

The Religious Origins of Modern Political Thought: Eric Nelson's *The Hebrew Republic*

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In the wake of the post-Reformation Wars of Religion, appeals to divine revelation were increasingly discredited in politics, resulting in what Mark Lilla dubbed the “Great Separation” between religion and state. According to the standard historiography endorsed by as diverse political thinkers as Leo Strauss, Michael Oakeshott, John Rawls, and Charles Taylor, modern political thought—and its distinctive features, such as republicanism, individual rights, and religious toleration—could only flourish in the aftermath of that separation. In *The Hebrew Republic* (2010), Eric Nelson argues that this narrative is exactly backwards: Renaissance humanism, rather than engaging in political theology, looked to Greek and Roman antiquity as sources of prudential *secular* wisdom to be found in history; it was only during the Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that Biblically-oriented theorists developed what we recognize as the foundational ideas of modern political thought.¹ Even today, when our politics are much more secular, our basic concepts of the state and its scope come from the era of the Hebraists.

Nelson explains that, starting with Luther's shift to *sola scriptura*, Protestants placed greater emphasis on reading the Bible in its original form without the aid of translation or traditional Catholic

commentary. This Hebrew revival led scholars to study the Hebrew Bible on its own terms as a source of divine wisdom. Despite theological misgivings, Christian thinkers increasingly turned to rabbinic writings, viewing rabbis as experts in interpreting the Hebrew Bible. Even beyond the hardcore Hebraists, many rabbinic texts were translated into Latin (and later, local dialects) for broader scholarly consumption. In the realm of politics, these post-Reformation thinkers reconceived Moses as a lawgiver and founder of an ancient Israelite polity with the Hebrew Bible construed as “a set of political laws that God himself had given to the Israelites as their civil sovereign” (16). If God Himself had created a political constitution, the obvious goal of political science would be to approximate this “*republica Hebraeorum*” (republic of the Hebrews) as closely as possible.

In three chapters, Nelson uses three examples of foundational principles of modern politics that underwent a paradigm shift as a result of Hebraic-influenced thought. In the first, he notes that during the Renaissance and before, constitutional pluralism—the Aristotelian idea that there exists a positive and negative version of each of the rule of one, the rule of the few, and the rule of the many—was accepted as axiomatic; even the more radical republicans viewed republicanism as relatively better than monarchy, but they did not approach the latter as *illegitimate*. It is only towards the end of the

¹ Parenthetical page citations throughout this paper refer to Nelson's *The Hebrew Republic*.

17th century that republican exclusivism (the idea that *only* republicanism is a legitimate form of government)—the reigning consensus in modern political theory—comes to the fore (as does, ironically, the monarchical exclusivism espoused in Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha*). Nelson traces these ideas to new Biblical interpretations of Deuteronomy 17 and I Samuel 8 informed by the Talmud, *midrashim*, and other rabbinic commentaries, the most radical of which describe monarchy as an idolatrous rejection of Divine rule.

In the second chapter, Nelson argues that the possibility of using the coercive power of the state to redistribute private wealth only entered the republican tradition with Petrus Cunaeus’s association of Roman agrarian laws with Biblical land laws such as *yovel* and *shemittah*. Previously, following the clear disapproval of Cicero and other prominent Roman writers towards Roman agrarian laws, European political thinkers had dismissed any possibility of laws that would redistribute private property from the wealthy to the poor, for which agrarian laws had become an (incorrect) stand-in. That left two options: either the state exists largely to *protect* private property, making wealth inequality unavoidable; or private property must be abolished altogether to achieve material equality. However, the Hebraists understood that Biblical rules of inheritance, forgiveness of debt, and return of sold property to its original owner at the end of fifty years signified that God—the Creator and permanent Landlord—had conditioned property ownership on it being relatively evenly distributed in the Hebrew Republic. Therefore, Nelson argues, the Biblical position *forced* Hebraists such as Cunaeus and James

Harrington to re-interpret the fall of Rome and agrarian laws in accordance with Plutarch and other Greek writers whose favor towards those laws had always been known but summarily dismissed.

