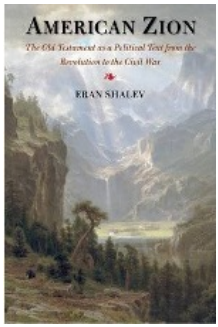
American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War, by Eran Shalev



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Eran Shalev's *American Zion* is a fascinating, well-documented, and well-argued book on the use of the Old Testament as a political text in the foundation and development of American national and political identity from the American Revolution to the Civil War. Throughout, Shalev, a senior lecturer in the History Department of Haifa University, provides readers with insightful description and analysis of the polyvalent ways that antebellum Americans received and deployed a variety narratives found in the Hebrew Bible. In doing so, Shalev demonstrates, as he puts it, the significance of the "Hebrew Bible, and particularly the role of biblical Israel, in the formation of an American national and political culture from the Revolution to the Civil War" (2).

While Shalev is by no means the first author to tackle the subject of the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the formation of American national identity, his approach, along with a focus that moves beyond the Exodus narrative to examine the use of other texts within the Hebrew Bible makes this work a useful addition to literature on the subject. In addition, Shalev's approach and treatment of the subject matter—that is, his analysis of the relationship between the uses and interpretations of texts within a given context—makes this work a useful model for how to undertake a sophisticated reception history of biblical texts, making it potentially valuable for non-specialists as well. I will have more to say on this below.

The book consists of an introduction, five substantive chapters, and a brief conclusion. In the introduction, Shalev lays out his key arguments, his use of terms, and where this book fits within, and differs from, the subject-specific literature. In particular he argues that Americans' frequent recourse to the Hebrew Bible was at times not only based on identification *with*, but also *as*, the Israelite political community. For readers who may be uncomfortable with the idea that describing the use of the Hebrew Bible as a "political text" might inadvertently naturalize the oft-critiqued commonsense notion that "religion" and "politics" are inherently discrete and identifiable categories, Shalev quickly quells this, by clearly outlining his use of the terms. For him, the use of the Hebrew Bible as a "political text" is quickly defined by its use in antebellum America as a "text about national politics" (1). This explanation receives a finer edge shortly thereafter, when Shalev writes that invocation of Old Testament texts alongside "the identification of the United States as a God-chosen Israel, provided a language to conciliate a modern republican experiment with the desire for biblical sanction; it could thus help alleviate anxieties related to the limits of human authority and legitimize the unprecedented American federal and republican endeavors" (2). Thus, Shalev's approach to analyzing religion or religious discourse—one to which I am quite sympathetic—is to consider the invocation of the Bible, or themes within it, as authorizing strategies, whereby novel human endeavors are given a more timeless sensibility through their rhetorical attachment to unseen providence. Throughout the rest of the chapters, various events and time periods are used to illuminate the utility of this approach, and its role in the formation of early American identity.

In chapter 1, "'The Jewish Cincinnattus': Biblical Republicanism in the Age of the American Revolution" Shalev provides a sustained analysis of the ways that Hebrew texts were invoked in the service of emphasizing the political doctrine of classical republicanism in the revolutionary era. While acknowledging the role that the Exodus narrative played in the American Revolution's political imagination (and again, its use as an authorizing strategy to invoke divine sanction to the revolutionaries' aims), he moves beyond this narrative to examine the use of other Hebrew texts in the service of outlining what he argues are consistent themes in classical republicanism: "corruption versus stern virtue, [and] self-aggrandizement versus sacrifice and self-effacement" (21). Among the highlights of the chapter is Shalev's analysis of the way the themes from diverse Hebraic sources such as the Book of Esther, Judges, and others, were combined with a civic humanist imag-

ination that began the formation and evolution of an American republican worldview that was heavily influenced by Old Testament scripture.

Chapter 2, "The United Tribes, or States of Israel" shifts to the post-Revolutionary period. Following on from America's Declaration of Independence and the authoring of the American Constitution, Shalev analyses the way that, once again, biblical tropes and identities were collapsed in time and space, and imagined as analogues to their contemporary American counterparts. Thus, he shows how pre-Civil War Americans articulated and constructed their political and national consciousness through the Old Testament, giving themselves a history where one did not necessarily exist. In this chapter we see how a number of clergymen, politically conscious Americans, and other statesmen drew on the Old Testament to "make sense of, justify, and reconcile the experimental constitutional arrangements of the young United States and the hallowed political models introduced through the history of what they often called the 'Jewish republic'" (51). Overall, the chapter provides a clear outline of how the Old Testament was used in early years after the American Revolution to alleviate the anxieties related to human authority by clothing them in the authority of scripture.

