FOREWORD

Aaron Wildavsky's *Moses as Political Leader* was the first book-length study of the political thought of the Bible by a contemporary scholar of politics. The reissuing of this pathbreaking work, coinciding with the twentieth anniversary of its original publication in 1984, offers us an opportunity to take stock of what has—and what has not—taken place in the fledgling discipline of Jewish political studies in the two decades since then.

To get such a picture, one must begin by coming to terms with the same phenomenon that greeted Wildavsky when he began writing about Moses: Strange as it may seem, political thought and the history of political ideas are taught in most universities almost without reference to the Hebrew Bible. One may consult virtually any textbook on the subject, but in this respect they are almost always the same. Political philosophy is presented as a tradition that begins in pre-Socratic Greece, and proceeds from there to Plato and Aristotle, to the Greek and Roman philosophic schools, and to the political thought of Christianity, as found in the New Testament and the writings of the Church fathers. The intellectual story line then continues through medieval political thought such as that of Thomas Aquinas, and finally the modern philosophies of writers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. This is the

case in traditional presentations of the canon such as that of George Sabine. But it is also true of more recent revisions of the canon such as those proposed by Leo Strauss and Sheldon Wolin.[1] Regardless of where one looks, one is presented with a picture that treats the contribution of the Hebrew Bible to the political ideas of the West in a few dismissive sentences, or else with none at all.

What is wrong with such a presentation of history? There are at least two problems with it. The first is strictly *historical* in nature. As a matter of empirical fact, the Western tradition of political thought seems to have developed in constant dialogue with, and under the constant influence of, the Hebrew scriptures. This is certainly true of the authors of the New Testament, the Church fathers, and later Christian political thinkers. But it is at least as true of early modern writers such as Bodin, Cunaeus, Grotius, Selden, Milton, Hobbes, Harrington, and Locke, whose work is the basis for the modern state, and all of whom make extensive reference to the Hebrew scriptures in their political writings.[2] Even Rousseau seems to have tried his hand at the political interpretation of Hebrew scripture.[3] In all these cases, we find the thinkers of the West struggling to gain an understanding of politics with the assistance of the Hebrew Bible. Yet there is almost no echo of this intellectual effort in the history of Western political ideas.

But underlying this strictly historical problem is another, deeper issue, which comes into sight as soon as one tries to understand *why* there is no reference to the Hebrew Bible in the traditional picture of the history of Western political thought. What is it, exactly, that prevents the Bible from being treated as "political philosophy"? After all, it seems to be preoccupied with precisely those matters that are of concern to political theorists: War and peace, justice and injustice, rulers and ruled, obedience and disobedience, power and right, individual and state, empire and anarchy. Moreover, these topics are not treated in an arbitrary fashion. It is difficult to read the biblical texts without being impressed that there are messages and insights the authors intended to teach concerning these subjects. On its face, then, it would seem that there must be a biblical political teaching, something that could be called the "political philosophy of the Hebrew Bible," and that could be compared to the political philosophy of other classic and modern sources. Yet if there is such a thing, hardly anyone seems to know what it might be.

The absence of the Hebrew Bible from the study of political thought is thus a historical problem, but it rests on a second, *philosophical* problem—the question of what can be considered a legitimate source of political and moral truth. Clearly, there is some hesitation concerning the texts of the Bible that places them beyond the pale. To be sure, almost everyone seems willing at least to pay lip service to the notion that what we call the West is a civilization based on the fusion of Hebraic and Greek ideas. Yet the Hebraic contribution is generally relegated to a narrow band of theological concepts. Some unnamed barrier prevents the political ideas of the Bible, as well as the historical influence of these ideas, from being deemed a subject worthy of systematic study.

