The Biblical Century

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

by Eric Nelson

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Reviewed by Yoram Hazony

It is an unspoken rule of modern historiography that the Hebrew Bible could not have contributed anything significant to the rise of modern ideas and institutions. This rule has been at the basis of academic writing on the history of the West for at least two hundred years. And its influence has been decisive: Nearly every serious book available about the rise of the modern world has taken this "no biblical influence" rule as axiomatic.

The only problem is that it's false.

Almost everyone who has ever written on the birth of modernity has recognized that the seventeenth century was the crucible in which modern ideas, science, and political institutions were born. Less familiar is the fact that this same period was also a time of spectacularly intense Christian interest in the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Talmud, and later rabbinic sources. This is not just a matter of a few collectors of linguistic relics studying Hebrew. The effort to retrieve Jewish learning and traditions was a massive undertaking whose effects were felt, directly or indirectly, across the European intellectual landscape. An indication of what was happening is the astonishing

effort at translation of rabbinic sources into languages accessible to Christians—an effort that, by the century's end, had led to the translation and publication *in Latin* of fifteen tractates of the Talmud, the Mishna, a range of midrashic compilations, the *Targumim* (biblical translations) of Onkelos and Yonatan, rabbinic works by Maimonides, Yehuda Halevi, Ibn Ezra, David Kimhi (Radak), Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag), Abravanel, and others, as well as the Zohar and other kabbalistic texts. An index of Christian works interpreting this ocean of newly translated Jewish sources, compiled in 1694, includes an amazing 1,300 titles, many of them published time and again all over Europe.

The story of the birth of the modern West, as it's been told and retold since it was given definitive form by partisans of the Enlightenment, tends to ignore all this furious Hebraizing activity (for a fuller treatment of this omission, see my essay "Judaism and the Modern State," Azure 21, Summer 2005). And when it isn't ignoring the Hebraism of the seventeenth century outright, it argues, in effect, that there were two *different* seventeenth centuries: On the one hand, there was the seventeenth century of religious fanaticism—a century characterized by rampant messianic expectations ("millenarianism"), the Thirty Years' War, and the English Revolution. On the other, there was the seventeenth century of the philosophers, who knew better than to be duped by the biblicism of their contemporaries, and who employed reason alone to produce the scientific revolution and the theoretical foundations of free government. On this view, the fact that the writings of leading seventeenth-century thinkers such as Descartes, Grotius, Milton, Selden, Hobbes, Boyle, Newton, Harrington, Locke, and Leibniz are full of theological speculation and biblical interpretation is to be dismissed as "window-dressing": The substance was freeing itself from any unseemly religious commitments, but the form had to pander to the tastes of the audience, and to evade censorship.

The last fifty years, however, have witnessed an ever-accelerating rethinking of this received view of the seventeenth century. Painstaking archival work has served to place the principal philosophical figures in their religious context—a project that has militated ever more strongly toward the view of these men as genuinely religious individuals whose avid interest in Hebraic sources was for real. Indeed, it is becoming progressively clear that their scientific and political thought can't really be separated from the spirit of the Reformation and the Hebraic revival, which both shaped their thinking and were shaped by it

in turn. In other words, it's beginning to look like the answer to the riddle of the seventeenth century is precisely the opposite of that suggested by the Enlightenment story: As it turns out, there was only *one* seventeenth century, and the modern age was born out of an intellectual matrix that was steeped in Hebraic texts and the ideas that come of taking them seriously.

The retrieval of the story of the "Biblical Century" (to use an expression coined by historian Edward Arber) is a project that has been the work of dozens of scholars in recent years, and one with which the Shalem Center in Jerusalem (my home institution) has been deeply involved over the past decade. One of the reasons I believe there to be a new opening to Judaism and Jewish sources at Western universities is precisely my experience of the rapidly increasing excitement surrounding this project of reconstructing the story of the seventeenth century in light of Jewish texts, which can now be felt among historians, philosophers, political theorists, and Bible scholars around the world. It's still a relatively small movement. But there's no doubt that the study of early modern Hebraism is quickly gaining ground in academia, and has the potential to transform the history of the West as we've known it.