Finally, in the third chapter, Nelson takes on the standard understanding that religious toleration—“the notion that the state should be barred from using its coercive power to compel religious conformity [which] stands at the very center of modernity’s self-understanding” (88)—could only happen following and as a result of secularization and the separation between church and state. Nelson claims that religious toleration instead was originally advanced by Hebraists who argued for Erastianism—a fusion of church and state in which religious law is promulgated and enforced solely by the civil magistrate—by looking at the Biblical and rabbinic example of Moses and the Sanhedrin who the Hebraists conceptualized as civil sovereigns exercising exclusive religious authority. From there, Protestant thinkers starting with Hugo Grotius took the next step to argue that the civil authority only has jurisdiction to legislate over matters necessary to preserve public order, which includes basic universal morality and perhaps some public religion, but nothing more—and certainly not over the private beliefs which man holds in his heart and can only be ascertained by God. As a result, “the set of religious matters deemed worthy of civil legislation grew steadily smaller—until at least it was virtually empty” (91). Religious Hebraists (such as Grotius, Cunaeus, John Selden, and John Locke) differ from Baruch Spinoza, who used the same Biblical sources to advocate for secularism and hollow out the influence of the Hebrew Republic, in that the latter’s “politics

is secular because, for him, the Biblical God does not exist,” whereas the former argued for religious tolerance because “the Biblical God who sent us into the world ‘by his order, and about his business’ wants it that way” (137).

However, it is in this third chapter that Nelson finds himself on shakier ground. For one, Nelson acknowledges “that it does not *follow* from the view that the civil sovereign is uniquely authorized to make religious law that the number of such laws must be small” and it is “perfectly possible to imagine” that an Erastian government could view “the care of souls” as a “civic purpose” for which purpose it must legislate dogma (180, n. 18). Yet Nelson never discusses the New England Puritans, Hebraists deeply committed to constructing a “New Israel” grounded in Biblical law who conditioned political participation on rigid religious dogma and expelled heretics. The omission looms ominously because it offers the possibility that the European reformers might have had other motivations in their reasoning, rather than the Bible being their *source* of religious toleration.

More internally to his argument, Nelson is unable or unwilling to dismiss Hobbes’s secularism in the same way that he does Spinoza’s due to the former’s prominence as a forerunner of modern political thought. Nelson recognizes that Hobbes’s embrace of Erastianism and toleration poses a challenge to his theory because Hobbes arrives at similar conclusions to the religious Hebraists despite doubting both supernatural power and the Bible’s status as the perfectly transmitted Word of God. Nelson creatively reinterprets Hobbes as recognizing Biblical authority in certain respects. However,

because this reading departs sharply from the standard interpretation of Hobbes, it deserves more sustained treatment than Nelson provides. Similarly, in Chapter 2, Nelson points to Cunaeus’s Biblical *leges agrarian* to explain the shift from Cicero’s negative reaction towards wealth redistribution to Plutarch’s view that Rome fell because it did not redistribute *enough*. However, Nelson acknowledges that later modern thinkers pulled more from Harrington’s Platonic basis for wealth egalitarianism—that redistributing wealth allows for the “naturally superior elite” to rule—rather than his Biblical arguments (87), without fully explaining why the change from Cicero to Plutarch must be due primarily to Biblical influences rather than mostly Platonic ones. (In general, *The Hebrew Republic* is shorter than a reader might have liked, clocking in at only 139 pages. Nelson might have benefited from additional chapters demonstrating the Hebraic roots of more than just three important principles of modern politics.)

On several occasions, Nelson acknowledges that in an increasingly secular society, it might be uncomfortable to find out that “several of our most fundamental ideals” have their historical roots in religion, but he encourages “neither should we turn away” from that history (139). Left more open is what will happen to those ideals as their basis becomes less compelling for the majority of the people in our modern society. Nelson notes that after Harrington, wealth distribution came to be justified on Platonic grounds rather than Biblical ones, and we can root religious toleration in Spinoza and his successors rather than the Hebraists. But those very Hebraists who pushed for religious toleration were

also insistent that “the Usefulness of Religion is even greater in that great Society of Mankind” (Grotius) because it instills virtue without requiring state coercion of the same (105). If divine mandates no longer compel personal morality, something else may take their place. If state-imposed doctrine takes its place, we risk undermining the very tolerance for differing beliefs that emerged from the Hebrew revival. As John Adams famously put it, “Our Constitution”—one that establishes a republic which enshrines religious toleration and does not treat wealth redistribution as anathema—“was made

only for a moral and religious People.” As religion recedes, it remains to be seen whether Adams’s second assertion will be proven true, that our modern political system “is wholly inadequate to the government of any other” (Adams 1798).

References

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