Moses as Political Leader

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Moses as Political Leader

Aaron Wildavsky

With a foreword by
Yoram Hazony

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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 career 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

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Leadership as a Function of Regime

This book makes two claims: one is that the biblical sense of leadership as a function of regime is more satisfactory than current conceptions in the social sciences; the other is that viewing the Bible as a teaching about leadership enhances its interpretation. The first claim involves learning from the Bible in order to improve understanding of leadership. The second claim uses the perspective of leadership to advance interpretation of the Bible. The two claims are connected by viewing leadership in the context of political regimes. In this concluding chapter, I begin by showing how social scientists have attempted to grapple with leadership as a general phenomenon. I then go on to elaborate a different conception in keeping with the biblical view, and conclude by applying this perspective to Moses' transformation of political regimes.

STUDIES OF LEADERSHIP IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

"The concept of leadership," writes Cecil A. Gibb in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, "has largely lost its value for the social sciences, although it remains indispensable to general discourse."[1] But if all of us (including social scientists) find this term indispensable, why has it been

so unsatisfactory in social research? Some say the concept is so general that researchers cannot tell to what leadership refers; others say the term is too specific to cover the vast range of possibilities. What makes leadership too vast a subject to be encompassed?

Despite Gibb's claim, the topic spawns extensive studies. If leadership is an endangered species, it is not extinction that threatens. Rather, the very tendency of the concept to engulf those factors supposed to distinguish it makes the subject amorphous and indefinable. An analytic history of the leadership debate will help us understand.

Early on in leadership studies, scholars assumed that leaders were self-evident agents with certain physical or psychological traits that explained their rise to power.[2] It must have been disconcerting to discover that the correct number of essential traits could vary from two to somewhere between nineteen and thirty,[3] and that universal traits stubbornly refused to reveal themselves. Worse, people supplied with those hypothetical traits often did not assume leadership positions, however broadly defined. For example: did leaders exhibit a drive to dominance? At the most frequently reported correlation of .20, this would mean that only 4 percent of total variance could be attributed to dominance.[4] Score one for the Bible, which does not play the "trait" game at all, but, rather, tests the capacity for leadership through action.

Dominance, recognized as a critical trait, led to the question of leadership styles. Was there no difference between leaders who used brutality and others who dominated through persuasion? As a trait, "dominance" suggested dangerous ideological overtones. Alfred R. Lindersmith and Anselm L. Strauss—writing not long after the struggle against Nazism—attributed fascination with traits to "current popular conceptions of leaders as… objects capable of being transformed into the 'magical helpers' sought by those whose need for security is resolved by finding some powerful authority upon whom they can become dependent."[5] Similarly, Daniel Bell found that almost all the literature, based on Aristotle and Machiavelli, conveyed the "image of the mindless masses and… the strong-willed leader."[6] Robert Tannenbaum added that "classical models of bureaucracy share with these elite conceptions an authoritarian bias in their emphasis on the exclusive prerogative of leaders to command the unquestioning obligation of subordinates to obey."[7] The contrast with Moses could not be clearer; from the time he offers to liberate the Israelites through the

exodus to the wanderings in the desert, his people constantly chastise him, several times revolting against his leadership.

The dominance approach, moreover, came to seem ill-conceived. Since one could not imagine leaders without considering followers, scholars posited, perhaps there was something about followers—some ineffable clue—that led leaders to them. Exit the "hero in history" and enter group dynamics—more prosaic but perhaps more profound. It turned out, of course, that there were almost as many dynamics as groups. Sometimes group members were led; sometimes they did the leading; often, in the midst of exponentially increasing interactions, the observer could not tell which.

Perhaps there had been an oversight? Leaders and followers, embedded in history, interacted in regard to something called "the situation." "Situationists" entertained a variety of opinions. Ralph Stogdill concluded that the "qualities, characteristics and skills required in a leader are determined to a large extent by the demands of the situation in which he is to function as a leader."[8] Since separate situations make different demands on leaders, Alex Bavelas suggested that we must instead try to "define the leadership functions that must be performed in these situations and regard as leadership those acts which perform them."[9] Thus there could be as many leaders as there were different situations. Situations, then, were even more varied than followers, who in turn were more diverse than leaders.

