew republic effected a transformation of three of the foundational concepts in modern political thought: republican government; a view of the relationship of state power to individual rights; and religious toleration. The question is how what is 'modern' took on its distinct character, and for Nelson the answer lies in the ferment of ideas that was brought about by the encounter with Hebrew sources. Specifically, he is concerned with how Hebraism changed what it was – possible? to argue; reclaimed defunct or disreputable positions; or created a new synthesis in political argument. In this sense, he seeks to go beyond the matter of how existing political ideas were further embellished by recourse of Hebraic examples; instead, the focus is on how these examples 'reoriented' European political thought at a crucial point in its historical and conceptual development.

The first chapter challenges the notion that the early modern period witnessed the victory of constitutional pluralism, whereby patterns of rule were the product of local custom and usage, rather than being guided by all-encompassing principles. This prevented any single concept of the 'correct' form of a constitution from holding sway. However, this all changed as political theorists consulted what the Hebrew sources said about kingship. Here, the Bible offered two contradictory examples. In Deuteronomy 17 we find the injunction that 'you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the Lord your God'. Yet, according to 1 Samuel 8, God was the only true king, which meant that any earthly manifestation of kingship was idolatry. Subsequent rabbinic commentary, and the engagement of Christian humanists with it, broadened the debate to the point at which it was taken up by figures such as Milton, Harrington and Hobbes. It was Milton in particular who drew out the argument that underpinned 'republican exclusivism': monarchy is 'illicit', based on idolatry, sin, and error. Thomas Paine agreed.

The second chapter considers the 'state' and its purposes, by way of a discussion of whether or not it was acceptable to redistribute wealth. Here again, Nelson points to a divergence between what Greek and Roman authorities said on this topic, and the positions that could be elaborated from a careful scrutiny of Hebrew sources. Students of Roman history – that is, everyone concerned with politics – knew very well that the decline of the republic was predicated on the assault on private property. In his *De republica Hebraeorum*, Peter Cunaeus revealed a Hebraic counterpart to the Roman agrarian law; this held that God, as divine landlord, ordained agrarian laws for his commonwealth. This reorientation in ideas about property was consolidated by James Harrington who, like Cunaeus, offered a 'revisionist history of Roman decline', and looked instead to the Greek historians of Rome, who paired agrarian law with Platonic concepts justice and right reason, values of rule that were transmitted through a 'superior elite' (pp. 83, 87). As Nelson wryly concludes, this should be an unsettling prospect for modern republicans.

Religious toleration is considered in the final chapter, the longest of the three. Once again, Nelson seeks to challenge the standard view of toleration as originating in secularism, and the firm separation of church and state. The central concept here is 'Erastianism', a term which many scholars have used while struggling to define. For Nelson, it denotes the position that 'the civil magistrate as the only potential source of valid religious law' (p. 92). The link with religious toleration has to do with civil peace: God is the framer of the republic, and as such is the author of peace rather than confusion. Hence, it is an element of prudential rule

to ensure that religion does not become the source of civil conflict. This explains, for example, the argument of Grotius, who vindicates the Erastian conviction that a well-ordered republic will assign religious jurisdiction to the civil magistrate?. This magistrate, in turn, adopts a *politique* and prudential approach to religion, and will tolerate disagreement over inessential points of religious doctrine? (pp. 100, 111). Here we have a variation on the position which was a dominant feature in post-Reformation debates on ritual and ceremonial practice that the *adiaphora* should be left to the discretion of the civil sovereign, in the interests of maintaining order and peace.

Turning to England, Nelson considers the vexed problem of the relationship between civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction? (p. 111). This comes out most clearly in the discussion of Harrington, and the whole question of the origins civil or divine of the power of the clergy. For many commentators writing in the wake of the British wars of religion?, the problem was a simple one: the liberty of the subject, the laws of the realm, and the honour of monarchy had been usurped by priestcraft. No one was clearer on these matters than Hobbes, who noted that all civil wars in Christendom were, at their roots, the result of a battle between priests and emperors.

A brief conclusion offers some reflections on the implications of this analysis for our understanding of the relationship between modernity and its own history. We too easily forget that our political concepts were formed in contexts that were profoundly influenced by a complex intermingling of sacred, classical and vernacular sources, in a culture that rooted political argument in historical precepts. Although Christian Hebraists used the Bible and the rabbinic corpus selectively, it is nevertheless the case that these texts took their place alongside Greek and Roman sources, and often supplanted their authority. While some readers of this book will quarrel with specific elements of Nelson's case, the foundations of modern political thought have truly been shaken.

Notes

1. G. Lloyd Jones, *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England: A Third Language* (Manchester, 1983). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Political Hebraism: Judaic Sources in Early Modern Political Thought*, ed. Gordon Schochet, Fania Oz-Salzberger, and Meirav Jones (Jerusalem, 2008); Eliane Glaser, *Judaism without Jews: Philosemitism and Christian Polemic in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2007); Achsah Guibbory, *Christian Identity, Jews, and Israel in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2010). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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