This unwillingness to treat the political teachings of the Hebrew Bible seriously stems, it seems, from the general devaluation of the Bible as a source of truth—a trend associated with Spinoza and the more radical wing of the Enlightenment, but which has now become widely accepted even by those who have never given the matter much thought. At the heart of this view is an account of the Bible that follows medieval philosophy in making a sharp distinction between those works that are the product of *revelation*, and those that are the product of *reason*. But whereas medieval thinkers hoped to show that both revelation and reason could lead to the truth, Enlightenment thinkers discounted revelation and implied that reason alone should be the basis for man's search for truth. Such a way of thinking had an immediate and dramatic result: As a book that had been traditionally considered a work of "reason," Plato's *Republic*, for example, was held to be worthy of being studied for the truths it might contain; whereas the biblical Book of Judges, which had been held to be a work of "revelation," was deemed unworthy of being studied for the truths it might contain. This manner of evaluating the worth of various books has proven to be one of the most enduring prejudices of the Enlightenment. And it is this prejudice that has apparently determined what ideas are to be taught as "philosophy," and what influences are to be regarded as meaningful in the history of ideas, for over two hundred years.

Now, this point of view suffers from a troubling internal contradiction. For it insists on maintaining a distinction between revelation and reason, even as it denies that there ever was such a thing as revelation. It says, in other words: Let us assume that there never was any such thing as

revelation, so that all books are equally works of the human mind. But then, having said that all books are equally works of the human mind, it reimposes the supposedly discredited category of revelation in order to refer to those works of the human mind that can be known, a priori, not to be the source of truths worth considering. Thus it transpires that what was once an honorific, used by God-fearing individuals to grant a special status to their most cherished books, is maintained even up to the present day as an empty stigma, whose purpose is to demarcate a class of works from which it is believed we can learn nothing.

In this, the heritage of the Enlightenment, as it has existed until recently in many academic disciplines, is very far from a consistent humanistic approach, which seeks wisdom and insight wherever it is to be found. Such an approach would wish to judge each and every work by the worth of its content, rather than by the label that was applied to it in a bygone age. Such an approach would set aside the medieval distinction between revelation and reason, and study the Bible without prejudice, and with an eye to what wisdom and insight may be found in the text.

Such an approach has been long in coming. But its time has finally come. The last generation has seen a gradual but pronounced movement away from the certitude that the Hebrew Bible deserves the stigma that has been attached to it for the past two centuries. In a number of academic disciplines, it has become increasingly acceptable for scholars to entertain the hypothesis that the books of the Bible were the product of intelligent and reasonable minds, and that they can in fact be studied for the wisdom they reflect and the truths they contain. In the area of political thought, this change in intellectual atmosphere began to make itself felt two decades ago as the result of the pioneering books of Aaron Wildavsky, followed by those of Michael Walzer, Daniel Elazar, and others.

As far as I am aware, the first contemporary effort to make a systematic study of the Jewish political tradition, including the political thought of the Bible, took place in academic seminars conducted by Daniel Elazar in the late 1970s. But the possibility of a systematic exposition of the political thought of the Bible was not demonstrated to a broad audience until the publication of Aaron Wildavsky's *Moses as Political Leader* (1984), and of Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* (1985). These book-length treatments of the political career of Moses

offered a modern academic audience the first glimpse of the intellectual depth underlying the thesis that the Hebrew Bible is a significant political work. These works, buttressed by the outstanding reputation of the scholars who stood behind them, opened the way to what has since become a steadily growing movement towards the reclamation of the Hebrew Bible in the study of politics.

Aaron Wildavsky came to the study of Moses after he was already among the world's most respected political scientists. Born in Brooklyn in 1930 to a family of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants, he received his undergraduate education at Brooklyn College, went on to study at the University of Sydney on a Fulbright scholarship, and then to Yale University, where he received his doctorate in 1958. After teaching for a few years at Oberlin College, Wildavsky moved to the University of California at Berkeley, where he served as professor of political science and public policy for thirty years, until his death in 1993.

