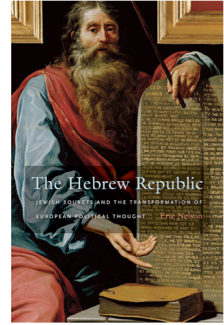


The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought,
by Eric Nelson

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Fascinating, persuasive and genuinely original, Eric Nelson's *The Hebrew Republic* represents an important addition to debates on the origin of modern political thought. Whereas traditionally the development of contemporary political thinking has been seen as a result of a “great separation” between religion and politics, Nelson adopts a diametrically opposed view. A political position that viewed monarchy as inherently corrupt, favoured redistribution of land through agrarian laws and supported religious toleration was, he argues, the result of an increasing Hebraism and interaction with Rabbinic sources. Far from representing a symptom of secularisation, then, these forms of thought were actually symptomatic of an increasingly religious mindset: the modern political world was “called into being, not by the retreat of religious conviction, but rather by the deeply held religious belief that the creation of such a world is God’s will” (5). Needless to say this is a significant claim, and to Nelson’s credit it is one that he manages to substantiate throughout his impressive analysis.

Nelson has divided his study into three chapters examining (in turn) the rise of republican exclusivism, shifting attitudes towards Agrarian laws and land redistribution, and the rise of religious toleration. The first chapter thus begins with a description of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century republican writers. Nelson shows how these sources viewed republicanism as one, rather than the only, form of government available. Monarchy therefore represented a viable alternative to republicanism. In tracing a shift towards exclusivism, Nelson shows how the debate changed when rabbinic sources began to be used by writers both for and against republicanism. Rabbinic debates had centred on two seemingly contradictory texts—Deut 17:14-17, which suggested that the children of Israel would appoint a king when they reached Canaan, and 1 Sam 8, in which the Israelites asked for a king and were told that they were rejecting God in the process. Nelson argues for the particular influence of the *Devarim Rabbah*, a compendium of midrashim on Deuteronomy that argued that the Israelites were committing idolatry

by replacing God with an earthly king. Nelson persuasively shows the influence of this point of view in John Milton's thought, as Milton moved away from arguing that monarchy was one acceptable form of government amongst many, to viewing it as a form of idolatry. Nelson shows that Milton was familiar with rabbinic scholarship through a number of sources, in particular through the works of Salmasius and Schickard. Most impressive here is Nelson's reading of *Paradise Lost*. While Nelson acknowledges that in the poem Satan bases his arguments against God on the same arguments Milton used against the Stuarts, he does not believe that this represents a total shift in Milton's thought towards a position in which monarchy is seen as a form of government instituted by God. Instead he argues that Milton echoes rabbinic views in seeing God as the only true monarch, with every earthly king thus attempting to usurp true divine authority in their earthly rule. Thus in Book XII of the poem, when Nimrod is set up as the first king, Adam views the idea that a man might rule over fellow men in the same way that God rules over humanity as a monstrous abuse of power. This is a very interesting reading of the text and the discussion in general offers valuable insight into Milton's political position.

The second chapter deals with controversies surrounding the debate on the Agrarian laws. Originally implemented in republican Rome, these laws aimed for an equal distribution of public land that was often wrongfully claimed as private property by powerful individuals. For the majority of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries these laws were examined through their supposed role in the fall of the Roman republic. The laws were generally seen as being one of the major causes of political instability and eventual civil war in Rome. Here, Nelson focuses on the Dutch Hebraist Peter Cunaeus. In a 1617 study of the "republic of the Hebrews" Cunaeus took up rabbinic debates on the land laws found in the Pentateuch. Influenced particularly by Maimonides' redaction of rabbinic viewpoints in the *Mishneh Torah*, Cunaeus used Israel as the "ultimate constitutional model" (75). He argued that an agrarian law in ancient Israel, through the equal division of the land between tribes and promise of restoration of land to its original owner in the year of jubilee, was the ideal basis for a state. This position was developed by James Harrington in England during the 1650s. Harrington imposed strict limits on land ownership in his utopian *Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), establishing the primacy of Israel's mode of government as the basis for his argument in the agrarian law's favour. This position was elaborated further in Harrington's 1659 *Art of Lawgiving* in which he argued more explicitly