In March 2010, this entire effort reached a new level with the publication of Eric Nelson's book on political Hebraism, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought*.

Eric Nelson is a young professor of government at Harvard, an expert on the reception of Greek texts and ideas in the early modern period, whose papers on political Hebraism began appearing in 2007. He is a superb scholar, and *The Hebrew Republic* is the best work to have appeared thus far on the subject of early modern political Hebraism by a considerable margin. It's an academic book that covers lots of new ground and sports extensive bibliographic references. Yet at the same time, the writing is clear as a bell and perfectly accessible to readers with no background in the subject. So if you want to begin thinking seriously about the place of Jewish works and ideas in the history of the modern West, this is the place to start.

There is much to appreciate in Nelson's work. But what is most impressive is his willingness (all too rare, unfortunately) to pick an open fight with a truly massive opponent. And he's also willing to name names, so we don't have to guess whom he's going after: Nelson's opponent is what I've been calling the Enlightenment

reading of the seventeenth century, with its unchallengeable axiom that the Hebrew Bible could not have contributed anything significant to the rise of modern thought and institutions (the "no biblical influence" rule). Nelson sees this understanding of history as having been promoted over the last century by leading intellectual figures such as Leo Strauss and John Rawls, and more recently in prominent books such as Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* (2001) and Mark Lilla's *The Stillborn God* (2007).

As against this view, Nelson offers a refreshingly bold reinterpretation according to which the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic texts in fact had a *massive* impact on the thought of the seventeenth century. As he writes:

> [The] explosion in the quantity of available Hebraica affected virtually every aspect of European intellectual life…. The Hebrew revival transformed European literature and criticism, medicine and science, theology and ecclesiology, and philosophy and law.

And this was at least as much the case in the realm of political ideas:

> [Hebraist] texts radically transformed European political thought and pushed it forcefully toward what we call *modernity.*

Nelson attributes our inability to understand this quite obvious fact about seventeenth-century political ideas to the common supposition that in medieval and Renaissance Europe, political theory was "fundamentally Christian, an exercise in applied theology"; whereas the philosophers of the seventeenth century "no longer recognized religious claims as authoritative" and "came to regard them as inherently dangerous to civil peace." But Nelson says that this accepted reading of history "puts things almost exactly backward." What was actually going on was that a much less religious Renaissance political tradition gave way, in the age of Reformation, to an overwhelming revival of religious and biblicist sentiment among the political thinkers of the seventeenth century:

> [The accepted] narrative seriously misrepresents the relationship between Renaissance political thought and the political thought of the seventeenth century. Renaissance humanism, structured as it was by the pagan inheritance of Greek and Roman antiquity, generated an approach to politics that was remarkably secular in character…. It was, rather, in the seventeenth century, in the full fervor of the Reformation, that… Christians began to regard the Hebrew Bible as a political constitution, designed by God himself for the children of Israel. They also came to see the full array of newly available rabbinical materials as authoritative guides to the institutions and practices of this perfect republic.

Nelson points, for example, to the fact that during the period in question, over *one hundred* books were published on the subject of the *respublica Hebraeorum,* or "Hebrew republic"—that is, on the nature of the political ideas of the Hebrew Scriptures and their rabbinic interpreters. This fact is well known to historians of the period. But Nelson understands from it something that has eluded many others: This makes writing about the ancient Jewish state "perhaps the most dominant genre of European political writing" for over a century. Given that it was during precisely this "Biblical Century" that modern political thought emerged, Nelson argues that we are going to have to undertake a radical rethinking of the development of modern politics. What is needed, he says, "is an explanation of how these ideas might have been generated, not as a by-product of advancing secularization, but rather out of the deeply theologized context of the Biblical Century."

To make his case, Nelson proposes to study the development of three crucial aspects of modern political thought, which can be shown, he says, to have emerged as a direct result of the increased significance and study of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic writings in the seventeenth century. The first of these is what he calls "republican exclusivism"—the belief that monarchy is illegitimate and that only a republican form of government is morally defensible. Nelson argues that, until the seventeenth century, Western discourse on this subject was dominated by the Aristotelian political inheritance, which accepted kingship as one of several legitimate forms of government. The principled opposition to monarchy, on the other hand, enters European discourse only through the famous anti-monarchical passages of the books of Judges and Samuel. These biblical histories depict a spiral of political horrors that bring the Israelites to demand a king. Biblical figures such as Gideon and Samuel oppose the people, but in the end, God relents, telling the prophet Samuel: "Obey the voice of the people in all they have said to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (I Samuel 8:7).