What, indeed, is a situation? William Thomas and Florian Znanieck's famous "definition of the situation" is composed of kitchen-sink variables, beliefs, values, groups, the physical environment, tasks, perception of all the above, and, for good measure, the surrounding culture.[10] Not surprisingly, A. Paul Hare concludes that "the major finding of this research is that there are more differences between situations than between the two leader styles" tested in his research.[11]

If (to follow the logic of the literature on leadership) the slavery of the Hebrews under Pharaoh was a "situation," was Moses' effort to beg off from his mission to lead the people out of slavery also a situation? And if one characterized as a situation Moses' efforts to placate his complaining people in the desert, would that designation also hold for Moses' use of force to put down the effort of dissidents to return to Egypt after the spies reported that Canaan would be difficult to conquer? Sometimes

"situation" appears to designate one event, such as Moses fleeing from Pharaoh, sometimes a series of similar events, such as the periodic discontent of the people with the leadership of Moses. Does the concept include both events (such as the Israelites crossing the Sea of Reeds) and patterns of power relations—slavery as a system of rule, or the Israelites' bazaar-like bidding and bargaining for favors after the exodus? Apparently, the answer is "all of the above." Yet a single episode may have different implications than does a series; and a pattern of rule is not necessarily the same as a series of situations. Theorizing depends on seeing patterns in what may originally have appeared to be disparate happenings. Treating situations as discrete events would make theoretical interpretation impossible, for history then would be reduced to narrative.

What is the alternative? To consider situations as patterns of events calls for a prior interpretative scheme (a theory) according to which events will be classified and given some order of priority. Thus in this chapter, the categories of regimes proposed are designed to give meaning to the events that take place within each regime. Moses' passivity—from the burning bush episode up to (but not including) Mount Sinai—may be attributed, for instance, to his being part of a pattern of master-slave relationships, in which there is no room for leadership.

As ontology was once said to recapitulate phylogeny, the individual passing through all stages of the species, so each approach to leadership ends up, willy-nilly, by incorporating the others. If anything is evident, it is that individuals do not act alone. "A group," according to Gibb, "is characterized by the interaction of its members, in such a way that each unit is changed by its group membership and each would be likely to undergo a change as a result of changes in the group. In this case there is a dependence of each member upon the entire group, and the relation between any two members is a function of the relation between other members."[12] Leaders are nothing if they cannot attract followers. Thus begins the blurring; as leaders merge into followers, social life becomes a seamless web. With increasing sophistication, scholars succeed only in making leadership indistinguishable from other phenomena.[13]

Once leadership depends on acceptability within a group, group members are seen to lead as well as follow. "Clearly," Kenneth F. Janda concludes, "a member cannot be salient unless he can be differentiated from other group members on one or more criteria, and, of course, almost

every group member can be differentiated from other group members on the basis of one or more of these criteria. From this realization, it is just a short step to conclude that every group member can be, and often is, a leader."[14] Is there, then, no difference between groups that mandate inequality and those that reject authority? The thesis that every man was his own authority was the major challenge to Mosaic leadership posed by the rebellion of Korah.

"The individual who engages in leadership events becomes a some-times leader," say Abraham Zaleznik and David Moment. Leaders no longer tell followers where to go, but rather help followers get to where they want to be. "Leadership," Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander assert, "is viewed as the performance of those acts which help the group achieve its preferred outcomes."[15] "Group norms" become social science code for "democracy." In these terms, Moses would not be judged a leader because (at the Golden Calf and again just outside the Promised Land) he prevented his followers from going where they wanted to go—back to slavery in Egypt.

Leadership also is represented as part of the "general process of role differentiation, by which a group develops 'specialists' in the performance of recurring functions."[16] If some people are specialized to "leadership roles" and others to followership, however, this division of labor will re-introduce all the old differences that the group interaction approach is supposed to obliterate. "Let George do it" is qualified by "if he can."

