



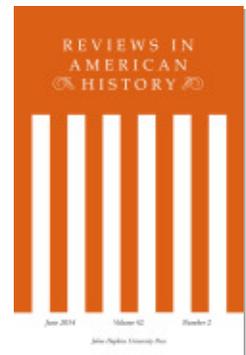
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OLD TESTAMENT REPUBLICANISM

Curtis D. Johnson

Eran Shalev. *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013. x + 239 pp. Notes and index. \$40.00 (cloth); \$28.00 (paper).

One of the most engaging essays I read in graduate school was Robert Bellah's 1967 article "Civil Religion in America."¹ In this seminal piece, Bellah explained how the Founding generation created a civil belief system that had all of the trappings of a religion, was vaguely unitarian, and espoused a deity that had a fondness for the United States of America. In his presentation, Bellah emphasized Enlightenment ideals, although he also noted the importance of ancient Israel. Nevertheless, I was troubled by not quite understanding how this American political religion developed historically. In the succeeding decades, eminent historians such as Ernest Tuveson, Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, Harry Stout, and Sacvan Bercovitch filled in many of the details missing from the Bellah piece. We should add Eran Shalev's name to this list of distinguished scholars, as his *American Zion* is a wonderful addition to the study of political religion in America's revolutionary and early national years.

American Zion is intellectual history at its finest. In this volume, Eran Shalev deftly traces the Old Testament's impact on republican thought, from its European origins through its flourishing in the American Revolutionary and early national periods, to its eventual decline in the decades before the Civil War. While other distinguished historians have alluded to the many themes, ideas, and images in *American Zion*, this study is unique in its singular book-length focus on and chronological description of the Old Testament's impact on American government and identity. Shalev uses a wealth of books, essays, sermons, pamphlets, and newspaper articles in making his case. Naturally, most of the written material comes from the well-educated upper class; however, Shalev also includes newspaper articles likely to have been read by a broad range of people. Perhaps his most fascinating examples are those involving people on the margins of society. Ever sensitive to regional variation, Shalev discusses documents produced up and down the Atlantic seaboard. While his efforts at producing a national rather than a Northern narrative aren't totally successful, the overall argument holds together nicely.

One of *American Zion's* strengths resides in what it is not. Because of his emphasis on the cultural and political impact of the Old Testament, Shalev bypasses previous historians' debates over the nature of republicanism. He also moves beyond current culture-war arguments over the Founders' orthodoxy, a subject expertly dissected in John Fea's *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* (2011). Instead Shalev shifts attention away from Christian doctrines and instead examines the impact of the Hebrew scriptures in shaping American political discourse and national identity.

Shalev's central argument is that biblical republicanism not only created a rationale for revolution, but made it possible for Americans to link the nation's fortunes to those of ancient Israel, thus assuring themselves that they, like the ancient Hebrews, had a special relationship with the Almighty. While elite Revolutionary leaders understood their cause in terms of classical republican ideals involving virtue and citizenship, such a discussion was unlikely to engage those with lesser education. However, the literate populace was well-versed in the Bible, thus making it possible for the leadership class to make classical republican arguments illustrated with biblical examples. Naturally, the foundation for this strategy was the Old Testament, as the Hebrew Bible was much more concerned with issues of statecraft than was the New Testament. The end result was the creation of a "biblical civic humanist language" that appealed to elite and common folk alike (p. 21).

The story begins with the American Revolutionaries and their use of multiple Old Testament tropes to justify their drive for political independence. The Hebrew scriptures had significant memorable, and malleable, material that could be used to support a host of arguments. Prior to 1776, when colonists were more inclined to blame their troubles on Parliament and the king's advisors than on George III, polemicists focused on unworthy subordinates such as Lord Bute, whose evil actions were supposedly done without the king's knowledge. Appropriately, anti-British critics used the story of Haman, a Persian subordinate who was seeking to destroy the Jews without King Ahasuerus' knowledge, to illustrate the villainy of British officials. The prescribed behavior for colonists was to resist imperial evil, even when done in the name of the king, much like Queen Esther and her ally Mordecai who foiled Haman's plot and set the stage for his execution.

