In recent years, scholars have been investigating the ways in which a sustained interest in the Old Testament as a political text—a branch of study that has been dubbed political Hebraism—evolved as an offshoot of humanism in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Reformed Protestants, who had an especially strong affinity for the piety and intermittent suffering of the ancient Hebrews, began looking to the Old Testament for wisdom not only in religious but also in secular matters as well. Across Europe and the Atlantic, from Germany to New England, Calvinists came to think of their theopolitical enterprises as “new Israels.” From the earliest days of settlement, New World Puritan immigrants drew on the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and flight through the wilderness to fashion, in the words of Sacvan Bercovitch, a “typology of mission.” Religion remained an organizing intellectual principle during the colonies’ long ordeal with the mother
country, as notable revolutionaries set out to articulate and debate their unprecedented political circumstances in terms that would be widely shared by their fellow patriots. But although it has been amply documented that the colonies’ revolutionary discourse was a “resilient intermixture of religious and republican vocabularies,” culminating in a novel American “Christian republicanism,” a related use of biblical texts—one that sought to discover in them justifications and models for practical political configurations—has yet to be adequately addressed. This line of inquiry, which gathered force after independence was declared and then achieved, can be tracked through the writings of a select group of New England pastors, men who in their sermons attempted to reconcile proposals for the new nation’s constitutional arrangements with the hallowed political prototypes first established by the biblical polity they came to perceive as “the Jewish republic.”


6For useful examinations of the difference between New Yorkers and ministers from the middle and southern colonies, see Melvin B. Endy Jr., “Just War, Holy War and Millennialism in Revolutionary America,” William and Mary Quarterly 41 (1984): 3–25; Mark Valeri, “The New Divinity and the American Revolution,” William and Mary Quarterly 56 (1989): 741–69, esp. p. 765; and Keith L. Griffin, Revolution and Religion: American Revolutionary War and the Reformed Clergy (New York: Paragon, 1994). Stout (New England Soul, pp. 293–96) recognized that New England ministers had addressed the theme of the Jewish republic in their sermons of 1775–76, but since his magisterial study concludes in 1776, he inevitably underscores threats of anarchy and disunion rather than the positive constitutional models the Hebrew republic offered. The several issues of Hebraic Political Studies that have appeared since its founding in 2005 (through early 2009) do not include a single article about American history.
The Israelites’ political history, a narrative of the relationship between God and his chosen people, is largely contained in the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Judges. Practitioners of the relatively new field of political Hebraism—historians, political scientists, linguists, and literary scholars—are actively assessing the varieties of political language displayed in the Bible, and in plotting its manifestations in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, they have charted the rise and fall of interest in the political history of the ancient Israelites as occurring between the mid-sixteenth century and the end of the seventeenth, with at least twelve major works on the subject appearing between 1546 and 1710. Those predominantly Christian political readings of the Old Testament—“whether or not the [ir] authors read those texts in the original Hebrew”—were typically applied to the current era’s pressing political questions. Ranging across a wide spectrum of thought rather than representing an ideologically coherent point of view, political Hebraism, its students contend, should be “seen as a common mode of discourse [rather] than as a defense of a specific political position,” and thus it should “take its place of honor among other [contemporary] languages or paradigms.”

Political Hebraism has been recognized as a foundational principle in the establishment of the Dutch republic (1581), which took its inspiration from the biblical narrative of Exodus. Giving rise to such impressive Hebraic commentaries as Petrus Cunaeus’s De Republica Hebraeorum (1617), political

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7Other ancient sources include Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, which restated that history. Josephus’s works were printed in America between 1773 and 1800 in eight editions.

8Sutcliffe, Judaism and Enlightenment, p. 43.


Hebraism was also, in the words of historian Adam Sutcliffe, “a recurrent motif in Dutch cultural politics . . . throughout the seventeenth century.” Sutcliffe argues that in the decades around 1600, the intellectual commitment to Hebraism was as strong in England as it was in the Dutch Republic, “the two states that were most heavily invested in the formation of new theological-political identities.” That swell of political Hebraism may have crested in mid-seventeenth-century England, when jurists such as John Selden and political thinkers of all convictions, from absolutists such as Thomas Hobbes, proto-liberals such as John Locke, and republicans such as James Harrington and John Milton, invoked and painstakingly analyzed the politics of the Hebrew commonwealth in their writings. Undergirding that fascination was a robust identification of England as a “second Israel,” a notion perhaps first expressed in John Foxe’s immensely popular martyrology, *The Acts and Monuments* (1563). During the Interregnum, a period in which England was “a culture saturated with the Bible,” English scholars “closely studied the Old Testament, the political structures of the republic of the Hebrews in particular.”

The potential benefits that political Hebraism holds for the study of early America, both in its intellectual engagement as an entity in the Atlantic World and in its common, if not universal, self-conception as a chosen nation, should be evident. What is less so is the value the paradigm poses


12 Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, p. 27.


for understanding the concerns that were circulating in revolutionary and post-revolutionary America as its newly independent citizens set about building their new nation. As configured to date, however, political Hebraism has been conceptualized not only as self-consciously Eurocentric but as having culminated at least a full century before the age of democratic revolutions commenced.16 Thus, defined as both geographically and temporally remote from the New World, political Hebraism has not been seen as pertinent to America beyond its initial seventeenth-century settlement period.17

Although there were sporadic, eclectic, and by now dated attempts to unveil, as their titles reveal, The Biblical Origins of American Democracy and the role of Hebrew and the Bible in America, historians have not generally taken the lead in such endeavors.18 Rather, political scientists such as the late Daniel Elazar and Donald Lutz, who analyzed the role of Hebraic notions of covenant and compact in the American constitutional tradition, produced the most innovative work in the field.19 Not until recently have we benefited from illuminating historical studies that fully appreciate the Atlantic dimensions of political Hebraism. Eric Nelson has argued that an encounter with a tradition of rabbinic interpretation, specifically of Deuteronomy 17 and 1 Samuel 8, radically transformed the thought of early-modern Christian theorists, who moved from a relativist position that accepted monarchy as a legitimate (if inferior) constitutional form to an exclusivist ideology that regarded kingship as a sin, and Nathan Perl-Rosenthal has shown how