Most studies seem to show some sensitivity on the part of leaders to group concerns. Is it true, therefore, that members of a group (another euphemism for followers) approve of leaders who show "consideration" and who side with the group in disputes with outsiders or higher-ups? Would Aaron, on these grounds, be preferred to Moses? This reverse-twist trait approach, however, is undermined by situational findings. D.C. Pelz discovered that most white-collar workers—aware of the need for someone to run interference outside the work group—preferred a supervisor who was well-connected in the hierarchy, even if that meant the supervisor was not close to them.[17] These findings were rationalized by positing a difference between task and emotional leadership; sensitive leadership makes the group happy, it seems, but not necessarily effective. And then there are circumstances. Colonel Nicholson of the movie *Bridge Over the River Kwai* is superb in circumstances calling for sticking to the rules

but rigid when he should be flexible. So, too, the group-centered leadership of Aaron made his people happy at the time of the Golden Calf, but without the task-centered leadership of Moses none would ever have reached the Promised Land.

In a creative construction called "idiosyncrasy credit," E.P. Hollander suggests that leaders first perform a series of services for their followers, thus building up credit, then trade in those credits for permission. (This, of course, assumes that the people involved will remember!) Moses did indeed build up credit for the exodus—credit that lasted somewhere between three days and three months—before his erstwhile followers demanded immediate gratifications. Storing up credit requires a regime that values contributions over time, not an anarchy, focused on current rewards, or an equity, which insists leaders be perennially perfect.

Simply saying that life is a social activity is a truism. To specify forms of social organization and to relate each to different types of leadership would reduce, instead of expand, the realm of relevant leadership behavior.

We are indebted to Gibb's invaluable surveys of the literature on leadership for the ultimate synthesis, which he calls "interaction theory," possibly because it covers all conceivable relations. A comprehensive theory of leadership, in Gibb's words, must include not only the personality of leaders, followers, groups, and situations, but also "must recognize that it is not these variables per se that enter into the leadership relation, but rather the perception of the leader by himself and by others, the leader's perception of those others, and the shared perception by leader and others of the group and the situation."[18] Viewing leadership as all-encompassing provides no perspective on perception; considering leadership as a function of regime explains why people adhering to different ways of life would perceive leadership differently.

Enter charismatic leadership. Max Weber—desiring to distinguish between small, repetitive choices that reinforce existing institutions and large, unusual ones that create new designs—decided to classify political systems by the kinds of authority that legitimate leadership. Weber saw traditional authority repeating itself; a rational-legal authority making minor adjustments; and charismatic authority introducing new patterns of action, new values, and new institutions. Weber's charismatic leader is distinguished by a divine call to duty (or, at least, so the leader thinks

and followers accept) that is transmitted to, and shared by, followers because of a certain glow radiating from the source.

Observing charismatic traits attributed to people performing ordinary secular roles, Edward Shils suggests that "charisma not only disrupts social order, it also maintains or conserves it." It is not the concentration of charisma, however, but its "dispersion" in society that interests Shils. A society in which people are civil to one another, he says, "entails not only the imputation of charisma to the mass of the population by itself; it also requires that the established and effective elite impute charisma to the mass as well, that the elite regard itself, despite all its differences as sharing some of the charisma that resides in it with the rest of its society."[19] The more equally traits are distributed, to be sure, the more they characterize entire populations rather than particular people within them.

Charisma is thus both democratized, becoming a mass as well as an elite trait, and deradicalized, supporting stability as well as its opposite. It has, however, been removed from its essential mooring in some particular political regime. If charisma is a substitute for authority, one might ask, what sort of regime is it that tries to organize itself without a binding source of rules?

Leadership as 'Cause'

With interdependency so rampant, there might be lots of leadership, but how could researchers isolate specific leaders? If leadership is everything in general, can it be anything in particular?

Leaders have been variously defined as those who occupy high-level positions; who have been elected by a group; who are most influential in setting goals (or helping achieve them); who influence others, whether or not goals get accomplished; who try hard, or often, to exert influence but do not succeed; or who do succeed more often than anyone else.[20] Alternatively, Robert T. Morris and Melvin Seeman assert that "leader behavior may be defined as any behavior that makes a difference in the behavior of the group."[21] Thus attention shifts from leader as cause to leader as effect. Is leadership, one wonders, a tower of power or the Tower of Babel?[22]

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