While the Haman references continued in relation to British officials and generals, American revolutionaries shifted their arguments in new directions after independence had been declared. First, they used examples of evil rulers—such as Antiochus Epiphanes, who desecrated the Temple in the second century B.C.—as ancient parallels to George III. More importantly, they argued that ancient Israel was a republic and used biblical examples to prod colonists into joining the patriot cause. Numerous writers invoked the city of Meroz, which God cursed because it failed to join other Israelites in battle against the

Canaanites, as a warning to Loyalists unwilling to take up arms against the king. Furthermore, Hebrew piety was intermingled with classical civic virtue with the conflation of the biblical Gideon, the Roman Cincinnatus, and General George Washington—all righteous republicans who rejected the trappings of power offered to them after decisive military triumphs.

The leaders of the new American republic sought ongoing continuities with ancient Israel as they began to shape their newly formed republic. Drawing on the rapidly developing field of Hebraic political studies, Shalev contends that “the Old Testament was a significant intellectual sphere through which pre-Civil War Americans articulated and constructed their political and national consciousness” (p. 51). And, as it turned out, American leaders often drew literal parallels with the ancient Israelites. John Adams noted that, like the United States, “the government of the Hebrews, instituted by God, had a judge, the great Sanhedrim, and general assemblies of the people” (pp. 56–57). The existence of Israelite tribes paralleled the existence of American states, so much so that one Connecticut cleric, Joseph Huntington, proclaimed the existence of thirteen Hebrew tribes, thus perfecting the parallel. Lyman Beecher went so far as to say that the American appellate system could be discovered in Israel’s “constitution.” At this point, one must question Shalev’s larger argument, at least for this chapter. While the author has a wonderful array of primary sources, there is a significant regional imbalance—fifteen sources come from New England, seven originate in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, but only three come from the South (and only one of those was an eighteenth-century text). Judging from the sources used, the desire to see structural governmental parallels between the United States and ancient Israel appears to be largely a New England (and Calvinist) preoccupation that had a lesser influence on the Middle States and a marginal impact elsewhere.

“A Truly American Spirit of Writing,” Shalev’s third chapter, is the most intriguing section of the book. Here he discusses pseudobiblicism, the practice of writing the history of the United States using the language and style of the King James Old Testament. This literary practice had a profound cultural impact as it simultaneously reinforced the concept of America being divinely chosen and also served as a secularizing force. Shalev notes: “While the language of the Bible reiterated Americans’ understanding of their collective mission, it also positioned politics as the new religion of the republic” (p. 85). By the mid-eighteenth century, when Americans adopted pseudobiblicism from the British, the language of the King James Version was already archaic—which oddly added to its mystical authority. Americans wrote numerous pseudobiblical historical and political texts in the late eighteenth century, the most notable being Richard Snowden’s *The American Revolution: Written in the Style of Ancient History*. Not surprisingly, Federalists and Republicans used the pseudobiblical style when attacking each other in the early 1800s. Only in the Jacksonian period did the pseudobiblical style recede from popular usage.

At this point, one could ask whether a discussion of this heretofore relatively obscure subgenre is relevant to larger historical concerns. Shalev gives several convincing reasons for pseudobiblicism's importance, of which I will mention two. The use of sacred scripture for political ends could be seen as evidence of general secularization. Shalev writes that "only a society that took its distance from biblical language, if not from the religious truths it revealed, could sustain, indeed embrace, such use of sacred language for the needs of the present. The use of biblical language for secular purposes thus underscores that the Bible in late-eighteenth-century America was no longer a self-legitimizing text that affirmed itself as God's Word" (p. 90). Shalev makes an excellent point, although there is another possible interpretation. He notes repeatedly that pseudobiblicism involved the Old Testament, but not the New Testament. Perhaps the Second Great Awakening, with its focus on the New Testament and Jesus Christ, led American Protestants to see the Old Testament as less sacred than did their Calvinist forbearers.

Turning to the second reason for pseudobiblicism's importance, Shalev convincingly argues that the genre paved the way for the acceptance of the Book of Mormon. By the time Joseph Smith introduced his book to the public in 1830, Americans had already been immersed in a sea of pseudobiblical writings. As a resident of Palmyra, New York, Smith himself had ready access to descriptions of the American past written in the style of the King James Old Testament. Like many such texts, the Book of Mormon followed the convention of claiming to be translated from an ancient source. While Smith's critics assailed many aspects of the Book of Mormon, no one questioned his decision to use King James' language in his "translation" of the document.