17For the prevailing geographical and temporal boundaries of Hebraic political studies, see Neuman, “Political Hebraism and the Early Modern ‘Respublica Hebraerum,”’ p. 57.
“Hebraic republicanism” promoted anti-monarchism in revolutionary America. American revolutionaries participated in this shift in political ideology, but they also took their biblicism, I assert, even further. Confronting particular political dilemmas with regard to legitimacy and authority, American patriots appropriated a biblical constitutional paradigm to help them make sense of their historical circumstances. By the late eighteenth century, the political history of the ancient Israelites as set forth in the Bible offered Americans not just an antimonarchical argument but a model for their emerging polity. Thus, whereas a biblically inspired exclusivist (that is, antimonarchical) republicanism helped American revolutionaries frame their struggle for independence as an escape from Egyptian bondage and the “British pharaoh,” the Mosaic constitution, “the oldest complete constitution in our possession,” according to one of its modern students, presented a historic archetype of a federal republic sanctioned by God.

Early in the Revolution, when British regulars intensified their vigilance in the wake of the destruction of the tea, Boston’s ministers returned to the Old Testament to seek out precedents for opposing kings and condemning standing armies. Many of their commonwealthean complaints against tyranny and monarchy paralleled Israel’s experience under the rule of the judges. Further into the revolutionary era, American biblicism only gained force. Once the colonies had cast off their yoke, they were faced with the task of shaping a coherent state out of thirteen separate and historically very different political systems. Again, ministers returned to the Old Testament for guidance, this time as a constitutional, not a revolutionary, framework.
They neither developed nor revised prevailing contemporary thought; if some of their insights were striking, they did not, in the final analysis, rise to the standard of innovative political philosophy. Yet, as Bernard Bailyn observed some four decades ago, such explorations help us understand how religious texts and modes of thought were implicated in the conversion of political arguments into revolutionary ideology and subsequently, as I will argue, into foundational justifications. Even though the discourse on the Mosaic constitution did not elicit any novel solutions to contemporary problems, it did provide American patriots with a language that brought scriptural authority, approval, and thus legitimacy to bear on their late-eighteenth-century political arrangements. In light of the efforts of this band of ministers, it appears that we should now add the biblical Jewish state, perceived as a republican and federal polity that had its origins in God himself, to our account of the sources that nourished the American constitutional tradition in its formative era.

Although no Hebraist per se, Thomas Hobbes demonstrated a genuine interest in the political history of the Jews, particularly in the third book of his *The Leviathan* (1651), which details their political organization. As Sutcliffe has observed, the Israelite commonwealth stood “as the original and perfect paradigmatic example of the Hobbesian commonwealth.”

23The first four books of the Hebrew Bible, according to Elazar, may be seen as “as a constitutional document, with Deuteronomy, the fifth, as the restatement of the teachings of the other four books in more systematic and properly constitutional form” (“Deuteronomy as Israel’s Ancient Constitution”).


26Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, p. 50.
Another group of English thinkers who would hold special sway in eighteenth-century America were also well versed in Hebraic politics. James Harrington singled out the Mosaic republic in *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), as did John Locke in his *First Treatise on Government* (1689).\(^{27}\) Algernon Sidney, the republican martyr best remembered for his magisterial, rambling *Discourses Concerning Government* (1680), expounded his political reasoning in light of the Hebraic republic while responding, like Locke, to Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha*, a promonarchic and absolutist treatise, itself grounded in biblical reasoning.\(^{28}\) Sidney’s biblical constitutionalism, an impressive seventeenth-century manifestation of Hebraic erudition, deserves a closer look.

A central figure in eighteenth-century Whig rhetoric on both sides of the Atlantic, Sidney was embraced by American revolutionaries who, according to Bernard Bailyn, “referred to the doctrines of Algernon Sidney” more than to any other luminary, making the *Discourses*, in the words of Caroline Robbins, a “textbook of revolution.”\(^{29}\) In the *Discourses*, Sidney surveyed a range of historical polities, including classical societies, but he focused on the government of biblical Israel. In his effort to refute Filmer’s views on the divine right of kings and on monarchy as a God-sanctioned biblical institution, Sidney sought to demonstrate that biblical kingship was a sin in the eyes of God. In the process, he elaborated on the form and content of the Hebrew republic before it was transformed into a monarchy. That republic, according to Sidney, had “a chief magistrate, who was called judge or captain, as Joshua, Gideon,


\(^{28}\)For John Locke’s biblicism, see Oz-Salzberger, “The Political Thought of John Locke.”

and others.” The complementary institutions of the Hebrew commonwealth were “a council of seventy chosen men, and the general assemblies of the people” (p. 127). While the magistracy was not a permanent but an occasional office, “like the dictators of Rome,” the council, “known by the name of the great Sanhedrin . . . [was] instituted by Moses according to the command of God” and persisted uninterrupted for many centuries (p. 127). The popular assembly, the third leg of the Mosaic constitution, came together, according to Sidney, on such a frequent basis “that none can be ignorant of it, but such as never looked into the Scripture” (p. 127).

