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Does the Bible Have a Political Teaching?



Abstract: The Bible has been marshaled in the service of many political doctrines. But does it have a political teaching that is its own? This paper argues that the central historical narrative of the Hebrew Bible (beginning in Genesis and ending with the book of Kings) was composed with an eye to advancing a consistent political theory. The biblical narrative issues biting criticism of both the imperial state familiar to the ancient Near East; and of its opposite, political anarchy. In place of these, the Bible advocates a new and intermediate form of political association: the unification of all Israel under a limited state, to be ruled by an Israelite “whose heart is not lifted above his brothers.” This limited state would be constrained with respect to its territorial ambitions, the size of its military, and the resources it would expropriate from the people in the form of taxes and forced service. Such a state has set out on “the way that is good and right,” and can hope for God’s protection from destruction and exile. Thus the freedom of the Israelites is understood to depend not only on maintaining a ban on idolatry, as is often said, but also on adherence to a political doctrine of a limited government over one nation. Only such a regime is thought to deserve the loyalty of man as well as God, and the ultimate collapse of the Israelite state is attributed to the abandonment of this political doctrine by the Israelite kings.

It is said that the Hebrew Bible has been put to many uses in the history of political ideas.¹ Indeed, the prestige enjoyed by the Bible during long stretches of Europe’s history meant that there was ample incentive for the partisans of one political cause or another to seek evidence for their views in the biblical text. But were all of these readings of the Bible

I would like to thank Joshua Berman, Matt Goldish, Ari Gontownik, Steven Grosby, Ofir Haivry, Yitzhak Lifshitz, Fania Oz-Salzberger, and Menachem Lorberbaum for their comments on drafts of this paper.

¹ See, for example, Fania Oz-Salzberger, “The Jewish Roots of Western Freedom,” *Azure* 13 (Summer 2002), p. 93.

of equal merit? Or were some treatments respectful of the biblical text and its teaching, whereas others rode roughshod over its intended message, forcing the Bible to give voice to ideas that were in fact quite alien to it? In short, does the Hebrew Bible have a coherent political teaching that is its own, which later readers were to a greater or lesser extent able to discern?

In this paper, my purpose is to suggest that the Hebrew Bible does present a coherent political teaching, and to give a preliminary account of a few central aspects of this teaching. In the course of this discussion, I hope to show not only that the Bible is shot through with politics and political thinking, but that the advancement of a particular set of political ideas is one of the purposes of the biblical text. Whether or not aspects of this teaching made their way into the writings of later thinkers is an important question. But at the very least, I hope to show that in searching for political wisdom in the Bible, they were not on the wrong track. The text itself pressed later generations to read it in this manner.

1. WHAT IS THE HEBREW BIBLE?

What, then, do we mean when we speak of “the political teaching of the Hebrew Bible”?

Anyone who knows the Bible well will immediately recognize that to speak in this fashion is to engage in a reduction. The Bible is not, after all, one book by one author. As a consequence, it does not have a single point of view on the matters of concern to it, politics included. For example, one would have a hard time reconciling the political understanding of the book of Daniel, in which faith in God is virtually all one needs to gain political salvation; with that of the book of Esther, which comes closer to the view that in politics, God tends to help those who help themselves.² This divergence in political teachings is endemic to the part of the Hebrew Bible known as the “Writings,” or Hagiographa, the last one-fourth of the Bible, and is apparently a reflection of the fact that these were collected with the intention of establishing a broad Jewish tradition embracing a diversity of viewpoints.³

But this is not the case for the earlier parts of the Bible. The first half of the biblical text comprises a single, largely unbroken narrative, which

² For the divergent treatments of politics in Daniel, Esther, and Nehemiah, see Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2000), esp. pp. 89–92, 135–143.

³ Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture* (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1991), p. 28.

begins with the creation of the world, but whose focus is the emergence of the Israelites as a people and the rise and fall of the independent state established by this people. The completed narrative, extending from Genesis until the destruction of the kingdom of Judah at the end of the book of Kings, was assembled not long after the fall of this Israelite state.⁴ And regardless of what one may think were the origins of the sources used in constructing this history, it is clear that the author or editor of this narrative intended for it to be read as a coherent whole, with a coherent purpose: Its purpose was to provide an account of why the Israelite state rose and why it declined.

This unbroken narrative is the core of what we call the Hebrew Bible. It is followed by the orations of the prophets, which make up the third quarter of the Bible and provide us with an evaluation of the events recounted in the history. The prophetic orations, too, represent a tradition and a school of thought with an evident internal integrity. But unlike the main historical narrative, they present themselves as the teachings of individuals, with all this implies. As the rabbis pointed out, Ezekiel does not necessarily see things as Isaiah does, even when they are the same things. Thus the presumption that we are approaching matters from a single, unified perspective gives way, in this part of the Bible—the Psalms, Proverbs, *megilot*, and so forth—we find ourselves in a much looser compendium of different kinds of works, written in different periods and with different purposes in view.

It is therefore certainly correct to speak of the Bible as containing different political teachings. But this in no way diminishes the fact that the Bible does advance a central, unified political teaching: that which is expressed in the story of the rise and decline of the Israelite people and their state—as told in the unbroken narrative from Genesis to Kings, and interpreted by the prophetic writings. It is this core political teaching to which we refer in speaking of the political teaching, or of the political theory, of the Hebrew Bible.

⁴ A systematic treatment of the question of the coherence of the historical narrative from Genesis to Kings appears in Donald Harman Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1998). A variation on this view places the compilation of most of the narrative before the final destruction of the state, during the restoration under the Judean king Josiah. See, for example, William M. Schniedwind, *How the Bible Became a Book* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). The difference between these two positions is not significant, however, to the present argument. Both views can be seen as the consummation of the theory of a single author for the entire “Deuteronomistic history” proposed by Martin Noth. See *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1943), esp. pp. 24–26, 128.

What, then, is the content of this political teaching? I will here restrict myself to four points, which I hope will suffice to give a sense of what future generations were to learn from the biblical narrative. Each of these can easily be associated with one of four pivotal developments in the narrative: (i) the exodus from Egypt; (ii) the concubine in Giva; (iii) the founding of the Israelite state in the time of Samuel; and (iv) the division of the kingdom of Solomon.

2. EXODUS AND REVOLUTION

As was emphasized long ago by the great medieval commentator Isaac Abravanel, the Hebrew Bible is fundamentally suspicious of worldly power, and particularly of the state.⁵ There are intimations of this from the outset, as when the establishment of the first city is attributed to Cain, who is also the first murderer.⁶ But this biblical aversion to the state is presented in a much more direct fashion in the story of the tower of Babel:

The whole earth was of one language and of one speech.... And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly..." And they said, "Come let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven. And let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad the face of the whole earth." And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mankind were building. And the Lord said, Behold, they are one people and they all have one speech, and this they begin to do. Now nothing that they scheme to do will be withheld from them. Come, let us go down and confound their language, that man may not understand the language of his neighbor. And the Lord scattered them from there across the face of the earth, and they stopped building the city.⁷

In this account, we have the biblical suspicion of the state in its distilled form: When men see themselves as a single people and live together in a single state, their ambition knows no bounds. By virtue of ruling the earth they come to believe they can rule heaven; by virtue of making

⁵ Isaac Abravanel, commentary on I Samuel 8.

