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978-1-108-42818-7 — John Locke's Political Philosophy and the Hebrew Bible
Yechiel Leiter
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John Locke's Political Philosophy and the Hebrew Bible

John Locke's treatises on government make frequent reference to the Hebrew Bible, while references to the New Testament are almost completely absent. To date, scholarship has not addressed this surprising characteristic of the treatises. In this book, Yechiel Leiter offers a Hebraic reading of Locke's fundamental political texts. In doing so, he formulates a new school of thought in Lockean political interpretation and challenges existing ones. He shows how a grasp of the Hebraic underpinnings of Locke's political theory resolves many of the problems, as well as scholarly debates, that are inherent in reading Locke. More than a book about the political theory of John Locke, this volume is about the foundational ideas of Western civilization. While focused on Locke's Hebraism, it demonstrates the persistent relevance of the Biblical political narrative to modernity. It will generate interest among students of Locke and political theory, philosophy and early modern history, and within Bible study communities.

Yechiel J. M. Leiter is President of the Veresta Group and Senior Fellow at the Herzl Institute and the Kohelet Policy Forum in Jerusalem.

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Preface

When I try to trace the mental processes that led to this book, my mind drifts back to my elementary school years. It was a religious education, the day divided between rigorous religious study in the morning and "secular" study in the afternoon. They shared the same day, but the religious and the secular could not have been farther apart. History, for example, belonged to the secular, including the histories of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and yet no one – religious or secular – pointed out that the Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud, taught that very day, every day, coincided on the time line with those histories. The realization of that fact came to me as a kind of epiphany in the fifth or sixth grade (a benefit of daydreaming perhaps), and it included a youthful hunch that the beginnings of recorded civilization in Mesopotamia (PM) and the Bible (AM) might also be substantively interrelated, as might the wisdom of the Talmud (AM) and the glory of Rome (PM).

As time progressed, my quest for parallel historical narratives that somehow connect grew into a search for the theological nature of the universalistic and particularistic elements ensconced within Hebraic teachings, accompanied by the realization that they were not quite as bifurcated as they had been presented. The rebirth of Israel, heralded in its political and legal letters of incorporation as both a *Jewish* and *democratic* state, had much to do with this intellectual awakening within me; for here was an ancient civilization to which I belonged, claiming, Bible and history in hand, sovereign entitlement as a nation-state, while pursuing its place among the nations of the world based on recognized and shared universal values.

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This quest was accompanied by a search for a structured understanding of the nature of government and philosophy of politics, brought on by the tumultuous 1990s. The functional disintegration of the Soviet empire that prima facie spelled out the theoretical defeat of communism was a watershed event, but I wondered about Francis Fukuyama's assertion that democracy's victory meant that humankind was left with nowhere to progress. An end of history was after all a theological concept; but was this what the Bible had in mind when it spoke of an "end of days"? Was consensual government the Messiah? Was this what the architects of government by the people really had in mind?

Along with a restudying of Biblical narrative, I returned to the seventeenth-century greats of political theory who helped usher us into the modern age. Some texts I had already studied and others I read for the first time, but what was now salient in my mind – something I simply had not taken note of previously – was the frequency with which theorists such as Grotius, Hobbes, Harrington, and Locke used the Hebrew Bible to establish their arguments. When the work of Jerusalem's Shalom Institute led by my friends Yoram Hazony and Dan Polisar, as well as articles by Fania Oz-Salzberger, came to my attention (hitherto preoccupied more with politics rather than with political theory), my previously unidentified and unnamed intellectual fascination took on the clearly defined discipline of *political Hebraism*.

I found no text more Hebraic than John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, that because it is exclusively so. His predecessors and contemporaries who used Hebraic texts as proof-texts quoted with no less frequency from Greek and Roman, as well as New Testament sources. Indeed, it is hard to escape the Christological orientation of their writings, but in the *Two Treatises*, copiously filled with Hebraic sources, it is difficult to find traces of Christology, if at all. What I found even more perplexing was the fact that Lockean scholarship, though robust and contentious, makes next to nothing of this fact, and where the unusual Hebraic nature of his resourcing is recognized, there remains no attribution of political Hebraism to his writing. That left me what I thought was ample room for academic contribution, for a thesis arguing for a Hebraic reading of the *Two Treatises*. My Master's thesis concentrated entirely on the *First Treatise* and my PhD thesis focused primarily on the Hebraism of the *Second Treatise*. This book is the outgrowth of both.

I believe that the cumulative effect of this analysis will offer ample proof that Locke anchored his political theory of civil government in the Hebrew Bible, and that he did so not for stylistic or ornamental reasons,

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but rather because he saw it as an authoritative text that could legitimate the moral nature of consensual government that he came to advocate.

If Locke's personal religious beliefs did not prevent him from being a political Hebraist, the defining of Locke in this manner has the potential of opening an entirely new vista of appreciation for Locke's political theories. And while a Hebraic reading of Locke will undoubtedly raise certain questions that will necessitate further historical and theoretical research, it may provide additional answers to difficult questions that have as yet not found satisfactory explanations.