that the stable commonwealth must rest on an equal distribution of property, i.e. agrarian laws. This reassessment of the Agrarian laws also led to a change of thought on the cause of republican Rome's downfall. Where the Agrarian laws had previously been interpreted through hostile critics such as Cicero, writers such as Cunaeus and Harrington turned to the more sympathetic Greek historians of Rome (such as Plutarch) to provide support for their reading of the change of government in Rome. These historians argued that it was the weakness of the Agrarian laws that damaged Rome and that the laws themselves were correct. Nelson therefore sees a turn away from Rome towards Greece in addition to the Hebraic turn that he traces here.

The final chapter is concerned with the rise of religious toleration. Here Nelson aims to argue against two widely held opinions—firstly, that toleration arose as a result of secularisation and secondly, that toleration resulted from a fundamental desire to divide church and state. Instead, Nelson sees toleration as resulting from a combination of Hebraic influences and Erastianism. While this may initially seem like a bewildering claim, the argument is in fact highly persuasive. Nelson argues that Josephus' claim that Israel was a theocracy, in that God was its civil sovereign, was central to these arguments. With God seen as civil ruler it was possible to establish the power of the state over religion, enabling Hebraists to question the utility of religious laws. The outcome of these discussions was to conclude that they were there for purely civil reasons; to preserve the status quo within the state rather than legislate against particular types of religious abuses. The survival of religious laws therefore boiled down to the question of which were vital for the state and which were matters of conscience. Eventually, Nelson argues, this led to a rapidly diminishing set of religious matters deemed worthy of consideration "until at last it was virtually empty" (91). While returning to Harrington and his rabbinic sources once again, the strongest element of this chapter is Nelson's discussion of the Hebraists Thomas Coleman, John Lightfoot and John Selden and their arguments in favour of toleration at the Westminster Assembly. Using the example of rabbis who argued that non-Jews were tolerated in Israel as long as they did not undermine the established faith, these speakers argued against the Presbyterian party for the primacy of civil authority and a wider toleration of religious difference. The discussion of Westminster is followed by a revisionist reading of Hobbes' work, claiming that Hobbes used the concept of the Hebrew republic to argue for toleration. While I did not find this entirely convincing, it was nonetheless a nuanced reading of Hobbes. Nelson closes by acknowledging a paradox in the development

of toleration—both secular and religious roots result in “a deep ambiguity in the character of the political ideas we have inherited from this crucial period” (137).

This book is an important contribution to the literature on the development of contemporary political thought, offering a truly original and highly persuasive argument. Nelson has managed to uncover a range of original texts in Hebrew, Greek and Latin that shed important light on the understanding of such well-known figures as Milton and Harrington. The ability to offer fresh readings of texts such as *Paradise Lost* is also refreshing and adds much to his general arguments from the rabbinic sources. I have only a few minor issues with this book, most notably its length. Despite having a remarkable amount of content, at 139 pages of text I was left feeling that there was room to expand the arguments. It was unfortunate, for example, that the discussion of the Westminster Assembly did not extend to the use of Hebraic thought later in the Commonwealth period (particularly the Barebones Parliament of 1653) which might perhaps have furthered discussions of the practical political impact of Hebraism. Similarly, while Nelson is open about his refusal to address the phenomenon of philo-Semitism in this work, a discussion of the wider roots and popularity of the concept would have been welcome and added some extra background to his discussions.

Nonetheless, these are very minor quibbles. This is an important book that will be debated for some time to come. In making scholars look seriously at the role of religious (and particularly Hebraic) roots of later political theory it highlights a vital theme deserving of much further study. Certainly read alongside Achsah Guibbory's recent *Christian Identity, Jews and Israel in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), for example, it adds to a developing picture of the importance of Hebraic thought to the seventeenth-century mind.

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