

# Shepherds and Farmers

## *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*

BY YORAM HAZONY  
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286 pages

Reviewed by MATT ABELSON

**I**N THE opening chapter of his new book, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, Yoram Hazony laments that “the Hebrew Bible remains a closed book for the overwhelming majority of educated men and women.” His lament is certainly deserved, particularly when it comes to American Jews. Their education in non-Jewish matters may be deep, but their overall knowledge of Jewish texts tends to be distressingly thin. For this population in particular, Hazony’s book provides an exciting, highly readable introduction to the tenach.

Hazony discusses two historical and eschatological legacies that have done a disservice to Hebrew Scripture and continue to alienate otherwise knowledgeable Americans from it. First was the Christian perspective of the “Old Testament,” which determined that the core of its divine message had to do with the witnessing of miraculous events—a focus that unfortunately accentuated the differences between reason and revelation, science and faith. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul declares that the Christian’s

responsibility is to testify to the fact of Jesus’s resurrection. Once the New Testament established this focus, many readers of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, could not help but read the latter in the same way as they read the former—as a text whose primary purpose is “to witness” God’s performance of miracles rather than God’s presentation of the law. That view of the purpose of divine texts had an impact on modern thinkers such as Immanuel Kant in the 18th century and Bertrand Russell in the 20th, who came to hold the Hebrew Bible in low regard because they viewed it through the Christian lens.

Second was the Grecophilia of the 19th century, which cast Greek civilization as *the* source of ancient political and moral truth and wantonly depicted the heritage of the Jews as unworthy of serious study. The philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, a founder of the University of Berlin, wrote, “It is only in [the Greeks] that we find the ideal which we ourselves would like to be and to bring forth.” At the same time, Germans were pioneering so-called source-critical biblical study, which discerned multiple authors of biblical texts over centuries—thereby calling into question the deliverance of the tenach from on high and casting Judaism as nothing more than a human invention. Although the majority of university-educated people today are not avid readers of the New Testament and Grecophilia is no longer the rage in academia, this background in the academic work that consigned the truths of the Torah to the ash-heap

of history helps explain Hazony’s determination to peel away previous interpretations and simply consider the text of the tenach as it is—and as a unified philosophical whole.

Hazony offers a description of the relationship between the Law of Moses and the “History of Israel,” the narrative that begins with Genesis and continues through the second book of Kings. The Mosaic law cannot be “understood without reference to the narratives in which it is embedded,” he writes. “In fact, one does not have to read too far to realize that the law of Moses is dependent on these narratives for its force and for its significance.”

The best example of Hazony’s approach is his discussion of “the contest of leadership” between Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Judah, and Joseph—five of the patriarch Jacob’s 12 sons. Each exemplifies a competing model by which a society can organize and govern itself so as to ensure its well-being, security, and prosperity. Hazony writes: “The construction of schemes of concepts based on contrasting character types is one of the techniques the biblical narrative uses to establish concepts of a general nature.”

Shimon and Levi are the infamous avengers of their sister Dinah’s rape by a neighboring Hittite. The two brothers demonstrate a commitment to justice that quickly deteriorates into reckless violence; they trick the Hittites into circumcision and then slaughter the tribe as its men are recuperating.

Joseph’s ascent from the Egyptian jailhouse to the palace, where he is Pharaoh’s most trusted adviser, is one of the most famous narratives in the Bible. It reveals Joseph as a character type whose accommodation to the needs and behavior of an imperial power such as Egypt is admirable—but calls his authenticity as a man into question.

What is most striking, however,

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about Hazony's analysis is how he identifies Levi's and Joseph's personalities through the portraits of their descendants. Moses is from the tribe of Levi, and in his willingness to kill an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew, Hazony sees the same character trait—a commitment to justice that leads to recklessness. Meanwhile, he argues, Joseph's character is the same as King Solomon's. Both are fabulously successful rulers, but their success is connected to their neglect of the values for which their ancestors, the patriarchs, stood. "Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter reminds us of Joseph's marriage to the daughter of a prominent Egyptian priest," Hazony writes. "Solomon's forced conscription of the population of the land in building projects reminds us of Joseph's enslavement of Egypt."

