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# Logos and Narrative

Geoffrey P. Miller<sup>1</sup>

Abstract: The books of Genesis through Second Kings trace a history of Israel from earliest times through the fall of the Southern Kingdom in 586 BCE. In earlier work, I demonstrate that this narrative contains a sophisticated political theory – a systematic analysis which justifies political authority; demonstrates the necessity of law and government; explores the nature of power relations in families; argues that nationhood is the best form of political organization; identifies self-governance, centralized institutions and sovereignty as the essential elements of nationhood; and claims that constitutional monarchy represents the best form of national government. But if the bible contains such a theory, why has it not been identified before now? The reason is that the bible's political theory is embodied in narratives rather than in discursive analysis. The political meaning of the narratives was lost as the bible came to be interpreted from an exclusively spiritual point of view. This paper identifies advantages and disadvantages of narratives and offers conjectures for why Greek thinkers presented their political ideas discursively while the culture of ancient Israel opted to convey abstract ideas in the form of narrative.

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Human societies cannot function unless some people are given the power to exercise coercive force. To live in a society means to be controlled by others. Basic to all societies, therefore, are the twin questions of when individuals may legitimately exercise power over others and how that power should be embodied in social institutions.

These issues are central to the work of contemporary political and legal philosophers such as John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Joseph Raz, Ronald Dworkin and H.L.A. Hart. They are central as well to the work of many of their predecessors – Marx and Mill in the Nineteenth Century; Kant and the *Federalist Papers* in the Eighteenth; Locke and Hobbes in the Seventeenth; Hooker and Machiavelli in the Sixteenth. Christian, Jewish and Arab thinkers of the middle ages occupied themselves with the topics, as did Cicero and others in the Roman

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<sup>1</sup> Stuyvesant Comfort Professor, New York University Law School. Marissa Elgrissy provided helpful research assistance in the preparation of this paper.

Empire. Ultimately, political theory is traced to the Greeks – Plato and Aristotle, active in the Fourth Century BCE.<sup>2</sup>

In articles and working papers published over the past two decades I have argued that the ancient world has bequeathed another work, possibly more ancient even than Plato and Aristotle, which also offers a systematic political theory.<sup>3</sup> The author of this work is one of the great political thinkers of history – possessed of remarkable capacities of systemization, balanced in judgment, profound in insight, and capable of setting out a coherent justification for the authority of law and a conceptual framework for strong but limited government power.

What is this ancient work of political theory? It is not one that has lingered in the dusty obscurity of a library of ancient books. Nor was it recently unearthed in an archeological expedition and translated for the world. It is a book with which nearly all of us are familiar, at least to some extent. It is the bible – the collection of scriptures which recounts the history of

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<sup>2</sup> Strauss and Cropsey's history of political philosophy is controversial in other respects, but it is in the mainstream of opinion when it concludes that the "political works of Plato and Aristotle are the oldest works devoted to political philosophy which have come down to us." Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (1987), *History of Political Philosophy* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> See Geoffrey P. Miller, *Patriarchy: The Political Theory of Family Authority in the Book of Genesis* (New York University School of Law, Public Law Research Paper No. 10-23); Geoffrey P. Miller, *Leadership, Self-Governance and Nationhood in the Hebrew Bible* (NYU School of Law, Public Law Research Paper No. 10-50); Geoffrey P. Miller, *Consent of the Governed in the Hebrew Bible* (NYU School of Law, Public Law Research Paper No. 10-56); Geoffrey P. Miller, *The Dark Age: How the Biblical Narratives Demonstrate the Necessity for Law and Government* (NYU School of Law, Public Law Research Paper No. 10-18); Geoffrey P. Miller, *Origin of Obligation: Genesis 2:4b-3:24* (NYU School of Law, Public Law Research Paper No. 09-60); Geoffrey P. Miller, *Golden Calves, Stone Tablets, and Fundamental Law: A Political Interpretation of Exodus 32* (NYU School of Law, Public Law Research Paper No. 10-02); Geoffrey P. Miller, *The Song of Deborah: A Legal-Economic Analysis*, 144 *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 2293 (1996); Geoffrey P. Miller, *The Legal-Economic Approach to Biblical Interpretation*, 150 *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics [Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft]* 755 (1994); Geoffrey P. Miller, *J as Constitutionalist: A Legal-Economic Interpretation of Exodus 17:8-16 and Related Texts*, 70 *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 1829 (1995); Geoffrey P. Miller, *Contracts of Genesis*, 22 *Journal of Legal Studies* 15-45 (1993); Geoffrey P. Miller, *Ritual and Regulation: A Legal-Economic Analysis of Selected Biblical Texts*, 22 *Journal of Legal Studies* 477 (1993).

Israel from earliest times and the mighty works of God which made that history possible. The bible, not the Greeks, may be the West's oldest political philosophy.