Sidney did not elaborate on how those bodies functioned, but he did note that “a Sanhedrin of seventy men chosen out of the whole people, are to judge such causes as relate to themselves, whilst those of greater extent and importance are referred to the general assemblies” (p. 464). The Hebrew republic seemed to have adhered to European notions of the rule of law because no man in Israel could “be raised above the rest unless he be called by God.” When such a man, say Moses or Joshua, died, “his children can have no title to his office” (p. 464). Judgeship, then, was not kingship. Sidney followed the classical maxim that “there never was a good government in the world, that did not consist of the three simple species of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy” (p. 166). The Hebrew government was thus godly, but in seeking to ensure its stability, it also carried the marks of a model republic: it balanced “the one” in the form of a judge, “the few” in the form of the great Sanhedrin, and “the many” in the form of the general assemblies of the people.

Sidney’s ideas were disseminated in the rebelling colonies through such media as the 150-page English pamphlet The Judgment of Whole Kingdoms and Nations. Large sections of the pamphlet, which was signed by Lord Summers but attributed to Daniel Defoe and John Dunton and which was

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30 Algernon Sidney, Discourses Concerning Government (1680; reprinted Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1996), p. 127. Further quotations from this work will be cited in the text.

31 The council was known by the name Sanhedrin only during the Babylonian captivity.
published in America in at least three editions during the early 1770s, were verbatim transcriptions of Sidney’s passages on the Hebrew republic.\textsuperscript{32} Sidney’s exegesis of biblical Israel’s constitutional structure was of special interest. For example, a Pennsylvanian calling himself Cato recalled in the \textit{Pennsylvania Ledger} of 27 April 1776 that “[t]he great Sydney . . . says \textit{God} ordained a mixed Government, answering to this in all its parts, and consisting of a single Judge, or chief Captain, (we contend not for names,) a Council of seventy chosen men, or Sanhedrim, and the General Assemblies of the People. Is not this our own form complete?”\textsuperscript{33} A decade later, John Adams, in his erudite and long-winded \textit{Defence of the Constitutions of the United States} (1787), noted the continuing influence of Sidney’s analysis: according to Sidney, Adams pointed out, “the government of the Hebrews, instituted by \textit{God}, had a judge, the great Sanhedrim, and general assemblies of the people.”\textsuperscript{34}

In truth, biblical Israel’s governance structure did not unconditionally support American revolutionaries’ ardent antimonarchism,\textsuperscript{35} and indeed, in the decades preceding the Revolution, North America’s British colonists were not yet experiencing the shift to a biblically inspired exclusivism like that which transpired, as shown by Eric Nelson, in mid-seventeenth-century England (but then receded after 1688). Because their political thought was still largely tolerant of monarchy, American colonists could choose, for example, to emphasize the benevolent reign of the house of David, which helped justify patriarchy


\textsuperscript{33}Cato, “To the People of Pennsylvania,” letter 8, \textit{Pennsylvania Ledger}, 27 April 1776. In his rebuttal of Thomas Paine’s widely influential \textit{Common Sense}, Cato attempted to demonstrate that Sidney was not an antimonarchist per se but merely a defender of liberty against monarchical absolutism (a distinction that did not save the Englishman’s life in 1683).

\textsuperscript{34}John Adams, \textit{A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States} (New York: H. Gaine, 1787), p. 147.

\textsuperscript{35}Frank E. Manuel points out that “Hebraic political theory, rooted in the biblical and rabbinic tradition, was throughout the long history of the Jews rather consistently monarchical” (\textit{The Broken Staff: Judaism through Christian Eyes} [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992], pp. 127–28).
and authoritarianism. Until revolution erupted and Americans turned toward exclusivism, as Nelson has described it, they had little cause to be interested in the early phase of the Hebrew polity’s history, when it was still kingless and, to their view, republican.

In 1750 Samuel Phillips (1690–1771) delivered a sermon before Massachusetts Bay’s House of Representatives, a sermon that illustrates this pre-revolutionary form of American Hebraic political thought. He recalled for his audience the angel who appointed Moses “to lead his people out of Egypt” and who later assigned Joshua to guide “the several Tribes into Canaan, and [to make] room for them there.” After their deaths, “several Judges being authorized from Heaven, presided over Israel successively.” Phillips did not stress the commonwealthan attributes of the Hebraic government but its “Succession of Kings,” who followed the reign of the Judges “by the express Direction and Appointment of the most high.” The political moral that the tale of ancient Israel revealed was thus one of subservience. Men, Phillips concluded, should be “under the Government of Men.”

Once Americans began to frame their ideas in the language of revolutionary liberty, however, a radically different view of the Mosaic constitution emerged. When the Revolution finally came, Americans saw kingship, in Nelson’s words, “not as a [godly] command, but as a fierce punishment.”

Once the Revolution got underway, certain pastors in New England extended the political relevance of the Hebrew Bible beyond the negative implications of Talmudic exclusivism and toward the positive model that the Mosaic constitution offered. However, those patriots who saw the Mosaic constitution as a

36Samuel Phillips, Political Rulers Authoriz’d and Influenc’d by God our Saviour to decree and execute justice A Sermon Preached at Boston . . . (Boston: John Draper, 1750), p. 7.

model for a mixed government of the one, the few, and the many encountered an inherent tension. On the one hand, ancient Israel seemed to provide an example of a historical entity, much like Greece and Rome, from which lessons both political and moral could be derived. According to such an exegesis, the demise of the Hebrew commonwealth was attributed to the same cause as the fall of the classical city-states: corruption. On the other hand, because it had originated in God, ancient Israel did not fit this pattern of secular history. In the eyes of contemporaries, the Hebrew state was “the only form of government expressly instituted by heaven”; it was also the only polity ever to be “entirely in the hands of Jehova, who was Israel’s supreme king and legislator.” Ancient Israel was, thus, an oxymoron—“a perfect republic.” Because the integrity of a republic depends on the ongoing virtue of its citizens and because humans, given their fallibility, are incapable of sustained virtue, any republic is inherently unstable and, ultimately, fleeting. To be “perfect”—that is, immune to corruption—a republic would have to transcend one of its fundamental characteristics; in essence, to be perfect, a republic would have to shed its republicaness. Therefore, if republics were body politics doomed from the start to succumb to the secular forces of fortuna, what would be the meaning of a republic instituted, perhaps even administered, by God? What lessons could Americans derive from this perfectly historical, or rather historically perfect, polity?