⁶ Genesis 4:17. For an extended treatment of this subject, see Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

⁷ Genesis 11:1–9. Translations are based on the Koren Jerusalem Bible, edited by Harold Fisch. I have made occasional modifications where the translation has strayed too far from the Hebrew. Responsibility for the veracity of the translations is therefore my own.

themselves a great name they come to believe they can be eternal. They come to think, in other words, that they are themselves God. And indeed, it is in this way that the great emperors of the Bible are portrayed. Pharaoh, Sanherib, Nebuchadnezzar, and Ahashverosh are all men whose self-worship is such that there is no limit to the evil they may be moved to do.⁸ Nor is this impression limited to emperors. Petty kings, too, are depicted as being of this same kind: “Seventy kings, having had their thumbs and their big toes cut off, gathered food at my table,” boasts the Canaanite king Adoni-bezek.⁹ Even lesser kings, it seems, would extend their rule over all the earth and heaven as well, if only they could. The evil they do is limited by nothing other than the strength of their arms.

Now, the Hebrews, from the first moment they are presented to us in the narrative, appear as rebels against the hubris and self-worship of kings and their states. God takes Abraham out of the great metropolitan centers of Mesopotamia and leads him into a veritable wilderness, Canaan, where he lives his life as a nomad, making his home in a herdsman’s tent. The point of this ideal is evidently to be free from the rule of men, so that one may properly turn one’s heart to God. There is, in other words, a palpably anarchic tendency at work here.¹⁰

The Hebrew Bible, however, is no utopia, and the idyll of the herdsman’s life is spoiled time and again by the kings that keep re-appearing in it, and by the terrible deeds they do: trying to purloin one’s wife, kidnapping one’s kinsman, stealing one’s wells, raping one’s daughter.¹¹ Moreover, it’s not the violence that puts an end to this experiment in living beyond the state. It’s the economics of the thing. Canaan is on the verge of famine in every generation from the time Abraham arrives there, and this threat of starvation forces the Hebrews to turn to the Egyptian state for help time after time.¹² And each time, Egypt does indeed save them. Like any crime family, it offers protection—but at the price of one’s freedom.¹³

⁸ Even Darius, best-loved of the imperial rulers in the Bible, who issues the decree to rebuild Jerusalem, is presented as accepting the idea that supplication before God should be forbidden for thirty days so that all requests in the empire should be directed to him alone. Daniel 6:8–10.

⁹ Judges 1:7.

¹⁰ On the anarchic tendency in the biblical political teaching, see Yoram Hazony, “The Jewish Origins of the Western Disobedience Tradition,” *Azure* 4 (Summer 1998), pp. 17–74; John W. Flight, “The Nomadic Ideal in the Old Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 42 (1923), pp. 158–226, esp. p. 213ff.

¹¹ Genesis 12:15, 20:2; 26:17–18; 14:11–12; 34:1–2.

¹² This pattern is already established in Abraham’s time. See Genesis 12:10.

¹³ It is important to note that as a consequence of this economic argument, a powerful dissent is registered against the anarchic ideal within the text of Genesis itself. This

As we've seen, the God of the Hebrew Bible doesn't much like the state. When he cares for someone, as he does for Abraham, his inclination is to tell him to get out. But in the case of Israel in Egypt, we have an entire people enslaved. They can't just walk away. What then?

To this, the biblical answer is breathtakingly bold, and in line, once again, with its tendency towards anarchism: The answer, we are told, is resistance and revolution.¹⁴ Indeed, the book of Exodus, which tells the story of the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, opens with three consecutive scenes of resistance against the state. In the first, Pharaoh instructs the Hebrew midwives to murder all the male children born to the slaves; but the midwives refuse the order of the king.¹⁵ In the second, a Hebrew woman hides her infant son from Pharaoh's men, and Pharaoh's own daughter conspires with her to save the boy, again in direct contravention of the order of the king.¹⁶ In the third, this child of disobedience, Moses, is introduced to us as a grown man. Here is what we are told about him:

And the child grew... and he became her son. And she called his name Moses.... And it came to pass that when Moses was grown, he went out to his brothers and saw their suffering; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew man, one of his brothers. He looked this way and that, and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.¹⁷

dissent is represented by Joseph, a Hebrew herdsman who, as a boy, dreams of harvesting grain and ruling the heavens. Genesis 37:5–9. By the time he emerges as Pharaoh's minister, Joseph appears to have been won over to the view that man cannot survive without the state, and that God himself wishes men to be saved by it. See, for example, Genesis 45:5–8. For a discussion of Joseph's politics of engagement with the state and its subsequent treatment in the Hebrew Bible, see Aaron Wildavsky, *Assimilation Versus Separation: Joseph the Administrator and the Politics of Religion in Biblical Israel* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993); Hazony, *The Dawn*, esp. pp. 83–92, 127–143.

For this reason, I am unable to accept the argument of Moshe Weinfeld and others, to the effect that the establishment of the Israelite state “contradicts” the earlier traditions of Israel. The critique of anarchy within the biblical narrative is immanent in the very first presentation of the anarchic vision, in Genesis. Neither the violence nor the economic dependence on Egyptian agriculture represented by Joseph permits us to accept anarchy as a simple and unalloyed ideal. The rejection of the preferences of Gideon and Samuel represents the conclusion of the biblical narrative that Joseph's critique of anarchy is in large measure correct. For Weinfeld's view, see his essay “The Transition from Tribal Republic to Monarchy in Ancient Israel” in Daniel J. Elazar, ed., *Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Political Tradition and Its Contemporary Uses* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1997), pp. 216–232.

¹⁴ See Aaron Wildavsky, *Moses as Political Leader* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2005 [1984]); Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

¹⁵ Exodus 1:15–21.

¹⁶ Exodus 1:22–2:10.

¹⁷ Exodus 2:11–12.

In this scene, as in the others, there is no pretense of being bound to obey Pharaoh, his law, or the agents of his state. There is not even some kind of divine intervention to justify rebellion against the state. On the contrary, in all three scenes, women and men violate the law of the state simply because they think it is the right thing to do. And the Bible evidently considers it the right thing to do as well. For as a direct result of these acts of disobedience, the Hebrews are given Moses, the man who will deliver them out of Egypt. Not until Moses has slain an Egyptian, fled Egypt, and reverted to the life of a herdsman—all on his own accord—does God reveal himself to him.¹⁸

The message here is unequivocal: God loves those who resist the state and its injustice. It is to those that he reveals himself, and those whom he is willing to help. True, the Hebrews are depicted as being largely passive, and it is God who delivered them “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” But the story of the exodus does not reach its climax until each Hebrew family has obeyed God’s command to slaughter and eat a lamb, smearing the blood on their doorposts. God asks them, in other words, to attest publicly to having killed and consumed the god of the Egyptians.¹⁹ An act of public disobedience and contempt towards Egypt is, as it were, the minimum price one had to pay to be delivered from the “house of bondage”²⁰ and to freedom in the promised land.