Thus the biblical narrative is unambiguous in depicting the introduction of kingship into Israel as a compromise that arises from the weakness of man's nature—he could have lived with none but God as his ruler, and yet he insisted on erecting a king of flesh and blood. But does this mean that erecting a king is a capitulation to an illicit urge that should be resisted, just like other forms of

idolatry? Or does it mean precisely the opposite—that given the reality of human nature, anointing a king is in fact a moral necessity? The Talmud and Midrash split on this question, as did later rabbinic commentators. And as Nelson persuasively shows, the Christian political theorists of the seventeenth century took sides along precisely the lines that had been defined by the rabbis in the texts they were reading. In particular, the first rabbinic position—which rules out kingship as intrinsically idolatrous—is one that has no other sources in the Western political tradition. When principled opposition to kingship appears in the writings of such political thinkers as John Milton and James Harrington, it is the direct result of a reading of Hebrew Scripture backed up by this tradition of rabbinic interpretation. Both Milton and Harrington quote the rabbinic positions on the subject explicitly, and these authors then become the source for others (such as Thomas Paine) who follow their lead in understanding the Scriptures in this fashion.

By the same token, Nelson claims Hebraic provenance for the emergence during the seventeenth century of a republicanism committed to using the offices of government to redistribute wealth. On Nelson's reading, European republicans had historically upheld Cicero's view that schemes seeking to limit the private ownership of land are akin to sedition, and a radical change became possible only with the introduction of the biblical jubilee laws into early modern political theory as an example of a just limitation on the extent of private landholding. He sees this idea as having been advanced by Petrus Cunaeus' *The Hebrew Republic* (1617) and adopted from there by Harrington and other leading republican thinkers.

In the final chapter of the book, Nelson makes what is perhaps his boldest claim of all: He argues that the modern concept of religious toleration does not, as is commonly supposed, derive from the demand for a secular state whose sphere of authority will be "separate" from that of the church. Rather, Nelson attributes the rise of religious toleration in the West to views descending from the Swiss theologian Erastus (1524-1583), who, in a work published posthumously, argued that the church lacked any legitimate authority to compel public acceptance of religious law because, in the Hebrew Bible, it was the judges and kings who wielded the right to enforce religious legislation, and not the priesthood. What became known as the "Erastian" view was thus a Hebraist theory that sought to overthrow the centuries-old Catholic doctrine of the "two swords," which

granted the church sovereignty in religious matters by showing that the biblical and rabbinic political traditions endorsed no such thing. The Erastian position thus *upheld* the principle of religious legislation for the public good. But it placed the authority to decide on such legislation in the hands of the civil government, which it saw as having sole responsibility for distinguishing those religious precepts that were desirable for society as a whole from those that would lead to gratuitous persecution of otherwise loyal and peaceable sects.

This powerful line of argument was taken up by Grotius, Cunaeus, Selden, Harrington, Hobbes, and Locke—in short, by almost all of the most important political theorists of the seventeenth century. From this, Nelson concludes that it was not atheism and the rejection of the Hebrew Scriptures (as proposed by Spinoza) that brought about the triumph of religious toleration in Western political thought. Instead, it was the Erastian political theory that won the day for political toleration. And this theory drew its force and worldly reasonableness not from the rejection of the Hebraic inheritance, but from the very fact that it was rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Talmud, and later rabbinic commentators.

