



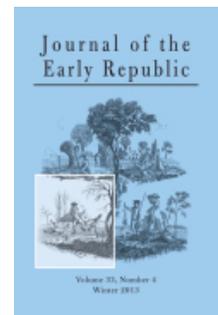
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American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War by Eran Shalev (review)

Alexis McCrossen

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REVIEWS

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American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War. By Eran Shalev. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. 239. Cloth, \$40.00.)

Reviewed by Alexis McCrossen

In the index of Bernard Bailyn's classic *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967) appear many references to Rome, a couple to Greece, and none to the Old or New Testament. Since then, numerous historians—not the least of whom is Eran Shalev, author of *Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic* (Charlottesville, VA, 2009)—have investigated how familiarity with ancient history and the classics informed American political and artistic culture. Shalev's recent book, *American Zion*, departs from Bailyn's model by revealing how profoundly the Old Testament influenced political debate and reflection in the United States between the Revolution and the 1830s. It shows how the Hebrew Bible was the source of images, stories, and tropes that resonated with Americans as they fashioned an understanding of themselves as a "chosen people" and of their nation as a "new Israel."

Drawing on Hebraic political studies, which investigates the "Hebraic tradition in political thought" (3, 52), Shalev has written an intellectual history that traces the origins, circulation, and adaptation of Old Testament themes in American political and religious treatises. He extends Eric Nelson's inquiry in *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 2010) to the American context. Shalev investigates the fluorescence of what he calls "Old Testamentism" during the Revolutionary decades and

beyond, before proposing in a closing chapter that midcentury debates over slavery contributed to its demise as a frame of political and religious reference.

Shalev's focus on the political imagination rather than on politics frees the book from a developmental trajectory whereupon one sort of reference to the Old Testament begets another. In five chapters, the book instead highlights the incidence of what Shalev characterizes as "Hebraic" tropes, themes, and metaphors in various forms of political speech. Drawing attention to "biblical republicanism," the first chapter redresses the scholarly neglect of the role of the Old Testament "in the formation and evolution of an American republican worldview" (19). It underscores how Americans relied on the Old Testament to identify corruption. Shalev masterfully explains how Americans "made sense of civic corruption through biblical narratives" (30), particularly in their oft-repeated references to the Maccabean Revolt (167–160 BC); Persia's corruptible king Ahasuerus and his mendacious, scheming minister Haman; and the Israelite town of Meroz, which sided with Canaan's invading armies. Thus, Americans "read the Old Testament as a narrative of resistance to tyranny" (41). It gave them a language and discourse through which they could talk about tyranny and republican virtue. To close chapter 1, Shalev shows how Gideon provided a model for disinterested republican virtue as important as the Roman Lucius Quinticus Cincinnatus. George Washington, it was said, embodied the admirable traits of the biblical as well as the Roman hero.

Shalev's literary analysis, particularly discourse analysis, illuminates the book's middle chapters. Chapter 2 explores the appropriation of Israel as a model of republican governance by figures as diverse as patriotic pastors Gad Hitchcock and Samuel Cooper, Harvard President Samuel Langdon, and the inestimable Thomas Paine. Even Lyman Beecher believed that the American Constitution came from the Bible, not Rome or Greece. The chapter concludes with a fascinating account of Mordecai Manuel Noah, who in 1825 tried to "reconstitute a Hebrew government" (77) a few miles from Buffalo on an island in the Niagara River, in a city he named Ararat, after the biblical Mount Ararat, where Noah's ark landed after the flood.

Chapter 3 investigates the uses of biblical language, arguing that the discourse itself perpetuated and supported ontological claims for authority and legitimacy. The biblical style influenced nomenclature as well as

literary form, and provided a venue through which satire could be developed. More important surely than satire was reliance on the biblical style in constituting religious revelations, as evidenced in *The Book of Mormon* (1830). This chapter's, and perhaps the book's, most important claim is that the biblical style "placed the United States in a biblical time frame," "expanded their [Americans'] horizon of national expectations," and "conditioned contemporaries to think of an American mission in biblical terms" (100–101). Thus, Manifest Destiny.

No book about the Old Testament in the United States would be complete without exploring the conviction that Israelites peopled the early republic. As Shalev nicely puts it, many different Americans "leapt over typology and metaphor to discover actual Israelites" (118). Perhaps first among them were "the Rodsmen," residents of Middletown, Vermont, who in 1800 decided that they derived from ancient Jews. Shalev traces the genealogy of the persistent misidentification of Native Americans as one of the lost tribes of Israel. His discussion includes a careful analysis of the intrepid Mordecai Noah's *Discourse on the Evidences of the American Indians being the Descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel* (1837) and Joseph Smith's *The Book of Mormon*.

While the first four chapters follow a roughly chronological path, though thematic in their premises, the final chapter chronologically and thematically brings the book to a convincing close. Here, Shalev presents the argument that sometime after the 1830, the New Testament eclipsed the Old Testament in its relevance to most Americans. He draws on a deep well of scholarship concerning the Second Great Awakening, the emergence of Jesus as a cultural hero in the United States, and the political and religious debates over slavery. He shows that pro- and antislavery positions both drew upon the New Testament in ways that marginalized the Old Testament. By severing the sense of continuity between "the Hebrew republic" and the American one, abolitionists and apologists for slavery together upset the notion that the United States was an "American Zion."

American Zion represents the best of intellectual history in its composition, methods, and use of sources. The only fault to which I would draw attention is a minor one, and that is Shalev's tendency to underscore points he believes are new or original. This does not seem necessary. Readers will recognize on their own the outstanding achievement that this book represents and the very real contributions it makes to our

understanding of formal and informal political speech in the antebellum United States.

ALEXIS McCROSSEN, professor of history at Southern Methodist University, is the author of *Holy Day, Holiday: The American Sunday* (Ithaca, NY, 2000) and *Marking Modern Times: Clocks, Watches and Other Timekeepers in American Life* (Chicago, 2013). She is currently researching New Year's observances in the United States.

Speculators in Empire: Iroquoia and the 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix. By William J. Campbell. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012. Xvii. Pp. 278. Cloth, \$39.95.)

Reviewed by Daniel J. Hulsebosch

Sovereignty at its margins is a confidence game. On the edges of the competing empires in eighteenth-century North America, each polity negotiated its jurisdiction in fluid interactions between shifting groups of actors over many decades. Yet some encounters stand out. One of the most striking, yet half-forgotten, scenes in the history of Britain's North American empire came in the autumn of 1768 at Fort Stanwix, a military outpost erected at the end of the Seven Years' War but, due to metropolitan economizing, already in decay. The fort lay next to a centuries-old Indian carrying place linking the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys, a commercial linchpin between the Atlantic and the Great Lakes. There, Superintendent of Indian Affairs Sir William Johnson brought together imperial officials, representatives of several colonial governments, and over 3,000 Native Americans, most of whom were members of the Iroquois Confederacy, to fix the boundary line between colonial settlement and Indian country. The goal was to maximize trade and minimize illegal migration, all the while leaving ambiguous the political meaning of a Euro-Indian border.

William J. Campbell's monograph is the first book-length analysis of the intricate diplomacy leading up to the Fort Stanwix Treaty. The starting point for compromise was the line atop the Appalachian Mountains, which the crown had declared, in the Proclamation of 1763, would hold back British settlers and speculators. It did not. The Stanwix Treaty shifted the line slightly east in New York, thus protecting strategic Iroquois lands, and then swept it west to open a huge chunk of the Ohio