How is it plausible to argue that the bible is about something as prosaic as politics?

1. The bible is relentlessly curious. Its pages offer pithy and intriguing observations about topics as diverse as language, culture, cosmology, meteorology, stock breeding, cooking, fashion, geography, commerce, diplomacy, history, family relationships, warfare, architecture – and much else besides. Given that government and law were ubiquitous in the lives of the peoples of ancient times, as they are today, it would be surprising if the bible did not take an interest in these topics.

2. The bible is chock full of laws – not only the Ten Commandments (in several versions), but also detailed codes of law that cover a range of topics both religious and secular. Legal materials are so pervasive that the Jewish tradition refers to the first five books of the bible as “*torah*” – law.

3. When the bible is not discussing law, it is usually dealing with politics. The books of Samuel and Kings tell of intrigues within the royal courts; Judges describes the political activities of tribal leaders; Joshua chronicles a period of military rule; Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy recount the leadership of Moses. Even the book of Genesis deals with political issues insofar as it concerns authority in families. Politics is everywhere in the bible.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Political themes are prominent even outside the corpus from Genesis to 2 Kings. The book of Chronicles retells the history of the kings of Israel and Judah, extending the account up to the decree of Cyrus permitting the exiles to return to their homeland. Proverbs contains numerous references to kings and advises them on how to behave (e.g., Proverbs 21:1, 27:23-24, 29:4, 29:14). Some of the Psalms refer to political matters, praising the king (Psalm 48:2, 45), announcing God's support for him (Psalm 2:7-9; 18:50), seeking divine favor for him (Psalm 20:9, 61:6-7, 72), and extolling the king's love of God (Psalm 21, 63). The prophets were actively involved in the politics of their times, and sometimes offered pungent critiques of royal policy.

4. The bible's interest in politics and law is not merely historical. It is also theoretical.

Interspersed in the bible are many examples of speculative thought: the book of Job, for example, is a meditation on why bad things happen to good people; and the creation account in the first chapter of Genesis still commands respect from cosmologists.<sup>5</sup> There is no reason that the bible would not also engage in abstract thinking about political themes. In fact, explicit examples of such thinking can be found in its pages: Samuel's warning about the ways of kings is one example (1 Samuel 8:11-18); Jotham's parable of the trees is another (Judges 9:7-15).

5. The bible displays a distinct propensity to express abstract ideas in symbolic form, including ideas about politics and law. The hand is a symbol of power (e.g., Exodus 15:6, 15:12, Psalm 17:7, 18:35, 21:8), the staff a symbol of authority (Genesis 38:18, 49:10, Exodus 17:5, Numbers 17:2). The rainbow symbolizes God's covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:13-16); the mark of Cain represents God's vow to protect the life of that figure during his wanderings (Genesis 4:15). Mount Zion refers to Jerusalem, the land of Judah, the tribe of Judah, or the Israelite people.<sup>6</sup> Figurative usages sometimes go beyond mere correspondences between narrative elements and features of the world: parables and fables create whole systems of symbolic meanings organized so as to bring out points or observations about the world (see Judges 9:7-15; 2 Samuel 12:12:1-4, 2 Kings 14:9-10).

Where is this political theory? Search the bible and you won't find any sustained mediation on the principles of good government of the sort found in Plato's *Republic*. There is

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<sup>5</sup> See also Calum Carmichael, *The Paradise Myth*, Paul Morris and Deborah Sawyer, eds., *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden* 48 (1992) (the Eden story was "born of intellectual curiosity" and was produced for the pleasure of depicting "an artificial, totally unreal picture of a mythical past in order to highlight . . . current views about, for example, Gods and human beings, human beings and animals, males and females"); John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (1992) (presenting the author as an antiquarian historian).

<sup>6</sup> 6 ABD 1096-97, "Zion".

no explicit categorization of political regimes such as that found in Aristotle's *Politics*. There are no self-announced inquiries into the nature of justice, the duties of kings, the obligations of citizens, the permissibility of civil disobedience, the appropriate form of punishment, the nature of the judicial function, or the role and function of law.

Notwithstanding the lack of explicit references, the political theory of the bible is hiding in plain sight. The bible's political ideas are to be found, not in any formalized system of discursive thought, but in the *narratives* – the familiar stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's Ark, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, Deborah and Gideon, David and Solomon.<sup>7</sup> These and other narratives deal in systematic fashion with concepts of obligation, legitimacy, and the proper role of government and law in the organization of human affairs. In this sense, they constitute a political theory – and one, moreover, which is in some respects as comprehensive and sophisticated as the ideas which we have inherited from ancient Greece.

Why would the bible present abstract ideas about politics and law in narrative form rather than directly, as in Plato and Aristotle?