In addition, it would be hard to imagine the resurgent interest in political Hebraism, of which this book is but a small part, manifesting itself without the reemergence of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. The phenomenon of modern Israel, though, has neither been easily understood nor taken for granted. While Israel struggles to identify its national character and reconcile its own place within the Middle East as well as on the international stage, a keener understanding of its own Hebraic legacy might prove vital to all involved. Domestically, such an augmented appreciation for Israel's historical Hebraic contributions may encourage a constructive outward and inclusive attitude among those with a more isolationist and exclusivist inclination. Within the international community, a deeper understanding of the Hebraic roots of political theory might also engender a greater appreciation for Israel's contemporary role. Without any intention of theoretical overreach, I will add my hope that this book will contribute to that very practical field of international politics as well.

The stakes then are quite high. If my thesis is correct, it would mean that most discussions of Lockean political thought miss the main point, that they use the wrong scaffold to assemble the theoretical construct that Locke intended. It also means that the seventeenth century's break with the past was far less complete than generally assumed, at least to the degree that Locke's political writing helped create that fissure. And finally, it means that a fundamental dimension of the American founding, the Lockean dimension, has not been properly understood and appreciated.

The significance of this is something Yoram Hazony, one of Israel's most original and consequential thinkers, is keenly aware of, and it is thanks to him and his colleagues at the helm of Jerusalem's Herzl Institute, Ofir Haivri and Meirav Jones, that I have had the time, impetus, and intellectual setting to turn my postdoctoral research into a book. To them I am grateful beyond words for the opportunity to participate as a resident Fellow in the Institute's activities, as I believe it is enriching that

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special sanctum where philosophy, bible studies, political theory, and intellectual history meet, while moving the goalpost of interdisciplinary relevance to a higher and better place.

As much of the research for this book was done in the context of my PhD, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my mentor, Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger, who guided both of my dissertations from start to finish. Without her persistent and patient counsel this book would not have been possible. There were frustrating moments to be sure, especially when my anxious midlife foray into academic research assumed a greater countenancing of the expeditious and the streamlined, but her consistently unyielding demands for further research, precision of presentation, and linguistic excellence proved to be as inspiring as they were imperative. Through her rare ability to fuse the excitement of originality with the requisite caution of academic exactitude I have learned much, with a personal significance that stretches beyond the boundaries of this work. It has been a distinct honor and privilege to study under Fania's tutelage.

I am most fortunate as well to have had Professor Michael Heyd of the Hebrew University and Professor Menachem Lorberbaum of Tel Aviv University join with Professor Oz-Salzberger to form my dissertation committee. Their sagacious critiques and invaluable recommendations helped ensure greater focus and precision, making my PhD thesis a better and more accurate work. I am particularly grateful to Professor Heyd for going well beyond the call of duty by taking the time to share with me some of his yet unpublished theories on the development of seventeenth-century secularism and Christian theology.

I am also indebted to Professor Aharon ben Ze'ev, the former president of Haifa University, who encouraged me to study at Haifa after I left my position at Israel's Ministry of Finance, and initially introduced me to Professor Oz-Salzberger.

Some of my research was conducted at the same time that I served as a senior policy analyst at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. My thanks go to Ambassador Dr. Dore Gold and Mrs. Chaya Hershkovitz, respectively the president and director of the Center, for affording me an atmosphere conducive to pursuing my academic research.

The advice of good friends is indispensable for the success of any composition. Dr. Asael Abelman has read parts of the research and made critical substantive recommendations without which my original academic text would have been sorely deficient.

I did not trouble my dear friend Henry Schwartz to read the manuscript as it was being written out of respect for his superhuman workload.

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But Henry, who has supported my work as far back as my memory serves, was with me every step of the way, and I would not have made it to the end zone without his encouragement and assistance. He has been my older brother and confidant, and through our friendship I have been graced with the privilege of sharing, if but in a small way, in his unstinting efforts to make the world a safer and better place.

My wife, Chani, and our children, Moshe (and Tzippi), Neriyah (and Liat), Sarah, David, Sophia (and Yair), Shmuel, Noam, and Amikam, have always endured my ever-changing schedule, and adding regimented hours of academic research to it did not make matters easier for them. Juggling a full professional workload with writing a book sometimes meant long hours for me away from home and at other times long hours for them wishing that I was away from home. They are an integral part of this composition, and I thank them. Our grandchildren, Carmi, Maayan, Harel, Tzur, Hadar, Kerem, and Dror, have added perspective and patience to the labor of putting the finishing touches on the work, for which I am richer and grateful. Who knows, maybe by the time they get around to studying political theory, the Hebraism of Locke's *Two Treatises* will have become accepted academic currency. I hope, at least, that on the way they merit an elementary school education less schismatic than the one their grandfather endured.

I am dedicating this book to my parents, Dr. N. Z. and Hannah Leiter. My father read an initial draft copy, made critical substantive comments, and offered stylistic and linguistic advice, while my mother, with her encouraging interest and enthusiasm throughout the entire process, inspired me to plod on whenever intellectual fatigue began to set in. I am indebted to them for that and for everything they stand for: devotion to truth; passion for knowledge; reverence for tradition and respect for innovation; commitment to family, country, and nation; and so much more. May this serve as but a small token of gratitude, and of the esteem in which I hold them.

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