

The Bible and Political Thought

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ABSTRACTS (10 Sept 2018)

Early Jewish communities considered themselves governed by divine law revealed in the Torah of Moses. This political function of the Mosaic law is grounded in the Pentateuch itself, which narrates the origins of Israel and the people's constitution in their covenant with God at Mount Sinai. Early Christians considered themselves living in the 'kingdom of God', which brought them in conflict with Roman emperors' claims to divine veneration. When Roman emperors were themselves Christians, however, they were soon portrayed as new Davids and Solomons, a tradition continued by medieval kings. Biblical narratives were frequently invoked when nationalisms arose in the 16th-17th centuries, e.g., in the Netherlands, Scotland or England, claiming the respective 'nation' to be a divinely chosen people like Israel – a historical development that could be called, with Philip Gorski, 'the Mosaic Moment'. The early modern political reception of the Bible is a climax in a complex genealogy of biblical political thought and its reception over more than two millennia. This conference will explore the political dimension of the Bible in exemplary themes from its emergence in the world of the ancient Near East to the present day.

Athens and Jerusalem: A Comparison of the Political Theory of Plato's NOMOI and the Hebrew Torah

Eckart Otto, LMU Munich

The legal corpora of the Torah in the Covenant Code in Exodus 20-23 and the Book of Deuteronomy and Plato's political philosophy of the Politeia, Politicos and Nomoi aimed at answering the question of how to keep societies together in Israel and Greece. These societies were in danger of falling to pieces, especially because of unsolved social tensions. Both groups of texts developed strategies of how to organize the economy, minimizing the tensions between poor and rich and limiting the political power of officials.

The Literary Compositions of the Hebrew Bible as Documents of Ancient Political Thought. An Overview and a Tentative Synthesis

Wolfgang Oswald, University of Tübingen

Most books of the Hebrew Bible have Israel as their main subject. How did Israel come into being? How was Israel organized? Who was part of Israel? Who was in power? Some literary works in the Hebrew Bible accept monarchy as the traditional form of government and merely discuss the legitimacy of dynasties. Others restrict the power of the king while some even deny the legitimacy of monarchy at all. And still others imagine an ideal king to come. Some literary works in the Hebrew Bible do not show awareness or acceptance of written laws. Others, on the contrary, are constitutions defining a society based on written laws. Still others accept written laws but qualify their validity. What was the role of the people? Were they merely subjects of the king or did they make up the popular assembly, i.e. the legislative body? Who was the sovereign? The great king from abroad as for example Cyrus or the indigenous king from Judah as David and the Davidides? The governor as Gedaliah or Nehemiah or some prophet-like figure as Jeremiah? The high-priest? Or no human being at all but the law as the book of Deuteronomy demands? Or God himself without any mediation as Psalm 146 declares? In this paper I shall trace these lines of political thought in the Hebrew Bible. Since these voices interact it seems possible to reconstruct a discourse that continued for more than three centuries.

The Use and the Abuse of the King Solomon Figure in Traditions

Peter Dubovský, PBI

King Solomon became the key figure for discussion and art both in the ecclesiastical and secular world. The figure was used for exhortative goals and abused for ideological purposes. This paper will apply the hermeneutical approach proposed by John W. O'Malley who organized the Western tradition into "Four Cultures". Following this model, I will organize the interpretations of Solomon into four groups: academic, prophetic, humanistic, and artistic cultures. By doing so, I will argue how the same figure was used in dialogue and war.

Romans 13: Paul and Politics

Oda Wischmeyer, University of Erlangen

Romans 13 has been the focus of theological thought on politics since the church fathers. During the last decades a new debate on how to read Romans 13 has been launched. At present, New Testament scholars heavily disagree about both the meaning of Rom 13:1-7 and the possible hermeneutical applications of the Pauline text. Whilst Stefan Krauter in his exegetical study on Romans 13 (2009) bluntly denies the relevance of Romans 13 for theologically based political ethics, eminent scholars from the last generation such as Helmut Koester and Dieter Georgi and in their wake contemporary colleagues as Neil Elliott and Richard A. Horsley read especially the Letter to the Romans as a political text. In "Liberating Paul" Neil Elliott interprets Romans as a manifesto of a sort of liberation theology.

In my paper I shall try for a fresh exegetical look at the text and for a hermeneutical reflection that takes into consideration the many-faceted *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the famous chapter. The possibilities for contemporary applicative readings of Romans 13 range from affirmative interpretations to revolutionary approaches. Application largely depends on the political systems at issue – Western democracies or totalitarian systems like China or illegitimate states or governments like various states in the global South. Western exegesis has to reflect that perhaps Paul's ideas of Roman governance have a different meaning according to the opposing political reality of many of our present regimes. At any rate, current politically oriented critical application of Romans 13 should not be restricted to our Western experiences and political values and directed to the model of democracy, but also discuss the status of Christianity in what we call dictatorial or illegitimate regimes and explore ways of reading and applying Romans 13 under these kinds of conditions.