In his long academic career, Aaron Wildavsky was author, co-author, or editor of 39 books, including respected contributions to the study of the functioning of government, public policy, and cultural theory. Perhaps his best-known work was in the field of public administration, in which *The Politics of the Budgetary Process* (1964), *Implementation* (1973), and *The Private Government of Public Money* (1974) did much to create an entire academic discipline devoted to understanding and improving the making of government policy. With Nelson Polsby, he co-authored *Presidential Elections* (1964), a more popular work that made the findings of political science accessible to college students and the general public, and was revised every four years to keep its data and conclusions fresh. In *Risk and Culture* (1982, co-authored with anthropologist Mary Douglas), and in a series of subsequent works, Wildavsky developed a cultural theory of politics that sought to explain political practice across civilizations as a function of the interplay among a small number of core factors that shape political regimes and the transitions from one regime to another.

In these and other writings, Wildavsky showed himself to be a daring innovator, who sought to reshape the subject matter of academic research so as to turn its attention to the real world beyond itself. It was this same impulse that, in the late 1960s, brought him to read the Bible for its political teachings. The period was that of the Vietnam War and the

civil rights movement, and the campuses were seething with a politics of moral indignation, whose high-mindedness constantly threatened, in Wildavsky's view, to careen into intellectual despotism. The most pressing issue, as he saw it, was for students and faculty alike to confront the relationship between the call to revolution and subversion of the existing order, on the one hand; and the need to preserve one's humanity in the face of this call, on the other. In order to grapple with this dilemma, he sought political and literary works whose subject was the "moral leader whose high aspirations lead him to the edge of despair or despotism, but who maintains his humanity in the end." As he writes in his introduction to *Moses as Political Leader*, "a little looking convinced me that social science research had little to offer in response. Besides, it was too cold. Whatever I had been doing obviously had not penetrated the audience I had tried to reach" (p. 6 of this edition).

The search for texts dealing directly with these issues brought him to the Hebrew Bible, whose political teachings are in fact preoccupied with the twin threats of despotism and anarchy that follow hard upon the heels of Moses' righteous revolution. Wildavsky describes the passion for the biblical text as something that may have been lying dormant in him; his grandparents were Orthodox Jews and his father, a skeptic, loved to recount stories from the Bible. But it was the recognition that there are times and places where the biblical political teaching is simply more relevant than that familiar to us from other sources that seems to have hit him the hardest. "There it was, just what I had been looking for—or, perchance, what had been looking for me—fanaticism with a moral purpose… My first question was, what gave Moses the right to have all those people killed?" (p. 7).

As Wildavsky describes it, he now began reading the biblical text on the supposition that it was a serious treatment of politics. In the years that followed, he found that this intuition of biblical relevance was upheld by an exacting study of the books of the Hebrew Bible. The result was *Moses as Political Leader*, which brought before the academic community the unprecedented claim that the books of Moses can be read as advancing a relevant and coherent political teaching.

It is easy to underestimate how revolutionary this claim was—and still is. I have already mentioned the weight of the existing canon of political thought, which militates with such force against the acceptance of the Hebrew Bible as a political text of real significance. But there are

other factors that Wildavsky's thesis had to contend with as well. Most significant was the profusion of scholarly work on the Bible itself since the time of Wellhausen, which has consistently viewed the biblical text as a patchwork of editorial scraps cut from previously existing sources. It is of the nature of critical studies of this kind to assume a sharp dichotomization between any given, hypothetical source and its neighbor—for if the sources in their original form did not disagree sharply, then how would one be able to tell them apart once they had been fused into the biblical text as we now have it? The natural tendency of such work is therefore to see the final text as internally incoherent (even as it assumes that each of the original sources was *highly* coherent): The many sources become a kind of cacophony of internal disputation within the text, and whatever meaning or teaching it might otherwise have been thought to contain tends to dissolve in the face of this noise. The plain sense of the final text is, in other words, sacrificed in order to get at the supposed meanings of the various hypothetical sources from which it is understood to have been composed.