Nelson's three examples can be seen as test cases for the thesis that the Hebrew Scriptures and rabbinic sources contributed to the birth of significant modern political ideas. Having established his argument in these cases, Nelson concludes that the Enlightenment reading of the seventeenth century will have to be revised or even rejected, and replaced with a truer picture of these thinkers as pursuing a philosophical agenda that was modern, to a considerable degree, precisely because it was biblically informed. As he writes:

> Once we are talking about a world in which a republican constitution is seen as a requirement of legitimacy, in which the state uses its coercive power to redistribute wealth, and in which broad toleration is the rule, we are recognizably talking about the modern world. And if that world was, to an important degree, called into being, not by the retreat in religious conviction, but by the deeply held religious belief that the creation of such a world is God's will, then the traditional narrative will have to be significantly revised, if not discarded.

The argument of Nelson's *The Hebrew Republic* is clearly drawn, backed up by an impressive array of historical sources, and—most important of all—throws a penetrating light on a chapter in Western history that has until now been almost

completely obscured by a thick cloud of confusion, ignorance, and ideological prejudice left over from a different time. It's the first really unarguable example of what can be achieved if we are willing to approach the subject of Jewish influence on Western ideas in the early modern period with the creativity, tenacity, and guts the subject requires. From now on, Nelson's work will serve as the gold standard against which further work in this field will be measured.

Nevertheless, I do want to challenge Nelson on one important point, which I think prevents *The Hebrew Republic* from being as illuminating a work as it might have been. This is with regard to the way he makes use of the categories of "secular" and "religious" in the new narrative of early modernity that he's trying to build, and persuade us to accept.

I suspect that many readers are at this point asking themselves the same "window-dressing" question: *How do we know seventeenth-century political theorists such as Grotius, Cunaeus, Selden, Harrington, Hobbes, and Locke weren't really just closet secularists, cynically manipulating the biblical and rabbinic texts to gain support for what were basically Enlightenment doctrines dressed up in religious garb? In this case, the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic sources had no real impact on the political ideas of the seventeenth century. They just served as camouflage for people who basically sympathized with Spinoza, but didn't think it was tactically to their advantage to say so out loud.*

In one form or another, this is the way partisans of the Enlightenment have always written about the philosophers of the seventeenth century, and Nelson clearly thinks this view is misguided and should be abandoned. Unfortunately, the evidence he musters doesn't go head-to-head with this argument. What the copious evidence Nelson gathers in *The Hebrew Republic* clearly shows is that the intellectual environment of seventeenth-century philosophy was flooded with Jewish texts, and that these texts were crucial in permitting the supporters of modern political ideas to advance their cause. This in itself is no small potatoes. If we could all agree to *this,* it would be a pretty big achievement.

But for Nelson, this isn't enough. He doesn't just want to say that Hebraic sources, introduced into public life by religious enthusiasts, were then adopted by secularizing philosophers to support their pre-existing political agenda. He wants us to understand that there was a *causal* relationship between the explosion of interest in Hebrew language, the Hebrew Bible, and rabbinic sources—and the decisive changes in political philosophy

that took place at precisely the same time. As he writes at the outset:

> My aim is to explore how the Hebrew revival *changed* what it was possible for Europeans to argue…. [Hebraist] texts radically transformed European political thought and pushed it forcefully toward what we call *modernity.*

To be clear about this, I think Nelson is exactly right here. The exposure to Jewish texts did have a decisive effect on the political thought of the seventeenth century. The question is—what was the mechanism that allowed for this impact? *How* did Jewish ideas, presumed dead and buried for so long, come to have the effect they seem to have had?

Nelson's answer is that the thinkers of the seventeenth century just weren't the secularizers we thought they were. They lived in a period of religious "fervor," in which "appeals to God's preferences as embodied in Scripture" were commonplace, and acceptance of the authority of the biblical and rabbinic texts was a given. This message appears throughout the book, but it is clearest in Nelson's introduction, where he sets up an explicit contrast (already quoted in part) between the Hebraist religion of the seventeenth century and the "remarkably secular" thought of Renaissance humanism:

> The political science of the humanists did not rely on appeals to Revelation, but rather on the sort of prudential knowledge to be found in the study of history and in the writings of the wise…. It was, rather, in the seventeenth century, in the full fervor of the Reformation, that political theology reentered the mainstream of European intellectual life. The Protestant summons to return to the biblical text brought with it incessant appeals to God's constitutional preferences as embodied in Scripture.