3. THE CONCUBINE IN GIVA

To this point, the choice between anarchy and the state is rather straightforward. Enslavement in Egypt is far worse than anything the patriarchs experienced in Canaan, even with the violence and hunger that life there entailed. For this reason, it is to a condition of anarchic liberty—and not to subjugation under the heel of a king—that the Israelites hope to return in Canaan. This hope is famously expressed by Gideon after the defeat of the Midianites:

I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. But God will rule over you.²¹

¹⁸ Exodus 3:1ff.

¹⁹ Exodus 12:3–11, 21–23. Amon, the god of the Egyptian capital of Thebes, was represented as a ram. By the time of the enslavement of the Jews, Amon had become the most powerful and prominent god in the pantheon, under whose standard the Egyptian armies waged war.

²⁰ Exodus 13:3, 14, 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6, 6:12, 7:8, 8:14, 13:6, 11; Joshua 24:17; Judges 6:8; Jeremiah 34:13.

²¹ Judges 8:23.

Similar sentiments are given powerful expression by Yotam, Gideon's son, after the death of his father; and by Samuel, the greatest of the judges, who repeatedly inveighs against the establishment of a permanent state.²²

But much as the narrative evidences sympathy for the dream of an anarchic order, its verdict is not for anarchy. It is for a state. And the reason is simple: anarchy just doesn't work out as one might have hoped. Indeed, the entire book of Judges is one long indictment of anarchy, making it the pivot on which the political teaching of the Hebrew Bible turns.

The book of Judges describes the aftermath of the Israelite invasion of Canaan under Joshua. The conquest under Joshua is depicted as being—in one sense, anyway—a kind of ideal, in which the Israelites act virtually as one man, almost with one heart, in their common effort to conquer the land and cleanse it of the abominable practices of its inhabitants.²³ But men, it seems, cannot maintain such unity of purpose indefinitely, “and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor what he had done for Israel.”²⁴

The book of Judges consists of eight episodes, arranged in such a way as to describe the gradual dissolution of all the Israelites had been fighting for:²⁵

1–3. *Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah.* The stories of Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah continue to reflect some of the cohesion and moral strength that characterized the period of Joshua. In these tales, the leadership

²² Judges 9:7–15; I Samuel 8:10–20. See in particular I Samuel 12:1–25, in which Samuel presents an interpretation of history contrary to that favored by the narrative itself. On Samuel's view, the judges Gideon, Jephthah, and Samuel are listed in one breath as having “delivered you out of the hand of your enemies round about, and you dwelled secure” (12:11). Moreover, Samuel insists that although “I am old and gray-headed,” nevertheless “my sons are with you” (12:2). Against the narrative's determination that the sons of Samuel had taken bribes, Samuel makes his famous speech: “Whose ox have I taken? Whose ass have I taken? Whom have I defrauded?” (12:3; cf. Numbers 16:17). In addition, as a demonstration of Israel's vulnerability, now that they have followed after the ways of Joseph, choosing an earthly ruler and becoming dependent on agriculture, Samuel threatens (with God's help) to destroy the wheat harvest and bring all Israel to starvation (12:17–19). And yet the narrative, while sympathetic to Samuel's longing for anarchy, does not support him in his views. Both the continual violence in the land and the corruption of his own sons testify against his view of anarchy.

²³ See especially Joshua 1:16–18; 24:16–21, 31.

²⁴ Judges 2:7, 10. Indeed, the subject of the *transmission* of wisdom may be said to be one of the most pressing political questions raised by the biblical narrative.

²⁵ On this progression as representing a decline in civic virtue, see Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1995), pp. 290–291. See also Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, pp. 72–76, 122–123; D.W. Gooding, “The Composition of the Book of Judges,” *Eretz-Israel* 16 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1982), pp. 70–79; and J.P.U. Lilley, “A Literary Appreciation of the Book of Judges,” *Tyndale Bulletin* (1967), pp. 94–102. This view is opposed by Martin Buber,

belongs to the most significant tribes—Judah, Ephraim, and Benjamin—and the judges themselves are, so far as we can tell, individuals of exceptional character. Each of these stories results in a dramatic and complete victory over the enemies of Israel, and we are told that “the land was quiet for forty years.”²⁶

Already in the third episode, however, the tribal alliance begins to show signs of cracking.²⁷ The song of Deborah the prophetess explicitly names four tribes—Reuben, Gad, Dan, and Asher—that refuse her summons to go to war against Yavin, king of Canaan. “Why did you sit among the sheepfolds,” she cries, “to hear the bleating of flocks?”²⁸

4. *Gideon*. In the fourth episode, Gideon, himself from a minor tribe,²⁹ is followed only by four of the lesser tribes. He does not really exercise leadership over any of the greater tribes, and indeed, he nearly comes to blows with the leaders of Ephraim.³⁰ Moreover, the tribe of Gad has such contempt for him that they will not even give his men bread in the midst of battle.³¹ Later, Gideon returns and kills the men of Gad in revenge, marking him as the first judge of Israel to turn his sword against his own people.³² As if this were not enough, it transpires that

who recognizes no such decline, and sees in the last two episodes “a monarchical book appear[ing] at the side of the anti-monarchical book of Judges, or rather, in opposition to it.” Buber, *Kingship of God*, trans. Richard Scheimann (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1967), pp. 77–84. It remains difficult to see how this view can be reconciled with the plain meaning of the text. An updated reading that sees the book of Judges as a struggle among competing voices can be found in the essays in Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Noam J. Zohar, eds., *The Jewish Political Tradition*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale, 2000). See in particular Michael Walzer’s introduction to the chapter on “Kings,” pp. 109–116; and Moshe Halbertal’s essay on “God’s Kingship,” pp. 128–132.

²⁶ Judges 3:11, 30; 5:31. According to 3:30, the land was quiet for not forty but eighty years. The fourth episode, concerning Gideon, likewise ends with the claim that “the land was quiet for forty years.” Judges 8:28.

²⁷ When Deborah asks the northern strongman Barak to muster for battle, he responds, rather cryptically: “If you will go with me, then I will go. But if you will not go with me, then I will not go. And she said: I will surely go with you.” Judges 4:8–9.

²⁸ Judges 5:14–18.

²⁹ For the first time a judge in Israel is explicitly described as the son of a man who owns an altar to Ba’al. Judges 6:25.

³⁰ The narrative, however, leaves open the possibility that Ephraim would have followed Gideon had he summoned them at the outset of the war. Instead, he calls on Ephraim only after victory is already at hand. It is apparently his own fear of the greater tribes that prevented him from issuing the summons. See Judges 7:23–8:1.

³¹ The tribes that go with him are Menasheh, Zevulun, Naftali, and Asher. Judges 6:34–36. His troubles with Ephraim and Gad are described at 8:1–9.

³² Judges 8:16–17.