Wildavsky quotes a famous passage from Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), which can easily serve as an example of the effect such source criticism has had on the capacity of scholars, and of educated individuals generally, to credit the possibility that the biblical text offers a coherent message of any kind. Here is Freud on his own use of the biblical text:

> When I use Biblical tradition here in such an autocratic and arbitrary way, draw on it for confirmation whenever it is convenient, and dismiss its evidence without scruple when it contradicts my conclusions, I know full well that I am exposing myself to severe criticism concerning my method and that I weaken the force of my proofs. But this is the only way in which to treat material whose trustworthiness—as we know for certain—was seriously damaged by the influence of distorting tendencies. Some justification will be forthcoming later, it is hoped, when we have unearthed those secret motives. Certainty is not to be gained in any case, and, moreover, we may say that all other authors have acted likewise.[4]

As Wildavsky points out, this suspicion of the text—these ruminations on its lack of "trustworthiness," on the "damage" done to it by "distorting tendencies," on the "secret motives" that were in play during

the editing process—quickly deteriorates into a kind of hermeneutic nihilism, which leaves one with little choice but to conclude that the text as a whole can't really mean anything at all. In this way, we arrive at a kind of tyranny of the hypothetical sources from which the Bible is thought to have been compiled, such that the study of these sources rises up and destroys any possibility of studying the text as a whole.

The past thirty years, however, have seen a pronounced movement of writers in a number of disciplines against this tyranny of the sources. An important milestone in this direction was the movement called "canonical criticism," associated with the work of Brevard Childs and his colleagues, which has turned attention towards the coherence of specific books of the Bible and of the overall biblical canon.[5] Another was the introduction of the Hebrew Bible into the academic study of literature by Robert Alter and others, which has done much to revive the recognition that the Bible consists of coherent texts, often composed with extraordinary care.[6] Of significance, too, is the work of scholars such as Donald Harman Akenson, who has proposed that at least the first half of the Bible was ultimately the work of a single hand, assembled with the aim of advancing a single, unified teaching.[7] Although these scholars write with different concerns in view and reach a wide range of conclusions, they nevertheless represent a marked trend towards an understanding according to which the Bible was composed intelligently, so that a coherent meaning might reasonably be discerned in it.

In a sense, then, Wildavky's *Moses as Political Leader* was the natural consequence of a larger trend. But it was also one of the most daring expressions of this trend. For *Moses as Political Leader* not only seeks to demonstrate that the biblical narrative is intelligently assembled and coherent. It advances the claim that the teaching that emerges from this narrative is itself worthy of study—not only stylistically or historically, but also philosophically. As he writes:

> My book intends… to use biblical teachings about leadership to improve current understanding of that elusive yet essential activity. For these purposes, therefore, questions of origins—Who wrote the Bible? How was it written or rewritten? What ideological axes did the various hypothetical authors-cum-editors have to grind?—are subordinate to questions of content—Does the leadership perspective help us understand the Bible? What does the Torah teach about leadership? How valuable is this teaching? ... [M]y concern is with explicating the content of the

> Mosaic Bible as it bears on substantive issues.... The important limits are not the absence of eyewitnesses (or other corroborating data, which might tell us more about the actual events), but rather the limits of imagination and insight that can make the Bible speak in a meaningful voice (p. 20).

As is clear from this passage, Wildavsky believed that the question of principal interest with regard to the biblical text is not who edited it, but whether it has something important to say. To answer *this* question, what is needed is to read the text as a whole, and with an eye towards understanding what it is trying to teach. When one pursues this avenue of research with imagination and insight, Wildavsky believed, the ideas being advanced in the text come through loud and clear, and issues of editorial history naturally remove themselves to the sidelines.