In this passage, Nelson presents us with a stark dichotomy between (1) the "remarkably secular" thinkers of the Renaissance, who relied not on "appeals to Revelation," but rather on the kind of "prudential knowledge" that one learns from "the study of history" and "the writings of the wise"; and (2) the thinkers of the seventeenth century, who are characterized by religious "fervor," "appeals to God's preferences as embodied in Scripture," and acceptance of the "authority" of the biblical and (in this passage) rabbinic texts.

This leaves the impression that the seventeenth-century philosophers were in the grip of some kind of prodigious religious zeal, so when they came across the biblical and rabbinic sources and recognized that they were talking about politics, they had no choice but to suspend their

intellectual faculties and bow before the authority of God's preferences as these appeared in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Talmud.

Nelson doesn't say this, of course. But neither does he offer us any other way of understanding what was going on. And his silence on this point is deafening: What is he actually saying about thinkers like Grotius and Selden, Hobbes, and Locke? The conceptual framework Nelson himself has provided offers us only two choices: Either they were in the camp of those making fervent appeals to Revelation (and therefore *religious*); or they were seeking prudential knowledge from the study of history and human wisdom (and therefore *secular*). And as the Enlightenment thinkers who invented this bogus dichotomy were well aware, it's nothing but a trap: Philosophers like Grotius and Selden weren't summoning people to bow unquestioningly before the authority of Scripture (much less the Talmud!). They were as interested in prudential knowledge, and in learning from history and from the writings of the wise, as anyone else. So if that's your definition of being *secular*—and if the only kind of *religion* you recognize is characterized by fervent appeals to Revelation—then all the seventeenth-century thinkers immediately turn out to be secularizers. The theory that their constant citation of Hebrew Scripture and rabbinic literature is no more than a sham quickly follows. QED.

This means that Nelson's definitions of what he means by secular and religious aren't lined up with his marvelously acute intuitions about what was really happening in the seventeenth century—a century in which philosophers like Grotius, Selden, Hobbes, and Locke could be interested in prudential knowledge and, at the same time, sincere and committed Hebraists. Nelson (and the rest of us) are going to have to make a choice: Either we give up on the secular-religious dichotomy and develop a new conceptual framework that will permit us to understand how the philosophers of the seventeenth century could really have been genuine Hebraizers, or we give up on understanding philosophical Hebraism as a historical phenomenon—and conclude that the whole thing was just a pretense.

The political philosopher Mark Lilla once told me that "There can be no third way" between secularism and religion as the Enlightenment came to understand these terms. But I think that if we're ever to understand the seventeenth century, we're going to have to free ourselves from this prejudice. The fact is that the

Enlightenment dichotomy between the secular and the religious breaks its teeth on the phenomenon that is the Hebrew Scriptures, and the rabbinic tradition that arises from them. The term secular comes from the Latin *saeculum,* which is used to refer to "this world," as opposed to some other world. What, then, are we to make of the Hebrew Bible—which is almost exclusively about "this world" and has between little and nothing to say about any other? Are we to understand by this that the Bible, which celebrates prudential knowledge, is a *secular* text? Or that in the Hebrew Bible, *secularism* and *religion* are not opposed to one another, but rather reinforce one another? Or should we perhaps just say that when it comes to the Hebrew Bible, these terms—which are in any case external to Judaism, imposed on it from outside—are completely meaningless; and begin the search for better-fitted concepts, which can really help us understand what we're talking about?

I suspect that whatever the answer is, we're going to need it to make sense of the seventeenth century. This is a period in which we see the emergence of Hebraized Christianities, in which the dichotomy between secularism and religion breaks down, and the most pious and religiously serious individuals are often precisely those who avoid the blind fervor of some of their countrymen, and engage in a systematic quest for prudential knowledge using histories and the writings of the wise—including those they find in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the writings of the rabbis. Developing an appropriate scheme of concepts for understanding this "Biblical Century" is one of the great challenges that still lie ahead.

Eric Nelson's *The Hebrew Republic* is a stunning book, and a singular achievement. I urge you to read it. There's been nothing like it, and it's truly a fitting kick-off for the next chapter in the effort to rediscover the place of Jewish ideas in the history of the West.

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