In Government Corrupted by Vice, a sermon delivered in May 1775 and published soon thereafter, Samuel Langdon (1723–97), Harvard’s incumbent president, elaborated on the


form and function of the Hebrew constitution. At this early point in the Revolution, barely a month after hostilities had commenced on Lexington Green, justifying and conceptualizing the form of an American republic was a less pressing priority than exposing the predations of the British monarchy. Accordingly, much of Langdon’s discussion of biblical history concentrated on political degeneration and the need to remove corrupt officers from their posts. In this regard, the only Hebrew officers Langdon chose to mention were counselors and judges. Preaching while the colonies were still nominally British, Langdon read the Bible in the tradition of “exclusive republicanism,” that is, as an antimonarchical text. “It was a high crime for Israel,” he declared, “to ask to be in this respect like other nations,” that is, governed by a king. When God provided his people with a king, through his prophet Samuel and in the guise of Saul, “it was rather as a just punishment of their folly, that they might feel the burdens of court pageantry” (p. 12). Broadening his outlook, Langdon turned to consider “the Jewish government . . . merely in a civil view.” Although it was a political structure none could, and Langdon certainly would not, deny had been “divinely established,” the Hebrew constitution provided a model of “a perfect republic” (p. 11). The magistrates of that divinely civic polity were the heads of Israel’s tribes and the elders of its cities, and even if Langdon did not specify how they were elected (or selected), those officials represented the public good in a manner suspiciously reminiscent of an ideal representation of his own commonwealth’s selectmen. At this early stage of the Revolution, the Continental Congress was still functioning as a provisional institution, with the colonies imagined as thirteen separate “clocks,” and so it is not surprising that Langdon focused on the Hebrew government’s separate tribes and cities more so than on its “national” character.

While “the heads of their tribes, and elders of their cities, were [the Hebrews’] counselors and judges,” they “called the

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41 Samuel Langdon, Government Corrupted by Vice (Boston: John Draper, 1775). Stout elaborated on the sermon’s Hebraic attributes in New England Soul, pp. 294–95. Foster, A Short Essay, also spoke to the theme of Hebraic constitution in 1775.
people together in more general or particular assemblies, took their opinions, gave advice, and managed the public affairs according to the general voice” (p. 11). This pristine and rudimentary republic diverged from the British political tradition, Langdon stressed, in one important respect: the Hebrew magistrates encompassed “all the powers of that government, for there was no such thing as legislative authority belonging to it” (pp. 11–12). Langdon justified this absence of a legislative branch—a task lightened by his disdain for parliamentary supremacy—by explaining that the Israelite’s “complete code of laws [was] . . . given immediately from God by the hand of Moses” (p. 12). The supreme ruler of the universe was the republic’s supreme legislator. Although his comments are meager when compared with later articulations, Langdon had already determined at the very outset of the Revolution that “the civil polity of Israel is doubtless an excellent general model,” a model—constructed, of course, by God—that could be copied, at least in principle and “to great advantage,” by modern societies (p. 12). Langdon returned to these issues years later, as we shall see, when a federal Constitution was at stake, but his and his contemporaries’ essential perspective would not change. Americans tended to picture the Mosaic political configuration as static, not as a historical entity that had changed significantly over time.42

Like Langdon, Thomas Paine (1737–1809) was an exclusivist republican, and, as Nathan Perl-Rosenthal has most recently demonstrated, he based his case against the legitimacy of monarchy, argued powerfully and influentially in Common Sense (1776), on biblical precedent.43 Although his purpose was to expose the errancy of monarchy, not to propose a constitutional program, Paine remarked favorably, if only in

42Daniel Elazar points out that Israel shifted from being a strong federation to a weak confederation, operationally hardly more than a league at times. Those changes ultimately led to “a change in regime of major proportions” (“The Book of Judges: The Israeliite Tribal Federation and Its Discontents,” Daniel Elazar Papers Index, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, www.jcpa.org/dje/articles/judges.htm [accessed 2 July 2008]).

passing, that the Hebrew polity was a republic: the Israelites had no kings, and “it was held sinful to acknowledge any”; also, their form of government was “a kind of republic administered by a judge and the elders of the tribes.”

In subsequent years, a few New England divines would go on to interrogate the political arrangements of ancient Israel. However, unlike Paine, who was no friend of organized religion, the ministers were attempting to infuse their political views of a right republic with the religious authority of God’s will as revealed in history and recorded in Scripture.

After independence was declared and patriots began to consider their future political arrangements, the ancient Hebrew government received more attention than it had earlier. James Dana (1735–1812) was impressed with it, “the only form of government expressly instituted by heaven,” and in 1779 he evaluated its pertinence for the American situation. “Their’s [sic],” Dana pointed out, “was a confederate republic with Jehova at the head,” which “consisted of twelve distinct states; each sovereign in the administration of justice within itself” (p. 17). In each of those semisovereign polities, “councils and force were united in whatever concerned them all.” Like the United States, the Hebrew republic was structured “for the better security of their [each and all states’] common and particular rights” (p. 17).