Gideon has a weakness for idols. He fashions himself a fetish, which he displays in Ofra, and we are told that “all Israel went astray after it, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his house.”³³ When Gideon dies, his son Avimelech massacres the rest of Gideon’s sons and declares himself king, only to die himself in a bloody altercation after a falling out with his followers.³⁴

5. *Jeftah*.³⁵ In the fifth episode, Jeftah is depicted as leading only the Giladites, which is to say, at most the two-and-a-half tribes of Transjordan alone. The son of a prostitute, we are told that he has gathered about him a band of *anashim rekim*—“worthless men,”³⁶ and that he speaks of Kemosh, the god of the Moabites, as though he were a living being and comparable to the God of Israel.³⁷ In order to gain victory over the Ammonites, he sacrifices his own daughter as a burnt offering to the God of Israel.³⁸ And he does not bring peace to the land.³⁹ Indeed, Jeftah deepens the rift with Ephraim to the point of open civil war between

³³ Judges 8:24–28.

³⁴ Judges 9:1–57.

³⁵ Until the end of the Gideon episode, the narrative had begun each story with “the children of Israel cried up to the Lord”; and each time, God heeded their cries by raising up a judge to deliver them from their enemies. Judges 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6. But in the fifth episode, when the children of Israel cry up to the Lord, they are met with despair. As God tells them: “You have forsaken me and served other gods. Therefore I will deliver you no more. Go and cry to the gods that you have chosen. Let them deliver you in the hour of your troubles.” Judges 4:8–9. And indeed, the last two of Israel’s judges are not precisely redeemers.

³⁶ Judges 11:3.

³⁷ Jeftah’s discourse on Kemosh appears in Judges 11:23–24. Compare Joshua’s prohibition on speaking the names of the gods of Canaan: “Brace yourselves, therefore, very much... that you come not among these nations that remain among you. Neither make mention of the names of their gods, nor swear by them, nor serve them....” Joshua 23:7. It is noteworthy that the narrative describes the followers of Kemosh as continuing to sacrifice their children to him. II Kings 3:26–27.

³⁸ Jeftah’s sacrifice of his daughter to the God of Israel is described in Judges 11:30–31, 34–39. On the “Molochization” of the God of Israel implicit in his act, see Buber, *Kingship of God*, pp. 68, 116. Precisely such an act was envisioned and proscribed by Moses: “Take heed of yourselves, that you not be ensnared into following them, after they are destroyed before you. And that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I too will do likewise.’ You will not do likewise on behalf of the Lord. For every abomination to the Lord, which he hates, have they done for their gods. Even their sons and their daughters have they burned in the fire to their gods.” Deuteronomy 12:30–31. Similarly: “There must not be found among you anyone that makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire.... Because of these abominations the Lord your God drives them out before you.” Deuteronomy 18:9–10.

³⁹ The first four episodes explicitly speak of peace having been returned to the land. The last four, beginning with Jeftah, do not describe peace as having been returned to the land.

that tribe and the men of the east bank, in which he massacres tens of thousands.⁴⁰

6. *Samson*. In the sixth, Samson is even more deeply immersed in the ways of the idolaters than his predecessors. He is depicted as associating with Philistine men, marrying a Philistine woman, sleeping with Philistine prostitutes. And these betray him time and again until his eyes are put out and he is put on display, a freak-show in Gaza.⁴¹ He delivers no one, not even himself; he dies a suicide in the land of the enemy.

7. *Micha's Idol*. In the seventh episode, there appears to be no judge in Israel at all, and "every man did that which was right in his own eyes."⁴² The Danites, unable to defeat the enemy that God has judged deserving of destruction,⁴³ find a weaker, innocent people on the northern border of Israel, and fall upon them and destroy them instead.⁴⁴ Their priest is a feckless man, a Levite who ministers to a statue fashioned from silver, which becomes the idol of the tribe of Dan.⁴⁵ The name of this purveyor of idolatry before a desperate tribe, we are told, is Yehonathan, son of Gershon—the grandson of Moses.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Judges 12:1–7. The bloodshed between Gad and Ephraim finally brings to a head an internal tension between Israel and the tribes east of the Jordan, which both Moses and Joshua struggled to subdue. In particular, Joshua had insisted that the men of the east bank remain with the Israelite armies until the west bank had been subdued, and only then retire to their own homes. Joshua 1:12–18. They are released from their pledge, after years of war, in Joshua 22:1–6. Already in Joshua's day, there had been a move by the tribes of the west bank to wage war against the east, but it had been defused. Joshua 22:9–34. It is particularly important to compare Jephthah's failure in this regard with Gideon's successful defusing of a similar situation in Judges 7:23–8:3.

⁴¹ Judges 16:20–21, 25. The passage that dominates the entire Samson episode is the proscription of Joshua: "For if you should at all turn back to attach yourselves to the remnant of these nations, these that remain among you, and shall make marriages with them, and go in unto them, and they to you... they shall be snares and traps to you, and a scourge in your sides, and pricks in your eyes, until you perish from off the good land which the Lord your God has given you." Joshua 23:12–13. Note in particular the chilling foreshadowing of Samson's eyes being put out.

⁴² Judges 17:6. Compare 18:1.

⁴³ Tellingly, Dan's enemies are defeated in battle by the Ephraimites, who choose to make them tributaries, rather than giving Dan its land. Judges 1:34–35. Thus the Ephraimites come directly to profit by the suffering of Dan—and this despite the explicit prohibition on making covenants with the peoples of the land. Judges 2:2.

⁴⁴ Judges 18:5–10, 27–28.

⁴⁵ Compare this episode with Moses' exhortation: "Neither shall you bring an abomination into your house, lest you become accursed like it, but you shall utterly detest it, and utterly abhor it." Deuteronomy 7:26.

⁴⁶ Judges 18:30. In the Hebrew version of the verse, the letter *nun* in the name "Menasheh" is suspended above the rest of the word; if this letter is ignored, the text reads "Moshe"—Moses. That this is the intention is clear because Moses' son was Gershon, a Levite; whereas Menasheh has no such son, and is not a Levite.

8. *The Concubine in Giva*. One might think that Israel can sink no lower. But they can, and they do. In the last episode, we meet a Levite returning with his concubine to his home in Ephraim. Along the way, he stops in the Benjaminite town of Giva for the night. There, the traveler is discovered by an old man who begs him not to spend the night in the street, as he had intended. It transpires that the old man has good reason:

They turned aside there to go in and to lodge in Giva.... And behold, there came an old man out of his field at evening, who was also of Mount Ephraim, and he sojourned in Giva... And he lifted up his eyes, and saw a traveler in the open place of the city....

And the old man said, "Peace be with you. Only let all your wants lie upon me, but lodge not here in the street." So he brought them into his house, and gave fodder to the asses, and they washed their feet, and they did eat and drink.

Now, as they were gladdening their hearts, behold, the men of the city, worthless men, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spoke to the master of the house, the old man, saying, "Bring out the man that came into your house, that we may know him."