1. Narrative offers advantages as a means for recording and transmitting information in a culture where many people are not literate.<sup>8</sup> This appears to have been the situation in ancient Israel, especially in the earlier days of his history. People in the agricultural areas would have had little need for reading and writing; most of their affairs could have been conducted

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<sup>7</sup> Biblical scholars have spilled oceans of ink on questions of terminology – asking whether a particular text be termed a “saga”, “cult legend”, “hero legend”, “etiology”, “collection”, “myth”, “story”, “narrative”, “epic” or something else. For purposes of this book, these distinctions are not important. I will refer to biblical passages that tell a story variously as “narratives,” “stories” or “tales” without intending any technical meaning for these terms.

<sup>8</sup> For a valuable discussion of literacy in Ancient Israel, see Susan Niditch, *Ancient Israelite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

orally and if they needed to record or understand anything in writing, scribes could be hired. Literacy, moreover, was expensive. It required training, a luxury which poorer families probably could ill afford. And unlike Egypt, which possessed papyrus, or Mesopotamia, with its plentiful supply of clay, the peoples of ancient Israel did not have a readily-available medium for memorializing written texts (pottery fragments were cheap but awkward; scrolls were expensive).<sup>9</sup> In a society where literacy was uncommon and the media of writing costly, much of the information important to the organization of the culture would often have been recorded and transmitted orally.<sup>10</sup>

2. Oral information would most likely have been preserved and transmitted in the form of stories. Stories – narratives – have excellent mnemonic qualities in that they are easy to recall and can be used as “tags” for recalling other items associated with the story.<sup>11</sup> The associated meanings are, in effect, symbolic or metaphorical: the story line calls to mind other ideas which would be difficult to recall, or to recall fully, if presented in purely discursive form.

3. The artistic quality of narratives enhances their communicative force. Many bible stories rank among the great works of human literature. Discursive political analysis lacks the punch. John Rawls’ masterwork, *A Theory of Justice*, weighing in at 538 pages, is a great contribution to political theory – but it’s not exactly beach reading. Unlike contemporary political theory, which is principally directed at an audience of intellectuals and academics, the author of the bible wanted to reach as many people as he could. Narratives are admirably

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<sup>9</sup> The discovery of ostraca – inscribed potsherds – in the territory of Ancient Israel from biblical times appears to document the absence of more convenient media. See Andre Lemaire, "Ostraca, Semitic," ABD, Vol. 5 (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> See Geoffrey Miller (1993), Contracts of Genesis, *Journal of Legal Studies* 22:15-45.

<sup>11</sup> See G.H. Bower & M.C. Clark (1969), Narrative Stories as Mediators for Serial Learning, *Psychonomic Science* 14:181-82; Francis S. Bellezza (1981), Mnemonic Devices: Classification, Characteristics, and Criteria, *Review of Educational Research* 51:247-275.

suited to the task of wide dissemination. Even if every member of the audience did not understand the political issues under consideration, some would get the message. We can say of the bible's political theory, as Hobbes said of Thucydides, that "the narration itself doth secretly instruct the reader, and more effectually than can possibly be done by precept."<sup>12</sup>

3. Narratives offer excellent capacities for authenticating the message.<sup>13</sup> Because they presented a history of the Israelite people, the biblical narratives could claim the imprimatur of legitimacy that is associated with historical events deemed relevant to the people's self-concept.<sup>14</sup> Additional authenticity could be achieved by associating a message with figures already endowed with charismatic authority – Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and so on. If people already accepted Jacob as an important ancestor, they were more likely to credit the message associated with things Jacob is said to have done. Etiologies also provided legitimacy: by associating a narrative with some element or condition known to the audience from their world, the message of the narrative gained credibility because of the connection (e.g., Genesis 9:12-16; Joshua 4:6). Etymologies validated narratives in a similar manner: the audience would be familiar with the word being explained, and, by associating it with the bible story, would tend to accord greater credit to the other elements of the story as well (e.g., Genesis 4:25, 5:28-29, 19:22, 32:30, Exodus 2:10). The use of items from popular culture also enhanced authenticity: if someone discovered a familiar song or proverb in the text, he or she was more likely to view the narrative as authoritative.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *On the Life and History of Thucydides* (first published 1628).

<sup>13</sup> See James W. Watts, *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999), pp. 36-60.

<sup>14</sup> See Michael S. Moore, *Dead Hand of Constitutional Tradition* (1995), *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 19:263-274.

