

# MOSES AS POLITICAL LEADER

CONTEMPORARY JEWISH THOUGHT  
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*The Dawn: Political Teachings  
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Yoram Hazony

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# MOSES AS POLITICAL LEADER

Aaron Wildavsky

*With a foreword by*  
Yoram Hazony

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*For my grandparents and my grandchildren*



## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> Even Rousseau seems to have tried his hand at the political interpretation of Hebrew scripture.<sup>3</sup> 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