If the United States was God's "new Israel," were there already Israelites among us? As Shalev points out, this question captivated Americans from Roger Williams, William Penn, Ezra Stiles, Thomas Jefferson, to Elias Boudinot—all of whom speculated that Native Americans were the descendants of the ancient Hebrews. By the early nineteenth century, the debate over Native origins led some observers to conclude that Amerindians were "perfect republicans" and that they, as ancient Hebrews, had come to America to flee tyranny and enjoy the liberty of self-government. Others painted a less sanguine version of this story, claiming that the Indians' aggressive behavior suggested they were the descendants of the tribe of Dan, a group known for its murderous tactics and for being the first tribe to fall away into idolatry. (Interestingly, most of the sources Shalev cites on this topic come from the North, which suggests that Southern whites were not particularly interested in theoretical questions about the origins of Native peoples.) The debate took a new turn in 1830, when the Book of Mormon steered the familiar topic of Amerindian origins in a novel direction. Meanwhile, Jewish leader Mordecai Manuel Noah was literally trying to create a Jewish homeland within the United States. His goal was to found a Hebrew city named Ararat on Grand Island, a few miles south of Buffalo,

New York. While Noah's efforts to create an American Zion collapsed in 1825, his example inspired Robert Matthews to assume the persona of the Prophet Matthias and attempt to create an Old Testament-style commune on American soil. Together, these disparate accounts illustrate the many ways Hebraic stories and imagery intertwined with Americans' conceptions of themselves in the early nineteenth century.

That which rises must eventually fall. In his fifth chapter, Shalev discusses how the New Testament eventually replaced the Old Testament in terms of political discourse, a process that began sometime around 1820 or 1830. He gives multiple reasons for this shift. The market revolution was a powerful secularizing presence. Furthermore, the United States had resolved many of its concerns regarding nation-building, so Hebrew parallels were no longer needed to justify governmental practices. But Shalev sees religious factors as even more important. The Methodists, who took America by storm in the early nineteenth century, emphasized Jesus as the most important figure in the Godhead. By mid-century, Roman Catholics, who clearly preferred the New Testament over the Old Testament, had become America's largest denomination. By contrast, Calvinists, the Protestants most interested in Old Testament/American parallels, went into decline compared to their evangelical and Catholic rivals.

Ultimately, slavery eroded the Old Testament's political influence in the North, the region that traditionally had given the Hebrew Bible its greatest support. Southern insistence that the Old Testament sanctioned slavery undercut enthusiasm for the Hebrew scriptures. Northern antislavery activists were forced to argue that Israelite slavery and American slavery were so fundamentally different that one could not be used to sanction the other, thus undermining a political tradition that sought to compare Israelite and American institutions. Furthermore, Northern abolitionists emphasized the New Testament, arguing that the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings indicated that loving one's neighbors (which would not include enslaving them) was foremost on Jesus' mind. African Americans raised the most serious problem of all. According to Shalev, "if the black American slaves played the role of the Israelites, which was the role that Americans traditionally assumed when co-opting the story of the Exodus, then the horrifying implication was that white Americans had become enslaving Egyptians" (p. 181). The Old Testament parallels, which had been comforting in the Revolutionary era, had by mid-century become so problematic that antislavery advocates shifted their attention to the New Testament. Ironically, Old Testament political parallels continued on most strongly in the black community, the group whose concerns were the most responsible for bringing political Hebraism to an end.

In conclusion, Eran Shalev's *American Zion* is a delightful book that can be used in many contexts. With its sophisticated analysis and thorough histori-

ography, it should be required for graduate seminars in American intellectual and cultural history. With its lively examples and fascinating historical connections, it could be used profitably in undergraduate history courses, either in part or as a whole. And for anyone interested in the origins of American exceptionalism, this is a must-read. Shalev concludes, "it seems safe to assume that a powerful outlook like that of the Old Testament biblicism in the United States' first half-century helped set major cultural processes on a course that would define much of the nation's later history. . . . It should not surprise us that so many of its citizens still ardently believe that God regards their nation with special favor" (p. 191).

Curtis D. Johnson is an associate professor of history at Mount Saint Mary's University. He is currently researching the evolution of Baptist community in western New York from 1790 to 1920.

1. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (Winter 1967): 1-21.