4. Narrative is a flexible means for framing simplified models of human society. We use narratives today for that very purpose. Economists' research papers specify models of economic activity, inhabit those models with agents who act according to specified criteria, and examine how the agents behave under the conditions of the models. As economist Robert Lucas put it, "[we] are storytellers, operating much of the time in worlds of make-believe. We do not find that the realm of imagination and ideas is an alternative to, or a retreat from, practical reality. On the contrary, it is the only way we have found to think seriously about reality."<sup>15</sup> The biblical narratives do essentially same thing. By selecting the characters and the physical setting in which those figures interact, the bible isolates the question under consideration and focuses attention on its resolution. The reader knows only the details that the author chooses to supply.<sup>16</sup>

Like all other modes of expression, narratives have deficits as well as advantages. Some shortcomings of narrative include the following:

1. Narratives are inherently more ambiguous than discursive approaches, and accordingly can be subjected to multiple interpretations (although even discursive approaches are also ambiguous; hence the debate among contemporary scholars about what philosophers of the past intended).

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<sup>15</sup> Robert E. Lucas, Jr. (1998), *What Economists Do*, <http://homepage.ntu.edu.tw/~mjlin/lucas.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> It is partly for this reason that many biblical texts display such characteristic ellipsis in style – a point Erich Auerbach makes in his book *Mimesis*, where he describes biblical narrative as “fraught with background.” Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

2. Narratives can be cancelled or modified by counter-narratives which place the first narrative in a different context.<sup>17</sup> They therefore lack the stability of discursive analysis which looks to principles of reason for validation.

Despite these drawbacks, the advantages of narrative are sufficiently pronounced as to render plausible the theory that the bible might use this medium as a way to express and investigate theoretical ideas.

Why has the bible's political theory been recognized before? Given that many brilliant people have devoted their lives to the analysis and interpretation of the bible, why have none of them identified this level of meaning? Several reasons may help explain why interpreters to date have not fully appreciated the bible's political theory:

1. The majority of interpreters have approached the bible from the standpoint of religious faith. Given the premise that the bible reports the word of God, a political interpretation is not to be expected. Even contemporary secular interpreters of the bible are often educated in seminaries or other religious institutions, and therefore tend to reflect religious attitudes in their interpretations.

2. Much biblical interpretation is influenced by theorists of the past – William Foxwell Albright in the United States and Martin Noth and Gerhard Von Rad in Germany, in particular. Those figures continue to exercise an influence on biblical interpretation, one which perhaps sometimes discourages unconventional approaches.

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<sup>17</sup> See Geoffrey Miller (1995), Verbal Feud in the Hebrew Bible: Judges 3:12-30 and 19-21, JNES 55:105–117; Geoffrey Miller, A Riposte Form in the Song of Deborah, In Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East, edited by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Bernard Levinson and Victor Matthews, 113-27 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

3. Biblical scholars are trained in the disciplines of languages, theology, and biblical history; they are not experts in the fields of politics, law, or political theory. Because they are not attuned to issues that are central to those other disciplines they are unlikely to recognize political meanings in the texts they interpret.

Why is the political theory of the bible conveyed in the form of narratives when the theory developed in the Greek world takes the form of discursive theorizing?

Differences between Israel and Greece can be overstated. The Greeks were hardly strangers to narrative: Homer is one of the great intellectual monuments of world culture. Even Greek philosophy was not devoid of narrative. Plato dismissed art as a means for conveying truths about the world but expressed his own ideas in the form of dialogues. Although Plato's use of dialogue can be dismissed as a conceit or convention used to tease out different views on philosophical questions, his choice of medium was important, in some sense, to the message he sought to convey. Aristotle abandoned the dialogical style, but he recognized the potential for narrative-like figures of speech to communicate information effectively: in the *Poetics* he commends metaphor for its capacity to sharpen analysis and to convey information to an audience in a compact form.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, it remains true that there are significant differences in style and presentation as between Greek and Israelite political theory. We cannot know the reason for these differences, but several conjectures are possible:

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<sup>18</sup> See J.D. O'Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric: The Dialectic of List and Story* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); James W. Watts, *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

1. The simplest explanation is simply that of path-dependence. There is no reason why theoretical discourse in Israel should have assumed the same form as that in Greece, even if conditions in the two regions were otherwise similar. Similar societies can take divergent paths depending on unforeseeable or random events.

2. The Sophists, whose ideas influenced Plato and Aristotle, were itinerant thinkers who traveled widely in search of patrons. This factor would have influenced the Sophists to develop and express ideas in a form which could readily be transferred across national boundaries. Israel, in contrast, does not appear to have supported a population of itinerant teachers. Given this circumstance, political ideas in Israel could have assumed a different form than the form that developed in Greece.

3. Greece became a world empire interested in exporting its culture and its ideas to the lands it had conquered. This process of cultural transmission worked best if the ideas in question were framed in discursive form which could easily transmit across cultural boundaries. In contrast, Israel became an inward-looking society, existing under foreign domination and concerned with the preservation of its own traditions.

The purpose of this paper is to respond to several obvious (and reasonable) objections to the thesis that the bible contains a systematic work of political theory. A fuller argument in favor of this proposition requires detailed analysis of particular biblical texts, something I have attempted in other work.