A year later, with independence long established, the war having raged on for five years, and the colonies-turned-states unified under the (yet to be ratified) Articles of Confederation, Massachusetts became the first state to endorse a constitution. In a sermon preached before both houses of the Massachusetts legislature on the day it was inaugurated, Samuel Cooper

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recounted what he, and indeed many contemporaries, found to be striking similarities between the circumstances of the “antient Israelites” and the American people: the two chosen nations rose from oppression and emerged “from the house of bondage”; both were pursued through the sea and led into the wilderness as a refuge from tyranny and as a preparation for the enjoyment of civil and religious rights. As in sermons from earlier phases of the Revolution, Cooper continued to attack manifestations of despotic power, which was “guided and inflamed by . . . lusts of the human heart” (p. 3). But now, biblical tyrants such as the Egyptian pharaohs or the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, antetypes of King George III, no longer dominated Cooper’s discourse, as they had prior to 1776.

Cooper took as his text Jeremiah 30:20–21: “Their Congregation shall be established before me: and their Nobles shall be of themselves, and their Governor shall proceed from the midst of them.” The prophecy seemed “to have been made for ourselves,” Cooper noted, for he took it to confirm that the ideal commonwealth should be led by a natural, nonhereditary aristocracy bred from its midst (p. 1). As had Langdon, Dana, and others, Cooper described Israel as a well-ordered nation with a balanced constitution but also as a “free republic, over which God himself, in peculiar favour to that people, was pleased to preside.” He attempted to explain the paradox of a perfect republic by referring to Israel’s “charter from heaven,” which apparently dictated that the Jewish people themselves, not God, would manage their polity (p. 8). Cooper did not, in other words, conceive of ancient Israel as a theocracy in the form of a republic but as a true republic with divine characteristics.

As was common in contemporary depictions, Cooper portrayed the Hebrew polity as consisting of three parts: a chief

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47The King James translation is misleading: that “Greaters” became “Nobles,” reflects the political sensibilities of early-seventeenth-century England, not the original Hebrew.
magistrate, called a judge; a council of seventy chosen men, the Sanhedrin (occasionally rendered as Sanhedrim); and the general assemblies of the people. This division into the prevailing concepts of contemporary political theory—“the one,” “the few,” and “the many”—was not so neatly delineated in Bible. As political scientist Daniel Elazar asserted, the overarching structure of biblical political domains, which could combine or separate the authority and powers of the executive, legislative, and judicial spheres, depending on a given situation, was “roughly similar to Western separation of powers in certain respects, but profoundly different in some critical ones.” The Bible was first and foremost a religious text in which matters of secular politics and history were secondary to and derived from theology, and as such it was often confusing and inconsistent. Cooper, like others, had to scour the scriptures for constitutional scraps. His findings were remarkable.

Cooper, like Langdon, inferred that in ancient Israel assemblies were more “essential and permanent” than the chief magistracy, the judgeship. The Sanhedrin “remained with but little suspension, through all the vicissitudes they experienced, till after the commencement of the Christian æra,” while the assemblies of the people “were frequently held by divine appointment, and considered as the fountain of civil power.” That power flowed through decrees and other channels that the assemblies judged “most conducive to their own security, order, and happiness.” The chief magistracy, the judgeship, on the other hand, was a more occasional body. Cooper’s understanding of the Hebrews’ political system, like that of many American commentators, was anachronistic insofar as it was driven by modern notions of popular sovereignty. Thus, even the Mosaic law, which God himself had delivered to Moses on Mt. Sinai, was not, Cooper insisted, imposed on the Israelites

48 In traditional Christian discourse, the Sanhedrin was not celebrated as a venerable “senate” but vilified as the body responsible for turning Christ over to his tormentors. See, e.g., James Rogers, Holiness the Nature and Design of the Gospel of Christ (Hartford, Conn.: Hudson and Goodwin, 1780).

49 Elazar, “The Book of Judges.”
against their will; rather, it was “laid open before the whole congregation of Israel; they freely adopted it, and it became their law . . . by their own voluntary and express consent” (pp. 8–9).

As evidence for his interpretation, Cooper cited the Hebrew tribes, under Joshua’s leadership, renewing the covenant in Shechem. In this voluntary act whereby they confirmed their commitment to their governing laws and statutes, “the Hebrew nation, lately redeemed from tyranny, had now a civil and religious constitution of their own choice” (p. 11). Biblical notions of covenant thus merged with civic humanism to create a novel amalgam of Hebraic republicanism that was particularly useful for infusing America’s constitutional experiment with historical meaning. Cooper concluded that the biblical history of the children of Israel revealed the kind of government that “infinite wisdom and goodness would establish among mankind” (p. 14). Such a government would be a republic, perfectly balanced and divinely ordained.

The following year (1781), in a sermon preached at Coventry, Connecticut, Joseph Huntington (1735–94) offered similar readings of the Hebrew constitution. Like Cooper, Huntington believed that God had provided the Israelites with “the most perfect form of Civil government.” That ancient constitutional plan had “no king, no despot, no emperor, no tyrant, no perpetual dictator allowed for” (p. 9). Huntington’s interpretation of the biblical constitution was much more elaborate than those examined thus far, which, in plumbing the republican character of the Hebrew government, reflected the seventeenth-century European discourse of political Hebraism. Huntington introduced a new set of problems to the discussion, namely, those related to the ostensibly federal arrangement of the Hebrew nation. The 1780s discourse about the Mosaic constitution thus confronted, as we shall see, the fundamental paradox of the

50 Foster concurred, stating that “God did not see it fit to assume to himself the regency and supreme civil government of Israel without their consent and election of him” (A Short Essay, p. 18).

51 Joseph Huntington, A Discourse Adapted to the Present Day, on the Health and Happiness, or Misery and Ruin, of the Body Politic, in Similitude to that of the Natural Body . . . (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1781), p. 8.
American founding, namely, that the United States was a plurality of distinct sovereign states that supposedly embraced a unified national agenda. Ancient Israel, a nation comprised of separate tribes, seemed to provide a historical example and divine sanction for the American federal experiment.