And the man, the master of the house, said to them, "No, my brothers, no, I pray you, do not so wickedly. Seeing that this man is come into my house, do not carry out this vileness. Behold, here is my daughter, a virgin, and his concubine. I will bring them out now. Ravish them, and do to them what is good in your eyes. Only to this man do not such a vile thing." But the men would not hearken to him, so the man seized his concubine, and brought her out to them. And they had their desire of her and abused her all the night until morning. And when the day began to break, they let her go. Then came the woman in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man's house, where her lord was, until it was light. And her lord rose up in the morning, and opened the doors of the house, and her hands were upon the threshold.

And he said to her, "Up, and let us go."

But there was no answer.⁴⁷

The Levite carries his concubine's body back to Ephraim with him.⁴⁸ There, he takes a knife and cuts her into twelve pieces, and sends one to the elders of each of the twelve tribes. Outraged, the tribes muster and

⁴⁷ Judges 19:15–28.

⁴⁸ Compare: "Take heed of yourself that you forsake not the Levite as long as you live upon the earth." Deuteronomy 12:19.

demand that the Benjaminites hand over the men responsible. When the Benjaminites refuse, there ensues a civil war involving virtually all of Israel, with horrendous casualties on both sides. But the attackers have the upper hand, and in the end they manage to destroy nearly every man, woman, and child in Benjamin. Only at the verge of the annihilation of the entire tribe do they pull back, letting six hundred young men escape with their lives.⁴⁹

This episode, with which the book of Judges closes, carries a very powerful and very specific message. For the story of the Concubine in Giva is a re-enactment of another scene much earlier in the biblical narrative. It is a re-enactment of the destruction of Sodom:

There came two angels to Sodom that evening, and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom. And Lot, seeing them, rose up to meet them.

And he bowed himself with his face to the ground and said, "Behold now, my lords. Turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house..."

And they said, "No, but we will abide in the street all night."

And he pressed upon them greatly, and they turned in to him, and entered into his house. And he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they did eat.

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, compassed the house around, both old and young, all the people from every quarter. And they called to Lot, and said to him, "Where are the men who came in to you this night? Bring them out to us, that we may know them."

And Lot went out at the door to them, and shut the door after him, and said, "I pray you, brothers, do not so wickedly. Behold now, I have two daughters who have not known man. Let me, I pray you, bring them out to you, and do to them as is good in your eyes. Only to these men do nothing, seeing that they have come under the shadow of my roof."

And they said, "Stand back." And they said again, "This fellow came in to sojourn, and he needs be a judge..." And they strongly urged the man, Lot, and came near to break down the door.

But the men put out their hand... and they smote the men that were at the door of the house with blindness... And the men said to Lot, "Have you any here besides? ... Bring them out of this place, for we will destroy this place."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Judges 20:1–21:25. In the aftermath, Israel goes up to the settlement of Yavesh Gilead in Gad, which again has been remiss in participating, and conducts an additional massacre there. Judges 21:8–12.

⁵⁰ Genesis 19:1–13.

It is immediately clear from a comparison of the two texts that the story of the Concubine in Giva is the story of Sodom.⁵¹ It was composed in such a way that the parallel could not be missed. But coming as the capstone of the slide into barbarism described in the book of Judges—in which each generation, as we are told, “became more corrupt than their fathers”⁵²—it is intended to teach a very specific lesson: that while enslavement to the Egyptian state was an evil of unfathomable proportions, so too is an anarchy in which “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” For what happened in Benjamin could as easily happen anywhere—or everywhere. No obstacle remained to prevent all of Israel from descending to the level of Sodom. And Sodom, of course, was judged so perverse that it was destroyed from the face of the earth.⁵³

4. THE FOUNDING OF THE ISRAELITE STATE

On four occasions, the narrative refers to the period of rising barbarism depicted in the book of Judges as one in which “there was no king in Israel.” Twice we are told explicitly that “there was no king in Israel, and every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”⁵⁴ Indeed, it is the revulsion against every man doing “that which was right in his own eyes” that is the central theme of the Bible’s account of the period of the Judges. In the end, it becomes clear that anarchy is unlivable. And the Hebrew Bible knows of no alternative to anarchy other than the establishment of a state—and of a king.

⁵¹ C.F. Burney, *The Book of Judges* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2004 [1918]), pp. 444–445. See also Susan Niditch, “The ‘Sodomite’ Theme in Judges 19–20: Family, Community, and Social Disintegration,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 44 (1982), pp. 365–378.

⁵² Judges 2:19. Noth suggests that this is likewise the meaning of the expression *vayosisfu la’asot hara* at Judges 3:12, 4:1, 10:6, and 13:1, which is then read “And they did even worse in God’s eyes.” *Deuteronomistic History*, p. 72.

⁵³ There is, however, an important difference between the two cases. In Giva, it is man that judges and punishes, and not God. Like much else in the book of Judges, this matter is ambiguous. On the one hand, we have to see the attempt to restore justice in an unjust land as being praiseworthy. In this sense, man is expected to emulate God. On the other hand, the Israelites do not really succeed in this effort. For in Sodom, God is depicted as sparing the righteous, whereas the righteous of Benjamin die together with the wicked. Moreover, the subsequent slaughter of the men of Gad seems utterly gratuitous. We are pressed to draw the conclusion that under conditions of anarchy, even the effort to bring justice to the land must end in mob rule and injustice.

⁵⁴ Judges 17:6, 21:25. Also 18:1, 19:1. Compare: “You shall not do after ‘all the things we do here this day,’ each man doing what is right in his own eyes.” Deuteronomy 12:8.

The establishment of the Israelite state is described in I Samuel 8, in a scene that apparently served as the inspiration for the early-modern theory that the state is founded on the basis of a social contract, which ends the uncertainty, violence, and even terror of the preceding “state of nature.” The Jews turn to Samuel, the judge in their day, and demand a king—that is, a permanent and united sovereignty that will be able properly to defend the people in war and to judge them in peace. Samuel is appalled, but God, whose wisdom is greater, acquiesces. The Jews are to have their state.

Significantly, the man chosen to be the first king of Israel is Saul of Giva, a youth from the very town in which the infamous atrocity occurred.⁵⁵ The fact that Israel is able to accept a king from among the Benjaminites is the ultimate sign of the tribes’ contrition over what they had done. Saul’s very election, then, must be seen as a symbol of the new era of brotherhood and internal integrity that the kingdom was to bring about. And indeed, the narrative in Samuel portrays the election of the Israelite king as the repair of the chaos and civil strife that had characterized the period described in the book of Judges.⁵⁶ When the Ammonites threaten to enslave Yavesh Gilead and put out the eyes of its inhabitants—the very same Gadites who had been in open rebellion against Israel under the judges—Saul raises an army from all Israel to save them:

And Saul said, “What troubles the people that they weep?” And they told him of the message of the men of Yavesh. And the spirit of God came upon Saul when he heard these things, and his anger burned greatly. And he took a yoke of oxen and cut them up in pieces, and sent them throughout the land of Israel by the hands of messengers, saying, “Whoever does not come forth after Saul and Samuel, so shall be done to his oxen.” And the fear of the Lord fell on the people, and they went out as one man... and they entered the [Ammonite] camp during the morning watch, and they smote Ammon until the heat of day, so that those that survived were scattered, and no two of them remained together.⁵⁷

Saul wins a great victory by uniting all of Israel “as one man.” But how was this great victory achieved? The division of the oxen and their dispatch throughout Israel is intended to remind the Jews of the chilling events surrounding the death of the Concubine in Giva. To be sure,

⁵⁵ I Samuel 10:21–26.