Chapter 3 shifts the book's focus toward a brief and lesser-known moment in early American biblical imagination. Subtitled "Pseudobiblicism, the Early Republic, and the Cultural Origins of the Book of Mormon" this chapter examines the previously unfamiliar style of American writing that peaked from approximately 1770–1840, and sought to emulate "the style of antiquity," through mimicry of the King James Bible, which Shalev calls "pseudobiblicism." This style of writing, according to Shalev, was "just as strange and foreign" to Anglophones of the time as it is to twenty-first century English-speakers today (85), making the popularity of this convention even more curious. Moreover, the chapter demonstrates that it was not frequently used in conventionally religious idioms, but rather by politically active authors and commentators, due to its linguistic similarity to another culturally authoritative text (the Bible), "as a means to establish their claims for truth, as well as their authority and legitimacy in public discourse" (85). Throughout the chapter, Shalev convincingly argues that extensive use of pseudobiblicism "demonstrates not merely the extent to which American culture was biblically oriented, but that that Biblicism was profoundly focused on the Old Testament" and Americans' "eagerness to understand themselves as latter-day Israelites" (101). Beyond describing this convention and its various uses, the chapter also advances the argument that this form of pseudobiblicism,

and the common practice of perceiving American history in biblical terms and in language that mirrored the King James Bible, provided the necessary backdrop for the popular reception of the Book of Mormon among some segments of the population.

The following chapter, "Tribes Lost and Found: Israelites in Nineteenth-Century America," provides the most explicit example of some Americans' more literal identification as Israel. Beginning with a discussion of a group of self-proclaimed "modern Israelites" that emerged around 1800, Shalev documents the ways those adhering to biological conceptions of their relationship with the ancient Israelites "leapt over typology and metaphor to discover actual Israelites, or their descendants, walking in their midst" (118). Another focus of the chapter is a discussion of Elias Boudinot's *A Star in the West*, published in 1816, which Shalev argues further transformed the American biblical imagination by reviving discussions about the possibility that "Indians" (native Americans) were of Israelite descent. Throughout the chapter, further interspersing discussions of a variety of works and modes of discourse that focused on the "Israelite-Indian theory" over the first half of the nineteenth century are used to demonstrate how this theory not only flourished, but, as with the focus of previous chapters, played a role in shaping American intellectual discourse, imagined history, and national identity.

The final chapter focuses on another turning point in Americans' invocation of the Old Testament and, more specifically, its decline in public political discourse. One of the arguments that underlies previous chapters is that one of the reasons the Old Testament was used so frequently to frame political and historical events is due to that text's preoccupation with worldly politics and social organization. This chapter, however, focuses on a period of time where the New Testament began to gain a more predominant role in public political discourse, as a result of evangelical revivals and the Second Great Awakening. As a result of this shift, Shalev argues that "This revamped emphasis on Jesus would transform the economy of American Biblicism and political imagination," ending the "golden age of the Hebrew Bible in American public life" not through processes of secularization but rather through that text being overshadowed by "New Testament–centered evangelical religiosity" (151–52). In addition to evangelical revivals, the New Testament and the figure of Jesus became predominant during this period due to emerging debates over slavery. Shalev shows how, after 1830, Jesus became a primary figure in the slavery debate with those in favor of the institution, as well as those who sought to have it abolished, invoking Jesus as a champion

of their cause. By examining these competing uses of Jesus, Shalev not only sheds light on the ways that Jesus was invoked for competing aims in this particular context, he also demonstrates more broadly the fact that Jesus, like the uses of the Old Testament in previous chapters, is ultimately devoid of any inherent "meaning" and can thus be co-opted for a variety of social and political causes.

A further highlight of the chapter is the clear documentation of the way abolitionists, in contrast to their predecessors who sought to show the parallels between the United States and Ancient Israel, worked hard to differentiate the two nations, due to the presence and sanctioning of slavery found in parts of the Old Testament. Such an observation brings to mind what Bruce Lincoln, in *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (1989), referred to as "affinity and estrangement" which he suggests are important discursive instruments that can either unite or divide a society. In this case, where an affinity with Ancient Israel had in the past played an enormous part of manufacturing a sense of shared American identity, from the vantage point of abolitionists, a sense of estrangement from Ancient Israel as a society that sanctioned slavery was invoked in order to provide a new model of what American society or identity ought to be. *American Zion* contains much more than I can possibly outline here, both in its historical content, and in its observations. While its variety of examples has its strengths, it also has its drawbacks. The wide-ranging discussion of examples in each chapter can at times lead the reader to wonder where it is all headed, and on occasion I felt as though a sustained engagement along with a bit of endurance was required to get through each of the chapters. This is not a criticism of the book as "too complicated" or a suggestion that it ought to have been made more simple. However, I do think that slightly clearer introductions to each chapter, outlining more explicitly the primary arguments that each sought to advance would help readers navigate some of the twists and turns by giving them a point of reference to which they could return.

Despite these minor issues, which may after all not be problematic for other readers, *American Zion* has many more strengths. For scholars of religion, reception history, identity studies, and similar fields, this book has much to recommend it. Shalev's close attention to the role that discourse played in the ongoing formation of (an unstable) American identity and the use of biblical texts and religious rhetoric to authorize and manufacture a sense of stability, and introduce divine providence to political contexts that were often new and novel, is, as I alluded to above, a useful model for anyone

interested in these issues, whether in an American context or not. Additionally, by closely examining the diverse ways the Old Testament was used as a political text in antebellum America, this book demonstrates the virtually unlimited ways that culturally authoritative texts (in this case the Bible) can be used to condemn or condone any number of social and political issues, and thus the futility of scholarly attempts to discern a text's singular "meaning." At the same time it is also demonstrative of the way that invoking a specific text as though it had inherent or stable meaning can lend a sense of continuity and "tradition" to the social and political issues one wants to endorse.

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