

Illinois Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Robert Erlewine

Summer June, 2015

Book Review: The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture, by Yoram Hazony

Robert Erlewine, *Illinois Wesleyan University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/robert_erlewine/14/

Politics and Religion, Volume 8, Issue 2, June 2015, pp 409-411
Religion and Politics Section of the American Political Science Association, 2015

Book Review

The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture. By Yoram Hazony. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 388 pp. \$79.99 cloth, \$27.99 paper

Robert Erlewine
Illinois Wesleyan University

Whether read as a prefiguration of the New Testament or as an inferior correlate to the cultural products of ancient Greece, the Hebrew Scriptures have often been explained away or vilified. Rarely have they been taken seriously as a source and product of reason. This is the task that Yoram Hazony sets for himself in this ambitious work. Rejecting biblical criticism, which he sees as not only unhelpful but informed by a legacy of anti-Semitism, and seeking to free the text from the so-called reason/revelation dichotomy that he attributes to Christianity, Hazony offers "a gateway" to "the enterprise of retrieving the ideas of biblical authors, bringing them into a more open dialogue with the ideas of the Western philosophical tradition than has been possible until now" (21).

Yet in this formulation, the central problem that plagues this book can already be discerned. By blithely dismissing the use of source criticism, and by trivializing the reason/revelation distinction as a Christian curio, Hazony underestimates the complexity of making philosophical sense out of the Bible. He is not wrong that the origins of biblical studies were steeped in anti-Semitism. But scholars in this field also recognized certain problems and difficulties in the texts themselves. The biblical text is filled with gaps, repetitions, ruptures, references to extra-textual material, all of which make source criticism and other methods developed by biblicalists indispensable. Hazony gets around most of these textual problems by pretending they do not exist. For example, he claims that the Pentateuch, prophetic works, and Deuteronomic history (the "History of Israel") occupy the clear center of the Hebrew Scriptures, without noting the vast disparities in genre between the various books in this "History." Similarly, Hazony elides the many textual anomalies that sparked exegesis not only in Christian and Jewish traditions, but also in the modern historical critical study of the Bible. Through recourse to phrases like "it seems to me" and "as far as I am aware," Hazony fails to address well-informed and rigorously elaborated positions that contradict his own. Indeed, while biblical scholarship has come a long way in addressing its anti-Semitic origins, Hazony casually dismisses all such scholarship as rooted "in the unspoken, or even unconscious, assumption that the biblical author's point of view on subjects of interest to them must necessarily be a primitive one" (79).

Hazony's account rests on a claim that the "History of Israel" offers a typological split between the farmer and the shepherd. While the farmer is loyal and piously faithful, the shepherd is fiercely independent. Unlike the farmer, for the shepherd, "[t]he fact that God has decreed it ... does not make it good. His response is the opposite of submission: He resists with

ingenuity and daring, risking the anger of man and God to secure improvement for himself and for his children" (108). Apparently, the Bible prefers this anarchic pastoral life of the shepherd. This marks the superiority of the Bible to Greek culture and ancient Near Eastern cultures, which emphasized the priority of the state to all else. But on such a model, God is curiously absent, except as a figure encouraging inquiry.

Hazony acknowledges that the Bible is notably ambivalent about the issue of kingship. In 1 Samuel 8:7, in reference to the people's desire to have a king, God tells Samuel to "listen to the voice of the people, in everything they say to you." Hazony emphasizes God's reluctance to found a state, offering instead an account that grounds the state both in the people's will and in the value-independence of divine justice, which puts a check on both the king and the people. Such a limited state, "whose rulers must take into account the possibility that if they go too far in the pursuit of evil, God's agreement to the continued existence of their kingdom will be withdrawn," is in keeping with the shepherd's ethics (152). Unfortunately, it is not in keeping with the Bible itself. For example, 1 Samuel 12:15 insists that the king and the people are in a strict covenant -- reminiscent of Deuteronomy -- so that "if you will not heed the voice of the WRD, but rebel against the commandment of the WRD, then the hand of the WRD will be against you and your king."

This is only one of many idiosyncratic conclusions in Hazony's book that fly in the face of standard and rudimentary readings of the Bible (Jewish, Christian, or secular). His single-minded emphasis on the shepherd/farmer typological dichotomy underplays not only the role of God in the Bible, but God's role in shaping the Israelite state. Indeed, his account of the shepherd as fiercely independent and self-interested goes against a reading of the surface of the Deuteronomic narrative, in which human flourishing rests almost entirely upon keeping God's commandments. The only way Hazony can justify his readings is by radically transforming the God of the Hebrew Bible, so that God is no longer an agent in history who is deeply tied to the people of Israel.

In and of itself, reading the Bible through a naturalizing hermeneutic is not a problem. Indeed, many great figures of modern Jewish thought, such as Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber, not only engaged in biblical criticism, but also sought to reinterpret the Bible for modernity. However, unlike Hazony, they were quite conscious of introducing their own hermeneutic to the text; they never pretended that they were merely offering a straightforward reading of it. More upsetting than Hazony's failure to set an example of cross-disciplinary conversations between philosophers, biblicists, and political theorists is this fundamental lack of self-consciousness, as if anyone might think that we could just set aside history and uncover the true meaning of the biblical text.