⁵⁶ I am indebted to Ari Gontownik for his insightful remarks concerning this passage.

⁵⁷ I Samuel 11:1–14.

by dividing oxen rather than a human being, Saul makes it clear that his rule will be tempered by humanity; even the accompanying threat (“Whoever does not come forth after Saul and Samuel, so shall be done to his oxen”) is aimed at property, not at the lives of his subjects, marking a significant improvement over the methods introduced by Gideon and Jiftah. But there can be no mistaking the fact that the unity of the tribes is achieved—as was never the case in the time of the Judges—through the introduction of a universal threat of sanction, as a result of which “the fear of the Lord fell on the people.” Saul is perhaps more humane than some of his predecessors, but he ultimately achieves the unification of the people through the imposition of a regime of fear of retribution.

But have we not now come full circle? Does not Saul’s recourse to threat of violence against the Israelites’ property (and by implication, against their lives) make him a king just like those of the hated imperial states of antiquity? Is not the Israelite state to be just like Egypt or Babylonia, an imperial state in embryo? Will it not continually build up its might at the expense of its people until the moment when it, too, can make a bid for world empire? What is to prevent it?

It is here that the establishment of the biblical state differs from that of the social-contract state of early-modern political thought. The social contract of early modernity is concluded among the individual members of a people;⁵⁸ whereas the agreement that establishes the biblical state is an agreement between the people, on the one side, and God on the other. Moreover, God is here portrayed as a reluctant party to the agreement. And it is precisely this supposition of God’s reluctance to enter into the agreement that provides the theological underpinning for the most important aspect of the Hebraic political theory, which is the *conditional* nature of the contract that brings the state into being. A king may be established because of the needs of his people. But his legitimacy cannot derive from the consent of the people alone—for what if the people consent to evil? This is the problem posed, for instance, by the example of Weimar Germany, where the consent of the people gave birth to one of the most vicious tyrannies mankind has known.

In order to win over a reluctant God, the contract that establishes the state includes a clause that the king must rule not only in a fashion that is (i) consonant with the consent of the people that established the

⁵⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 18, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1994), p. 110ff; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II, §§ 95–99, ed. Peter Laslett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 330–333; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, I, vi, trans. Judith R. Masters, ed. Roger D. Masters (New York: St. Martins Press, 1978), pp. 53–54.

state;⁵⁹ but also (ii) in a manner that is in keeping with what Samuel here calls *haderech hatova vehayeshara*—“the way that is good and right.”⁶⁰ That is, his rule must be in keeping with an independent standard of justice and goodness, without which the consent of the people will never suffice. As Samuel tells the people upon Saul’s coronation:

Behold the king whom you have chosen, and whom you have desired! Behold, the Lord has set a king over you—if you will fear the Lord and serve him, and obey his voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, if both you and the king that reigns over you will follow the Lord your God.... I will teach you the way that is good and right.... But if you shall do wickedly, both you and your king shall perish.⁶¹

We have, therefore, a system of *dual legitimacy*, which responds both to the desires of the people, and to a standard of right that is ultimately independent of these desires.⁶²

But what is the content of this independent standard of right? The biblical narrative tells us much about what the Israelite king must do if he is to be judged to have ruled in a manner that is “good and right,” and it is not possible to make a full study of the matter here. But I would like to draw attention to the fact that the biblical standard of right is not only concerned with driving idolatry from the land, nor even with elementary moral concerns such as the defense of the widow and the orphan. Perhaps the most important principles describing what it means for the king to follow the right path are those found in the “Law of the King” articulated in the books of Moses.⁶³ Here, the Israelite king is bound by the following *political* principles:

⁵⁹ Interestingly, the text is emphatic on this point, with God himself being depicted as telling Samuel: “Listen to the people in all that they say to you.” I Samuel 8:7.

⁶⁰ The standard of “the way that is good and right” is the standard that is used to judge the kings of Judah and Israel throughout the rest of the narrative. In the book of Kings, especially, the term “right” apparently refers to the achievement of a minimally decent society; whereas the “good” refers to the attempt to serve God with a whole heart. A discussion appears in Ofir Haivry, “The Way of the World,” *Azure* 5 (Autumn 1998), pp. 44–53.

⁶¹ I Samuel 12:13–14, 23, 25.

⁶² The institution of prophecy is properly understood as the expression of this system of dual legitimacy in the political understanding of ancient Israel, and in the political theory of the Bible.

⁶³ The Mosaic “Law of the King” is not to be confused with the speech of the prophet in I Samuel 8, which is known by the same name. In this paper, I use this term exclusively to refer to the Mosaic law in Deuteronomy.

You may appoint a king over you, whom the Lord your God will choose. One from among your brothers shall you set as a king over you. You may not set a stranger who is not your brother over you.⁶⁴ But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to the end that he should multiply in horses.... Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart not turn away. Neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold. And it shall be, when he sits upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write himself a copy of this Torah... and he shall read therein all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes to do them, that his heart not be lifted above his brothers... to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom.⁶⁵

Thus we find that the king is forbidden to amass large quantities of horses; that he is to avoid having many wives; and that he is not to accumulate large quantities of gold. And upon consideration, it becomes clear that these three proscriptions of the Law of the King are really one: For the warning against horses is clearly aimed against maintaining very large standing armies. The warning against multiple wives is similarly intended to preclude too great an involvement in foreign alliances, of which the accumulation of high-born foreign wives was an important instrument. And the warning against hoarding gold was aimed against a regime of heavy taxation, impressments, and conquest, such as would be necessary to pay for many horses and many wives.

If we are to state this simply, the Law of the King was set against the life of the imperial state. Instead, it proposes what we might today call a *limited state*:⁶⁶ one headed by a king whose life is not consumed in the unending quest for ever greater power.

In a similar vein, the narrative insists that the state be limited territorially as well. Thus the books of Moses and Joshua include clear boundaries for the land, instructing the Israelites that they are to:

Come to the mountain of the Emorites, and to all the places near it, in the plain, in the hills, and in the lowland, and in the Negev, and

⁶⁴ Similarly, although there were foreign prophets, the Israelites were to turn to prophets from among their own people. Deuteronomy 18:15, 18.

⁶⁵ Deuteronomy 17:14–20.