Of course, the books of Moses are not written in the form of an Aristotelian treatise. They are presented as a narrative, and to discern a political teaching in them, one must first assume that general truths can be taught in the narrative form. In this, Wildavsky follows other modern commentators on the Bible such as Umberto Cassuto and Nehama Leibowitz, who have argued that the biblical narrative is extremely sensitive to the development of circumstance, power relations, personality, and moral understanding over time. Recognition of this fact permits one to understand the biblical characters as learning and growing in the course of their experiences. And what they learn can also be a lesson to us. This is no less true of Moses, and Wildavsky argues that the gradual development of Moses' political understanding over the course of the narrative from Exodus to Deuteronomy permits us to understand the biblical text as a kind of "primer" in government (p. 10). Through the medium of the biblical text, we experience unrestricted monarchy (in Egypt), anarchy (in the wilderness, when the people choose to be led by a golden statue in the shape of a calf), and a regime Wildavsky calls political *equity*—essentially an egalitarian republic—in which Moses is little more than the first among equals (in the rebellion of Korah). At each step, there are evident reasons that Moses, as political leader, cannot continue under the burden of the preceding political constellation. In this way, we are led inexorably to the conclusion that Moses has little choice but to adopt the final, hierarchical arrangement in which his rule is ameliorated by the appointment of the assembly of elders—roughly, what we would today call a limited or constitutional monarchy (p. 165).

In making this argument, Wildavsky imputes to the biblical text an awareness of and concern for governmental forms often thought to have been born only later, in Greece. And he attributes to the books of Moses a clear preference as to the form of the desired regime, this preference being justified not by arbitrary divine decree, but by the workings of reason as it responds to experience.

Of particular interest is Wildavsky's recognition that the biblical texts understand Hebrew politics as being perpetually poised between replication of Egypt's tyranny, on the one hand; and a slide into complete anarchy, on the other. As Wildavsky points out, when the Bible refers to Egypt as "the house of bondage," it refers not only to the enslavement of the Hebrews, but to a vertical political order that amounted to enslavement of most of the Egyptians as well. For a people recently liberated from this order, "the likely alternative" seems to be complete anarchy, and therefore dissolution (p. 33). The narrative reaches its climax at the golden calf, when Moses, having descended from the mountain, calls upon those loyal to him to kill their idolatrous brothers. As a result of this bloodshed, order is restored, but at the cost of Moses turning the sword on the very people he had sought to liberate from Pharaoh. The governmental forms Wildavsky calls *equity* and *hierarchy* are understood as the biblical text's alternatives to the installation of a regime like that of Egypt, a regime of "permanent purge" (p. 160).

This same question regarding the appropriate governmental form applies no less to the man who is to lead and govern the people, Moses. Wildavsky points out that at the outset, Moses has before him only two models of the individual's involvement in politics: The model of absolute passivity, which he inherits from the experience of bondage, and which Wildavsky finds embodied in the figure of Aaron (p. 121), who yields before the anarchic yearnings of the people and fashions for them an idol of gold; and the model of absolute authority, which he inherits from his familiarity with the god-king, Pharaoh (p. 112). The crucial question is whether there is a kind of political authority that is somewhere between these two poles, but nonetheless stable enough to endure. As Wildavsky emphasizes, the desire for the establishment of a human political authority of this kind is the basis for what is portrayed as God's ongoing effort to persuade Moses to take responsibility for events (e.g., "Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward," Exodus 14:15). But it is also the basis of God's insistence on checking

Moses' tendency to seek unlimited power for himself. (pp. 171ff.) Moses struggles against both sides of this bargain, finally reconciling himself to the fact that a mature politics requires the assumption of ultimate responsibility, and yet without the benefit of ultimate power (p. 105).

A common caricature of biblical politics suggests that God gets mixed up in politics in order to strengthen absolute government. But Wildavsky presents the political thought of the Bible as moving in precisely the opposite direction. Pharaoh had no need of the Hebrew God to strengthen his absolute government; on the Egyptian view of things, Pharaoh was God, and that gave him all the authority he needed for absolute rule. As Wildavsky correctly realizes, the Hebrew God enters into politics not to support absolute government but to impose limits on its authority. God's appearance entails the establishment of a higher standard against which the acts of Pharaoh can be judged. But it also entails the establishment of a standard against which the acts of Moses can be judged. The introduction of this higher standard into the political realm is that which permits the limitation of Moses' power, thereby preventing the establishment of Moses as the first in a line of absolute rulers in Israel.