Huntington portrayed each Hebraic tribe, which he alternately—and significantly—referred to as “states,” as a discrete administrative unit. All tribes, according to Huntington, “managed their internal police within themselves; had each of them their legislative body, for their own state or tribe; also their judges, and courts of justice” (p. 9). Each tribe, then, had a general congress headed by a “president”—again the use of American nomenclature is telling—and a Sanhedrin (as opposed to the national Great Sanhedrin). Officers, called “the elders of the tribes,” governed the entity for which they were responsible; they were either elected by the people or appointed by divine decree. Because the voice of the people, Huntington believed, manifested the voice of God, neither mode of selection was preferable to the other. Equating godly decrees with democratic resolutions and popular sovereignty was an innovative way to resolve the contradiction of a corruptible republic perfected through its relation to God as well as to legitimize a complex distribution of authority among jurisdictions.

As long as this order endured, the constitution “united and cemented” the Hebrews through the general “congress,” a body that had originated in the wilderness of Sinai and been charged with advising and directing the elders of the tribes and general assemblies. The Hebraic constitution, in accord with God’s own will and adapted to mankind to secure “the privileges of the subject,” made the children of Israel “far the happiest nation under heaven” (p. 10). That liberal version of national happiness

prevailed, however, only from the time of Moses through that of the prophet Samuel. At that point, “the constitution was subverted,” as the children of Israel requested, and they were subjected to a king (p. 10).

The similarities between the Hebrews and Americans were legion and they were striking, Huntington claimed. Both were federal republics and both consisted, according to him, of the same number of political parts: thirteen states, thirteen tribes. Huntington went on to explain his unusual and deliberate count. The Hebrew nation was conventionally taken to consist of twelve tribes, the progeny of Jacob’s twelve sons, but because the tribe of Joseph had subdivided into the tribes of Ephraim and Mannasseh, in fact Israel was composed of thirteen tribes, just as America consisted of “thirteen united, free and independent states” (p. 9). It was thus “really worthy of notice that our number should be exactly the same, even in the first establishment of our independency” (p. 24). Discovering (or creating) additional symbolic parallels, Huntington contended that America’s “Sanhedrim” answered in “substance to the seventy elders of Israel that were over all the tribes as their supreme council” (p. 24). (Indeed, revolutionaries commonly concluded, as John Murray did in a sermon from 1784, that “those seventy [Israelite] worthies” corresponded to the members of the American Congress, that “august and venerable Council nearly of the same number.”)54

Giving a federal cast to ancient Israel, Huntington argued that in addition to the overarching Sanhedrim/Congress, “we have a General Assembly, in each of our States, the same, for substance, with the elders of each tribe or state in Israel of old” (p. 24). In offices and magistrates, the ancient and modern polities were also comparable: “We have our courts, judges, and


teachers formed on the same general plan, varying only in a few circumstances” (p. 24). In Israel, as in the United States, officers were elected by “the people at large” or “by those to whom the people delegated power for that purpose” (p. 9). Even in their religiosity, the ancient and modern republics were correlative, since both had “the same rule to walk by . . . the perfect word of God” (p. 24). In short, both ancient Israel and America had “in a civil and political view . . . the best regulated commonwealth that ever the wisdom and goodness of God formed” (p. 24).

Three years later, in 1784, Huntington once again preached on the merits of the Hebraic constitution, this time before both houses of Connecticut’s legislature. With the war now over, a new era seemed to have commenced. According to the cleric, God had given America, “a land as fertile as the land of Canaan, and of much larger extent . . . the best civil constitution now in the world, the same in the general nature of it, with that he gave to Israel in the days of Moses.”55 The constitution Huntington referenced was not the federal Constitution of 1787, yet to be conceived, but the loose Articles of Confederation, finally ratified in 1781. The Articles established a congress that was, like ancient Israel’s “supreme council . . . chosen, by delegates from each [tribe], often called their Sanhedrim” (p. 24). With the war now over, Huntington found more reasons to revel in the similarities of the ancient and modern constitutions than he had a few years earlier. Not content with his novel numerology on the thirteen polities of America and Israel, Huntington determined that “our number of people is about the same with their’s [sic] in the days of Moses—i.e. about three millions” (p. 24). Huntington did not divulge the source for his figure, but the conforming number of Israelites and Americans underscored even more boldly the alleged similarity of the ancient and modern constitutions: the number of states-tribes (thirteen), the size of their populations, and the federal manner in

which the discrete parts of their polities were administered all matched.

In Huntington’s determined effort to build an American republic on an ancient Hebrew model, creative numerology was twinned with inventive nomenclature. He continued to insist that regardless of “the difference of names, titles and phrases,” a nuisance that failed to trouble him, the “substance of things is the same.” Thus, each Hebrew tribe (or American state) “managed its own internal police, each had a General Assembly, composed of their best men, at the free election of the people,” and each had its “executive courts and officers in various stations, for substance answering to ours” (p. 24). If Canaan was the Hebrews’ inheritance, Columbia, whose “southern dominions cover the same climate in which [the Israelites] dwelt,” was the Americans’ (p. 25). To the perennial ill of republics, those bodies-politic doomed in time to fail from corruption, Huntington offered a sanguine solution. Americans had only to “keep the commandments of our God. This will secure to us every blessing, and make us ‘high above all nations’” (p. 25). The republic would avoid political and moral degeneration, widely referred to as “the Machiavellian moment,” by embracing the Mosaic moment of godly republicanism.