⁶⁶ This may be seen as the basis of constitutional government. See Elazar, *Covenant and Polity*, p. 313. The theological implications of such a state are discussed by Alan L. Mittleman, *The Scepter Shall Not Depart from Judah: Perspectives on the Persistence of the Political in Judaism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2000), p. 95ff.

by the seaside, the land of the Canaanites and the Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Perat.⁶⁷

Perhaps in comparison to the borders of the present Jewish state, the borders stipulated by Moses and Joshua seem generous. But if we compare Israel's ambitions to those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, we see that the biblical narrative is laying down as law the idea that Israel is to be limited in terms of the territories it may seek.⁶⁸

This impression is borne out, too, by God's command that Israel is to keep its hands off of the territories of its neighbors to the east, Edom, Moav, and Ammon. As Moses tells the Israelites before they enter Canaan:

You are to pass through the border of your brothers the children of Esau.... Take good heed of yourselves therefore. Meddle not with them, for I will not give you of their land. No, not so much a foot's breadth. Because I have given Mount Seir to Esau for a possession.... Do not harass Moav, nor contend with them in battle, for I will not give you of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the children of Lot for a possession.... And when you come near, opposite the children of Ammon, harass them not, nor contend with them, for I will not give you of the land of the children of Ammon any possession, for I have given it to the children of Lot for a possession.⁶⁹

Taken together, the Law of the King, the limitation of Israel's borders generally, and the proscription of conquest on Israel's eastern border in particular, afford a clear understanding that Israel is to be a state different from its neighbors in that it is to be limited in its aspirations—perhaps the first state in the world to have been limited in its might by decree of its own God.

5. SOLOMON AND THE DECLINE OF THE STATE

The Mosaic Law of the King has been called minimalistic. But I think such a view underestimates the difficulty of what is being asked. For just as the laws of sexual purity, dietary restrictions, and Sabbath observance impose a regime of systematic moderation of the appetites of the

⁶⁷ Deuteronomy 1:7. Cf. Deuteronomy 11:24, 32:8; Joshua 1:4.

⁶⁸ See Steven Grosby, *Biblical Ideas of Nationality: Ancient and Modern* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

⁶⁹ Deuteronomy 2:4–6, 9, 19.

individual, so too does the Law of the King—which seeks to limit the accumulation of gold, wives, and horses—impose a regime of systematic moderation on the appetites of the state. And for a similar reason: it is the appetites of the state, as expressed in the profligate accumulation of gold, wives, and horses, that is seen as the cause of much of the violence, oppression, and even idolatry that had characterized the states of neighboring peoples. If one could somehow restrain these appetites, space might be cleared for a regime that would win the consent not only of men, but also of God.⁷⁰

Of course, restraining the appetites of the state means restraining the appetites of the rulers, and the narrative emphasizes that this problem is not one that is unique to monarchy. It haunts all political leadership. Trouble in this vein goes back to Gideon, judge of Israel, who nobly refuses his followers' demand that he make himself king, but who nevertheless exhibits a pronounced taste for quantities of gold and wives—precisely that which the Law of the King proscribes. Neither of these do him much good. The gold permits him to fashion the aforementioned fetish at Ofra, and therefore to lead the Israelites straight into the idolatrous ways of the Canaanites. His many wives, on the other hand, give him seventy sons.⁷¹ As tends to happen in the Bible, these sons and their mothers immediately begin conniving for succession, and when Gideon dies, they go about declaring themselves king and murdering one another—a political horror that goes on for several years until the last of the pretenders to the throne is killed and the whole story is brought to an end in a bloodbath.⁷²

Even this does not quite end the story. For the heritage of Gideon to Israel includes an entire tradition of incontinence on the part of subsequent judges, who continued multiplying their own wives, horses, and wealth;⁷³ David's house, too, is plagued with intrigue and bloodshed arising from his commitments to multiple wives and their children.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ It is relevant that in the rabbinic retelling, the first kingdom of the Israelites was destroyed as a result of idolatry, bloodshed, and sexual impropriety—an account that seems to parallel the biblical categories of gold, horses, and wives. See *Babylonian Talmud*, Yoma 9b. I am indebted to Ofir Haivry for this observation.

⁷¹ “He had many wives,” at Judges 8:30, follows precisely the language of the prohibition in Deuteronomy.

⁷² Judges 8:30–9:57.

⁷³ Thus the judge Yair the Giladite has thirty sons who ride thirty horses and lived in thirty cities. Judges 10:3–4. Ivtzan of Bethlehem has thirty sons, whom he married off to thirty foreign women, and thirty daughters whom he married off to thirty foreign men. Judges 13:8–9. And Avdon of Piraton had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy horses. Judges 13:13–19.

⁷⁴ The succession of Solomon is described in just this manner. I Kings 1:5ff.

All of this, however, is small potatoes in comparison with what is to come in the kingdom of David's son, Solomon. Under Solomon, the Israelite state reaches the apex of what man can achieve on this earth. Israel has won its wars and now has peace on all sides; it has power and wealth, and is honored among the nations; it has reached its prescribed borders; its ruler is wise, and he brings justice to the state; he is pious, and builds a great Temple to God; under his leadership science and art flourish; and the people are happy.⁷⁵ Indeed, it is the success of the early stages of Solomon's reign that serves the prophets as a model of the messianic vision.

Nevertheless, even as Solomon's kingdom reaches the pinnacle of what the state can hope to be, the seeds of its destruction are sewn through its incontinence. The state grows ever more distant from the Law of the King:

Now, the weight of the gold that came to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold, besides what he had of the merchantmen, and of the traffic of the merchants, and of the kings of Arabia, and of the governors of the country. And king Solomon made 200 targets of beaten gold; 600 shekels of gold went to one target. And he made 300 shields of beaten gold.... Moreover, the king made a great throne of ivory, and overlaid it with the best gold.... And all king Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the house of the forest of Lebanon were of pure gold; none were silver, for that was considered as nothing in the days of Solomon....

And Solomon gathered together chariots and horsemen. He had 1,400 chariots, and 12,000 horsemen, whom he placed in the cities for chariots.... And Solomon had horses brought from Egypt and from Keve. The king's merchants took the horses from Keve at a fixed price. And a chariot coming out of Egypt would cost 600 shekels of silver, and a horse 150, and so by their hand were they exported to the kings of Hittim and the kings of Aram.

And king Solomon loved many foreign women. Together with the daughter of Pharaoh, there were Moabite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women—from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the children of Israel, You shall not go into them, nor shall they come into you, for they shall surely turn your heart away after their gods. To these, Solomon attached himself in love. And he had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines, and his wives turned away his heart.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ I Kings 3:3–28, 4:20–5:22.

⁷⁶ I Kings 10:14–11:4.

Attention has often been directed particularly to the matter of Solomon's wives, who "turned away his heart" towards foreign gods. This is in keeping with the text that immediately follows, which emphasizes that Solomon built temples in Jerusalem to the gods of all of his foreign wives.⁷⁷ But it is also clear that the narrative is not concerned exclusively with the establishment of idolatry in Jerusalem. Rather, there is here a systematic rejection of the Mosaic Law of the King on all three counts—with respect to gold, horses, and wives. It is the influence of the wives, we are told, that turns his heart; but as in the case of Gideon before him, the gold is what permits Solomon to engage in excesses—the establishment of the temples to Kemosh, Molech, and others in Jerusalem—he might otherwise not have committed.