Wildavsky wrote two books on the political philosophy of the Bible: *Moses as Political Leader* and his later *Assimilation Versus Separation* (1993),[8] which deals with the political teaching of the Joseph narrative in Genesis. He had also planned on writing a third book on the political teachings of the story of David, but this was a work he did not succeed in completing before his death. (Elements of this work appear in the Epilogue Wildavsky added to *Moses as Political Leader*, which appears at the end of this volume under the title "A Speculation on the Survival of the Jewish People.") In all this work, he maintained his posture of quiet but firm defiance of the conventional wisdom, according to which the Bible could not possibly have a coherent political teaching. And this posture served as an aid and an inspiration to others.

The impact of Wildavsky's book stems, in part, from the fact that its revolutionary approach was backed up by Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*, which appeared shortly afterwards. Walzer, who writes that he read an early draft of Wildavsky's book,[9] emphasized a different aspect of the Pentateuchal political teaching, focusing on the books of Moses as a

manifesto for revolution and political change. But his method was strikingly similar to that of Wildavsky's studies of the Bible. As he wrote:

> In returning to the original text, I make no claims about the substantive intentions of its authors and editors, and I commit myself to no specific view of the actual history. What really happened? We don't know. We have only this story.... The effort of modern critics to disentangle authorial traditions, to identify earlier and later fragments within the narrative, has not in my view produced a better understanding.... 'At no point,' as Northrop Frye has written, 'does [this effort] throw any real light on how or why a poet might read the Bible'—and it is no more help to a political theorist.[10]

The fact that scholars of the stature of Wildavsky and Walzer were willing to go out on this limb had an immediate and telling effect. When I was in graduate school studying political theory in the late 1980s, these books on the political thought of the Bible were already well known. This is not to say they had had a discernible effect on what was being taught as political philosophy—in my department, or anywhere else. But the perspective these books represented was understood to be legitimate. And when I proposed to write a doctoral dissertation on the political philosophy of the biblical Book of Jeremiah, at least some of my teachers responded with enthusiasm. I had the honor of having Wildavsky as a member of my dissertation committee.

My experience was by no means unique, and within a few years, works seeking to advance our understanding of the political thought of the Bible began appearing on a regular basis, both at the hands of students of political philosophy, and of other writers who became inspired to join in the effort of reviving our understanding of the biblical political teaching. Among these works are Shmuel Trigano, *Philosophie de la Loi* (1991); William Safire's book on Job, *The First Dissident* (1992); Wildavsky's book on the Joseph narrative, *Assimilation Versus Separation* (1993); Daniel Elazar, *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel* (1995); Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther* (1995); Ira Sharkansky, *Israel and Its Bible: A Political Analysis* (1996); Alan Mittleman, *The Scepter Shall Not Pass from Judah* (2000); Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Noam Zohar, eds., *The Jewish Political Tradition* (2000, 2003); Norman Podhoretz, *The Prophets* (2002); and Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (2003).

These works follow divergent paths, and not surprisingly, some are more persuasive than others. Nevertheless, when one considers the pattern to which this list gives expression, it is evident that something significant has happened in the wake of Wildavsky's early work. It is now obvious that the treatment of the Hebrew Bible as a work of political thought was no passing whim, but a serious proposition concerning the history of political ideas and the subject matter of political philosophy. I do not mean to say that this proposition has been established to anyone's satisfaction. Most of these studies cannot be regarded as definitive. Moreover, even when taken together, they hardly scrape the surface of what may reasonably be called the political thought of the Hebrew Bible. On the contrary, these works reflect only the beginning of the road to a clear understanding of the "political philosophy of the Bible" in all its dimensions. In addition, with respect to the effort to place the Hebrew Bible within the overall history of political thought in the West, this enterprise has begun in earnest even more recently, and one can only look forward to its development as a natural extension of the current exploration of the political thought of the Bible.[11]

There is, in short, much work that remains to be done before the Hebrew Bible finds its way into university courses, textbooks, and academic discourse as a significant political work in the history of the West. But when this happens—and it now seems clear that this is only a matter of time—this achievement will redound to the enduring credit of Aaron Wildavsky's first foray into the field.

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