As Massachusetts prepared to cast its vote for ratification of the federal Constitution, Samuel Langdon addressed the General Court, returning to the topic he had raised more than a decade before. As the title of his sermon indicates, Langdon believed that the republic of the Israelites provided “an example to the American States,” indeed to all nations. Although the Israelites had had “the advantage of applying to the oracle of the living God,” the Mosaic constitution, as recorded in Scripture, remained a superlative civic law and thus could “be

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considered as a pattern to the world in all ages” (p. 7). Some polities traditionally regarded the king’s “will . . . as a law”; others bent to “the capricious humour of the multitude” or to “senators and judges . . . left to act according to their best discretion” (p. 15). The Hebrew nation was the first to distribute authority among the one, the few, and the many and to instill the rule of law. Countering the common wisdom of eighteenth-century political discourse, Langdon thought Israel offered a better model of government than the much vaunted classical societies. Although Lycurgus had provided the Spartans with a set of laws, that system postdated Moses’ code by six centuries, and it was “imperfect,” even in some instances “absurd” (p. 15). And the laws of the Roman empire, even at the height of its glory, when its complex and effective legislation was “carried to great perfection,” were “far from being worthy to be compared with the laws of Israel” (p. 16).

Langdon went on to charge that Great Britain’s laws were “tediousness, voluminous bulk, intricacy, barbarous language, and uncertain operation of many of them as to equity” (p. 17). Not only did the laws of Israel antedate other exemplary systems by centuries and millennia (an especially important attribute in a culture still saturated with the legalistic language of “usage”), but they were also inherently superior, politically and morally, to any judicial code, ancient or modern. Yet the Israeliite republic offered America much more than a superb, time-proven legal code; ancient Israel, which was, according to one of its modern students, a “tribal federation in which the tribal leadership play[ed] a vital role,” embodied a federal constitution and so was especially instructive for an American nation about to adopt an innovative governing system. Langdon proposed that his fellow citizens “look over [the Israelis’] constitution and laws, enquire into their practice, and observe how their prosperity and fame depended on their strict observance of the divine commands both as to their government and religion” (p. 7)

58 Elazar, “The Book of Judges.”
Pursuing the wilderness theme that had long tied Massachusetts to Israel, Langdon noted that when fleeing from the Egyptians, the Israelites were merely an unruly multitude “without any other order than what had been kept up” during their captivity. After their escape, however, they were “suddenly collected into a body under the conduct of Moses.” Like the Americans declaring independence from their oppressors, the Israelites were reduced in a short span of time “into such civil and military order . . . [and] adapted to their circumstances in the wilderness while destitute of property” (p. 8). The necessary enforcement of that martial order was ensured when able men were chosen out of the tribes and made “captains and rulers of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens: and these commanded them as military officers, and acted as judges in matters of common controversy.” The Israelites’ quick progress “from abject slavery, ignorance, and almost total want of order, to a national establishment . . . from a mere mob to a regulated nation,” impressive, perhaps even miraculous, as it was, had since been replicated in America’s history of revolution and rapid movement toward a federal Constitution (p. 15).

Langdon recounted how God had commanded Moses to bring seventy men, “chosen from among the elders and officers, and present them at the tabernacle” so that they might share the burden of government with him. Thus, the American preacher concluded, a “senate” was constituted, “as necessary for the future government of the nation” (p. 9). Like Huntington before him, Langdon purposely conflated the American (or rather Latin) and Hebrew nomenclatures, senate with Sanhedrin. Conceding that political theory and practice had changed over the centuries (in biblical times, he pointed out, “the people in all republies were entirely unacquainted with the way of appointing delegates to act for them, which is a very excellent modern improvement in the management of republies” [p. 9]), he nonetheless underscored ways in which the Hebrews’ procedure for electing their “senate” corresponded with the process for forming modern assemblies. Even if they did not actually elect their representatives, Langdon declared, “doubtless the [Hebrew] people were consulted as to the choice
of this senate” (p. 9). The preacher indeed believed that the
Israelites had had a voice in public affairs “from time to time,”
when the “whole congregation [was] . . . called together on all
important occasions” (p. 9). The conclusion of Langdon’s con-
stitutional exegesis was foreseeable: the Hebrew government
was “a proper republic” (p. 9).

That biblical commonwealth was no simple republic, how-
ever, but a federacy. “Every tribe,” Langdon pointed out, “had
elders and a prince . . . with which Moses did not interfere”
(p. 9). Those tribal leaders had an acknowledged right to meet
and consult together and “with the consent of the congregation
do whatever was necessary to preserve good order, and promote
the common interest of the tribe” (p. 9). In short, according to
Langdon’s interpretation, the tribes resembled the American
states under the Constitution: they were quasi-autonomous,
semi-sovereign entities. Also as in the United States, the lo-
cal governments of the Israelite tribes were structurally “very
similar to the general government.” Each had “a president and
senate” at its head, while the whole of the Hebrew people
“assembled and gave their voice in all great matters” (p. 9).

With its courts, too, the Hebrew arrangement resembled the
American federal solution. The Israelites’ civil government in-
cluded, after their settlement in Canaan, courts “appointed in
every walled city” in which elders “most distinguished for wis-
dom and integrity were to be made judges, ready always to sit
and decide the common controversies within their respective
jurisdictions” (p. 10). The people of the separate tribes could
appoint “officers as they might think necessary for the more ef-
effectual execution of justice.” As with the complex, layered, and
hierarchical judiciary proposed for the American Constitution,
from the provincial Hebrew courts “an appeal was allowed in
weighty causes to higher courts appointed over the whole tribe,
and in very great and difficult cases to the supreme authority
of the general senate and chief magistrate” (p. 10).

The Hebrew republic was, as Langdon was at pains to show,
an apt blueprint for the United States’ federation. Its con-
stitution was “concise and plain, and easily applicable to al-
most every controversy” (p. 11). It had established a laudable
governmental structure, which was God-given. As the country contemplated the weighty matter of ratifying the Constitution presented to it, Langdon assured its citizens that the Hebrew political structure offered a reassuring historical example of the separation and balance of powers among the magisterial, legislative, and judicial spheres, between periphery and center, that reflected the people’s expectations (at least Federalists’ expectations) for their new government. The “perfect republic” could indeed be both faultless and republican—faultless not because it was God-given, but rather, because it was God-given, it was “founded on the plain immutable principles of reason, justice, and social virtue,” which perfected it to the utmost (p. 11).