Sinai versus Rome: Rabbinic Perspectives on Roman Law Courts and Roman Justice

Katell Berthelot, CNRS Aix-en-Provence

Although Rome did not impose its laws upon the conquered peoples it came to dominate, Roman law and Roman courts were part of Rome's imperial presence, both from an ideological and a practical point of view—because the Romans claimed to have the best legal system ever written, and because some of Rome's provincial subjects practiced what is commonly called "forum shopping," and tried to have their case judged by a Roman court rather than by a local one. After 212 CE the phenomenon became all the more common as nearly all free people had become Roman citizens.

In this context, I would like to examine the few sources that explicitly reflect the rabbis' rejection of Roman or, more broadly, non-Jewish courts and laws during the tannaitic period, and then proceed with the analysis of the underlying religious or theological rationale for this rejection, arguing that some rabbis at least associated non-Jewish law courts with idolatry, a statement that has deep implications for a proper understanding of the rabbis's political counter-model in the context of the Roman Empire.

Crusade and Reform – Biblical Exegesis and the Role of Crusading within Broader Papal Policy

Nicholas Morton, Nottingham Trent University

It is very easy to view crusading as a highly distinct activity in medieval society – individual, and separate from other aspects of Church policy. It has certainly been studied as a discreet entity for decades. Even so, the biblical imagery employed by the pope and other crusading preachers tells a different story. In their sermons, letters and bulls, such advocates of crusading drew upon exegetical themes which immediately connected crusading to a range of other activities such as: resistance to secular authority, internal peacemaking within Europe, the moral reform of society. Thus, such biblical material demonstrates the synergies between crusading and other such activities. This paper will explore several key biblical themes found in crusading sources, focusing especially on passages from Ezekiel, Maccabees, the gospels, as well as some pan-biblical themes to demonstrate how a study of such exegetical material can shed considerable light on the way in which crusading was conceived and understood by the medieval church.

Biblicisation without Templates, or Accidents of the Biblical in Sixteenth Century Mesoamerica

Yvonne Sherwood, University of Kent

This paper explores how alien landscapes and cultures were understood through biblical analogies in the work of 16th and early 17th century Spanish and mestizo authors such as José d'Acosta, Diego Durán, Guaman Poma, Bartolomé de las Casas, and Bernardino de Sahagún. In contrast to the more secure and self-affirming use of the Bible in the Victorian Empire, the Bible was mapped onto Mesomerica in surprising, bleak, and often self-critical ways.

The Bible and Politics. How to Analyse a Complex Relationship?

Dominik Markl, PBI

The Bible contains political thought, for example in elements of constitutional law in the Pentateuch, in the historiography of Israel's leaders, and in reflections on imperialism in both narratives and prophecy. The political reception of the Bible, however, has not been limited to intrinsic political thought, but has included legal ideas and ethical values expressed in diverse literary modes. This is just one of the reasons why the political use of the Bible has been complex and diverse. This paper will outline a theory of the reception of canonical, sacred literature to propose a framework for analysis of its specific political use, which will be illustrated by historical and contemporary examples.

The Eye-Sore of the Bible: Varieties of Political Radicalism in Seventeenth Century England

Kevin Killeen, University of York

This paper will deal with the bible in the political and popular thought of the post-reformation era. It will attend, firstly, to the ubiquity of the scriptural in early modern English culture, its diffusion in the vernacular, and a pervasive sermon culture. It will consider the remit of the political-scriptural, in an era that deployed the Bible to such varied ends, eschatological, soteriological and doctrinal. The paper will attend to the frequent and perhaps baffling elision of radical (in the sense of regicidal) writing, both Catholic and Protestant, and it will explore the co-existence of the belief that Catholics distrusted and maligned the Bible and the concern that they were troublingly adept in their exegesis. Looking at the Jesuit Robert Persons, it will make the case that his work was troubling for his Protestant adversaries less because he claimed that the spiritual censure of Rome had a bearing on English kingship, than because he claimed the Bible did, usurping, if not satirising, the discursive ground that Protestants considered rightfully theirs, by making of it a language of thorough-going political sedition.