But the Law of the King does not aim only to keep the king's heart turned towards God. It has an additional purpose, which is to keep the king loyal to his people and sympathetic to them: "That his heart not be lifted above his brothers."⁷⁸

With regard to Solomon, we are not told that his heart was "lifted above his brothers"—although one can only wonder what a king who will not drink from a silver vessel because it is too lowly, might have understood concerning the sufferings of his people. But when the king dies, and his son Rehavam takes the throne, it is precisely the sense that the heart of the king is "lifted above his brothers" that is depicted as leading to the downfall of the state. A popular leader rises against the state, who seeks to remind the new king that his wives and chariots and vessels of gold are paid for by impressment and taxation⁷⁹—and to demand a reduction in the burden imposed by this burgeoning state:

Yarovam and all the congregation of Israel came, and spoke to Rehavam, saying, "Your father made our yoke hard. Now therefore

⁷⁷ "Then Solomon did build a high place for Kemosh, the abomination of Moav, on the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. And he did likewise for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods. And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the Lord, God of Israel, who had... commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods. But he kept not that which the Lord commanded." I Kings 11:7–10.

⁷⁸ Deuteronomy 17:20. It is particularly important that study of the Torah is supposed not only to turn the king towards God, but also to prevent the evil of his feeling too high above his brothers.

⁷⁹ As Aaron Wildavsky suggests, there is a point at which impressment and taxation begin to look like slavery, and kingship like the idolatry of Egypt. Wildavsky, *Moses as Political Leader*, pp. 257–258.

make the hard service of your father, and the heavy yoke which he put upon us, lighter, and we will serve you.”⁸⁰

When the young king retires to consider what to do, his companions turn his heart away, swelling his head with false words:

The young men who had grown up with him spoke to him, saying, “Thus shall you speak to this people, that has spoken to you saying, your father made our yoke heavy, but you make it lighter for us. Thus shall you speak to them: My little finger shall be thicker than my father’s loins. Whereas my father did burden you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.”⁸¹

In the assurance that Rehavam’s “little finger” shall be “thicker than my father’s loins,” we find precisely that arrogance which characterized the imperial state in the story of Babel—and, apparently, the soaring of the heart above the people that is proscribed in the Law of the King.

And the king answered the people harshly... and spoke to them after the counsel of the young men.... And the king hearkened not to the people....

And all Israel saw that the king hearkened not to them. And the people answered the king, saying, “What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, Israel. Now tend to your own house, David”....

Then Rehavam sent Adoram, who was over the tribute, and Israel stoned him with stones, so that he died. And the king Rehavam made haste to mount his chariot, and to flee to Jerusalem. Thus Israel rebelled against the house of David, to this day.⁸²

When the young king delivers this message to the people, they rise against him, kill the tax collector, and tear the north of the kingdom away from Judah.⁸³

In this sequence of events, we are permitted a clear view of the manner in which the violation of the Law of the King brings about the downfall of the state. Solomon hoarded wives, gold, and chariots. It was his wives and gold that brought about the establishment of idolatry in the land. It was the taxation and servitude that brought resentment and rebellion. And it was the arrogance of a ruler whose “heart was lifted above his

⁸⁰ I Kings 12:3–4.

⁸¹ I Kings 12:10–11.

⁸² I Kings 12:13–17.

⁸³ I Kings 12:18.

brothers” that brought precipitous decline to a kingdom that only a few years earlier had been the envy of all mankind.

But the limited state is not the only political lesson here. It cannot escape notice that the rending of the kingdom of David and Solomon in two is treated by the biblical narrative as a terrible tragedy. For in the political understanding of the Bible, the unity of Israel is something extraordinarily precious. This is not an intuition that is original to the book of Kings. It already appears in Genesis, which reaches its climax with the hatred spilled between Joseph and his brothers. In Joshua and Judges this same theme appears in the form of the recurring threat of civil war. It is the united state of Saul, David, and Solomon that lays this threat to rest for a time. And it is Solomon’s violation of the Law of the King that is depicted as bringing about the resurgence of this fratricidal warfare in the time of his son, Rehavam. Henceforth, the treachery of one Israelite state against another is always possible, and sometimes a reality. It is a nightmare that will only be alleviated one day when, according to the visions of the prophets, the Israelites will again be united, under a king of their own, one ruler over all Israel.⁸⁴

6. CONCLUSION

As I have attempted to show, the principal narrative sequence of the Hebrew Bible—spanning half of its length—is constructed with political lessons in mind. And while later generations may have seen fit to emphasize different aspects of the biblical political teaching, this is no reason for an impartial observer to miss the fact that the Bible does have a coherent and more or less consistent teaching that is its own.

The most significant step in seeking the biblical political teaching is to recognize that in the biblical narrative, the Israelites are delivered not once, but twice. They are delivered once in Exodus, and once again in Samuel. Their first deliverer is Moses, who redeems them from the tyranny of the state; their second deliverer is David, who redeems them from anarchy. It is in the early stages of his son Solomon’s reign that we find the political condition the Bible depicts as the best that can be achieved by man—an achievement that is at once both fleeting and real.

With this in mind, it is not difficult to recognize the political understanding that the narrative was written to teach. The Bible understands the political order as oscillating between the imperial state, as represented by Egypt of the Pharaohs; and anarchy, as represented by Israel in the

⁸⁴ Ezekiel 37:15–24.

period of the judges. The first road leads to bondage; the second to dissolution and civil war. Neither alternative, then, can serve as the basis for the freedom of a people. The question with which the biblical narrative wrestles is whether there is a third option, which can secure a life of freedom for Israel in the face of these two mortal threats.

In the political theory advanced by the Hebrew Bible, there is such an alternative. If one wishes for political betterment, there is no choice but to establish a state. Yet this state cannot be unlimited in principle, like the states of “all the nations”⁸⁵ in the ancient Near East. Rather, it must be a state that will steer a course between the two extremes, seeking “the good and the right.” For this, one must have rulers who understand that virtue emerges from limitation of the state: from the limitation of the borders of the state; from the limitation of the size of the armed forces and of what one is willing to do in the name of foreign alliances; from the limitation of the income of the state; and from the limitation of the degree to which the king sees himself as being raised above his own people. It is within the framework of these constraints that both the people and their king are to find the love of justice and of God that characterized the herdsmen who were their forefathers.

The Hebrew Bible thus endorses the integrity of a single, limited state as preferable both to anarchical order and to the imperial state. This limited, national state, in which the king will be chosen from among the people and will be one of them in spirit, is in fact the biblical ideal. Yet this is an ideal suspended at the midpoint between two competing evils, and it perpetually threatens to decline in the one direction or the other. In the eyes of the author who labored to assemble the core biblical text in the shadow of the destruction of the Judean state, it was clear that the aim must be to steer the state between these twin threats, thereby assuring the sympathies of both man and God, and therefore the political longevity of the kingdom.

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⁸⁵ I Samuel 8:5, 20.