The revolutionary discourse of the Hebraic constitution lends an American dimension to the study of political Hebraism just as political Hebraism adds a Hebraic dimension to the history of the formation of the American republic. Historians have long been aware that a number of intellectual trends—from the English liberal and jurisprudential traditions to civic humanism and the Scottish Enlightenment—were funneled into American constitutional thought during the founding era. If the contribution of political Hebraism still needs to be defined more precisely, perhaps, at the least, this essay has demonstrated that it deserves further study. In their effort to replicate the Hebrew republic’s tense duality—that is, as a self-governing body-politic that originated with God—Americans, in any case those New England ministers who have been quoted above, sought to extend the logic of their enterprise from settlement

59 Nathan Hatch noticed that clergymen “found republican ideals confirmed in the experience of Israel” and that they considered that confirmation significant because it gave the defense of liberty the full force of religious argument and provided an idiom for sustaining religious identities (Sacred Cause of Liberty, pp. 158–60). Hatch has not elaborated, however, on the significance of that idiom as a political discourse.

through nationhood, for, like the Jews, they seemed chosen and favored by God, and the government they were choosing for themselves was, like Israel’s, a federal republic. Thus, the discourse of the Mosaic constitution enabled those preachers, and presumably their receptive audiences, to frame and conciliate notions of chosenness with the emerging American federacy, of divine sanction with worldly politics. Seeing the American federal republic as historically and structurally connected to the ancient Hebrew republic calmed their anxieties and legitimized their actions.

Commenting on the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, historian Christopher Brown has noted that “in the study of ideas and ideologies . . . the import of marginal texts rests with their capacity to elucidate broader patterns in thought and argument, and sometimes less with their immediate influence or affect on contemporaries.”\[61\] Although it seems incongruous to describe a continuous, persistent, and adaptive discourse such as that of the Mosaic constitution in America as “marginal,” it does reflect larger processes and developments in revolutionary Americans’ patterns of thought and political imagination.\[62\] The discourse

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62 The discourse on the Hebrew republic was taking place in a number of forums, from formal sermons to newspaper essays. Thus, for example, an anonymous author in the *Connecticut Courant* of 19 February 1776 pointed out that the Hebrews enjoyed a “kind of republic administered by a judge and the elders of the tribes.” Others followed, such as “J. R.,” who a few months later argued that confederacy “enabled the twelve tribes of Israel to withstand the attacks of numerous and mighty enemies” (*Connecticut Courant*, 20 May 1776). Moreover, political Hebraism was still circulating in the antebellum era. Mordecai Noah’s attempt to “revive the Jewish government” in Grand Island, New York, in 1825 (see Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* [New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981], pp. 61–75), and E. C. Wines’s remark still decades later that the Hebrew constitution was “eminently republican” and that “whoever attentively considers the . . . Hebrew and American constitutions, cannot but be impressed with the resemblance between them. Their fundamental principles are identical, and many of the details of organization are the same or similar” (*Commentaries on the Laws of the Ancient Hebrews* [New York, 1855], p. 633), manifest the ongoing influence of the biblical political imagination in the United States. The historiography of classical influences on politics in early America is vast. For a recent addition, see my *Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University
on the Hebrew republic may not have generated a new political philosophy. Nonetheless, the repeated reference to and use of the constitutional history of biblical Israel, which spilled from the formal settings of sermons into other modes of public discourse and circulated in the United States long after the ratification of the Constitution, demonstrates how, while less religious minds turned to sources such as Greek and Roman annals or early modern European history to situate their endeavors in a historical context, pious New Englanders made use of the Hebrew precedent to reconcile their biblical commitments with the politics of Revolution. The ancient Jewish republic provided, contemporaries claimed, “an example,” “a general plan” of the “same in the general nature” as their own revolutionary endeavor, and thus they elevated their own historic moment with reference to the God-ordained Mosaic moment.63

Throughout the revolutionary period, New Englanders made use of the Hebraic republicanism they derived from European humanists and revolutionaries, and they perpetuated their forefathers’ exegetical habits by employing a language that betrayed typological inclinations to correlate ancient Israel and America. We have recently learned from a monograph by historian Jorge Canizares-Esguerra that the Puritans and their successors were not alone in understanding and justifying colonization as an act “foreordained by God, prefigured in the trials of the Israelites in Canaan.” According to this novel interpretation, English Calvinist and Spanish Catholic settlers were Atlantic “cultural twins,” each group equally “interested in developing typological readings of colonization.”64 But as stimulating

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63Langdon, The Republic of the Israelites, an Example to the American States, p. 2; Huntington, A Discourse Adapted to the Present Day, p. 11; Huntington, God Ruling the Nations, p. 24. Stout emphasizes that although we no longer think of America as New England writ large, we should not “understate the importance of New England’s religious culture to the evolving American republic” (New England Soul, p. 9).

64Canizares-Esguerra, Puritan Conquistadors, pp. 14, 72, 83.
as Canizares-Esguerra’s findings are, revolutionary-era New Englanders were still, in one sense at least, exceptional. They were the only people in the Atlantic basin who explained and came to terms with their governmental structures in light of those recorded in the scriptural texts that had guided their communities since the Great Migration. And so, as they set out to construct a wholly new form of government, they took heart from their forefathers, who had in turn drawn their courage from God’s Book and from the historic figures who populated it.

Eran Shalev is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Haifa, Israel. His book Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic is forthcoming from the University of Virginia Press in fall 2009. He is currently working on a monographic study tentatively titled “American Zion: Biblical Imagination and the Political Bible from the Revolution to the Civil War.”