As this discussion of the "contest of leadership" shows, Hazony is convincing when he argues that the Bible can be read as "an investigation into the nature of the moral and political order in general"—that is to say, philosophically, without a prior commitment to the idea that the Bible was delivered to man by God.

More problematic is Hazony's use of archetypes to make his argument. He identifies two kinds of characters in the tenach, shepherds and farmers, and asserts that the text argues that the ethics of the shepherd are superior to those of the farmer. Shepherds—Abel, Abraham, David—are nomadic and independent and disobey the state's demands and strictures. The essence of their "outsider ethics" is a commitment to placing their well-being and that of their families above all else. Farmers such as Cain, notes Hazony, are pious and submissive—obedient to God's decree in Genesis chapter three that man will "till the soil" upon his banishment from the Garden of Eden. These characteristics are

central to the farmer's ethics and it is no coincidence that farmers form the backbone of imperial states such as Babylonia and Egypt. Ultimately, the story of Israel proves to be an argument against the dangers of the imperial state, so by implication the shepherd's ethics are to be preferred over the farmer's.

The diversity of the tenach's characters, however, militates against such a generalized reading. Hazony's dichotomy leaves out such key types as the warrior—for example, Joshua—or the priest, who plays an important role in both the crafting and the content of Leviticus. Before one can come to the conclusion that "the God of Israel loves those who disobey for the sake of what is right"—emblematic of the shepherd's behavior—one must take into account how these other characters act as well. In the case of the priests, who administer the offering of sacrifices in the Temple, obedience is crucial to their notion of living in accord with the proper moral and political order. If the Bible is making a unified philosophical argument about what constitutes the good for human beings, as Hazony asserts, then a more complex accounting of the varieties of behavior that evoke the God of Israel's love is required. Hazony has not finished the job here.

*The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* should be seen as part of a larger polemical project. Though it makes no Zionist claims, it is best understood as part of a noble tradition of Zionist thought. Zionism has always enjoyed a special relationship with the tenach. For a Zionist intellectual like Mica Berdyczewski or a political actor like David Ben-Gurion, the Bible was at the heart of the Zionist enterprise not only because it was composed in Israel, but because it possesses a raw, energetic, and vigorous ethos. Often implicit for these figures in their adop-

tion of the Bible was a rejection of the relevance of the Babylonian Talmud, which dominated the experience of the Jewish people from its redaction in the 600s until at least the late 1800s. This was necessary for them because the Talmud was, at its core, an effort to harmonize Jewish belief and practice, often derived from the Bible, with Jewish rootlessness. With the forced diaspora at an end, they believed, it was time to return to the empowering original.

In Israel during the 1950s and 1960s, the tenach occupied an elevated position in Israeli national life. In secular schools, it was taught as both national history and literature. Its land-based orientation and martial exemplars formed the foundation of the burgeoning Israeli sabra identity. So powerful was its force in Israeli national life that religious Zionist yeshivas adopted the practice of privileging the Bible over the Talmud in a manner that was nothing less than a revolutionary change from the classical yeshiva curriculum. One of the outcomes was the religious Zionist movement Gush Emunim, which based its program for establishing communities in Judea and Samaria on a certain reading of the tenach.

Hazony, who was born in Israel but raised and educated in America before returning home and founding the groundbreaking think tank the Shalem Center, has devoted his career to the project of finding the commonality between Western philosophical traditions and the faith and history of the Jewish people. One can therefore see *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, with its strengths and its telling flaws, as part of an ongoing effort to maintain the centrality of the tenach in the national culture and public life of the state of Israel—and in the non-religious thinking public in the West as well. ▶