The Trouble with Prophets: A Political Problem from Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty to Thomas Hobbes

Joachim J. Krause, University of Tübingen

A classic of early modern political thought and champion of the political reception of the Bible, in his *magnum opus* “Leviathan or, The Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil,” Thomas Hobbes gives a full account of religion and politics. The book features a whole range of major biblical issues, most of them from the Old Testament. A child of unstable times, Hobbes' main motivation as a political thinker and interpreter of the Bible is to conceive a theory of politics which will help to prevent unrest and civil war. Key to this matter, in his view, is to defuse confessional conflict. For this end, he advocates a radical reduction of the creed to an *unum necessarium*: “Jesus is the Christ.” Bringing thus the Bible into political thought, Hobbes provides a prime example for the historian of ideas. It was Carl Schmitt who, in his “Political Theology,” argued that all important ideas of modern political reasoning were secularized theological ideas. Engaging Schmitt, Jan Assmann suggests to invert this train of thought. According to him, the important ideas of theological reasoning are theologized political ideas. However, Assmann does not simply turn Schmitt's reconstruction on its head. Rather he seeks to expand it by its prehistory. In this venture, Hobbes' work may be cited as a case in point. This will become obvious when we, as the present paper suggests, focus on a particularly delicate problem for statecraft throughout the ages: the trouble with prophets. Given that his main goal is to invest the sovereign with enough power so as to be able to keep the war of everyone against everyone at bay, Hobbes clearly perceives prophecy as a source of political instability. Therefore he postulates two essential characteristics of a true prophet: the true prophet will work miracles which in fact take place and will teach no other religion than the one already established in the state. As is plain to see, Hobbes draws on Deuteronomy 13 here, and in fact he repeatedly cites the injunctions given in that chapter. While at first glance it might appear that in so doing, the early modern political thinker has secularized a theological idea into a political one, when we look further for the prehistory of Deuteronomy 13 and the idea itself, namely the Assyrian succession treaty of Esarhaddon, it will become obvious that, in a way, Hobbes only ties in with the more original meaning of the argument.

The Bible and the Antislavery Movement

John Coffey, University of Leicester

The Bible was both a liability and an asset for the abolitionist movements that emerged in America, Britain and France during the later eighteenth century. For centuries, Scripture had been used to defend slavery, and abolitionists were forced to counteract proslavery exegesis. Yet the Bible could also be deployed against racism, slave trading and even slavery itself. Scripture was cited to demonstrate the fundamental unity and equality of human persons regardless of race; God's judgment against injustice; and the divine imperative to ‘release the oppressed’. Biblical texts were emblazoned on antislavery banners, inscribed on medallions, and quoted in speeches, sermons, pamphlets, and verse. This paper will examine the abolitionist use of the Bible from the mid-eighteenth century to contemporary anti-trafficking movements, arguing that while Scripture was a powerful resource, abolitionists and proslavery activists were fighting a battle for the Bible that led some to question biblical authority.

The Mobilization of Biblical Israel in First World War Biblical Scholarship

Andrew Mein, Durham University

The outbreak of war in August 1914 saw a spate of patriotic publication by academics on both sides. Biblical scholars were no exception to this rule, and the national and martial focus of the Old Testament gave it fresh relevance to the crisis of a world at war. In this paper I will examine some of the ways in which British and German scholars made biblical Israel a model for the modern nation at war, and how their reflection played into the typical themes of wartime propaganda.

The Hebrew Bible, Politics, and Modern Israel

Fania Oz-Salzberger, University of Haifa and the Paideia Institute, Stockholm

This paper begins by suggesting a typology of several modes in which the Hebrew bible was politicised in the history of ideas. Focusing on the Israeli test case, it explores the vast array of Biblical rhetoric and inspirations in Zionist and Israeli ideologies, history and politics. It proceeds to analyse some of the complex impacts of Biblical language, poetics, law and moral philosophy across Israel's political spectrum.

“The Lord Alone Shall be King of America”: Hebraism and the Republican Turn of 1776

Eric Nelson, Harvard University

It is well known that Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* fueled an abrupt “republican turn” in American political thought during the early months of 1776. Less well understood is that it did so by reintroducing into Anglophone political discourse a seventeenth-century, Hebraizing tradition of republican political theory, one grounded in the conviction that it is idolatrous to assign any human being the title and dignity of a king. This theory was both more and less radical than more familiar forms of European republicanism: more radical, in that it denied the legitimacy of all monarchies, however limited; less radical, in that it left open the possibility of an extremely powerful chief magistrate, so long as he was not called “king.” The history of American constitutionalism and the history of Christian Hebraism turn out to be deeply intertwined.

The Bible in the American Revolution and the American Civil War: A Comparison with Selected Texts

James P. Byrd, Vanderbilt University

In this presentation, James P. Byrd offers insights from his analysis of scripture in the American Revolution and the Civil War. He has published a book on the Bible in the American Revolution, and he is currently writing a book on the Bible and the American Civil War, both with Oxford University Press. His methodology draws on a database analysis of biblical citations in these wars, taken from a variety of sources, including sermons, diaries, newspapers, and soldiers' letters and journals. Byrd will examine selected texts that most influenced Americans in these wars, and will show how they contributed to American ideas of violence, civil religion, and “manifest destiny.”