

American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text From the Revolution to the Civil War

Spencer McBride

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

McBride, Spencer (2013) "American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text From the Revolution to the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.3.15

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss3/14>

Review

McBride, Spencer

Summer 2013

Shalev, Eran *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War*. Yale University Press, \$40.00 ISBN 978-0-300-18692-5

Israel Reborn on Western Shores

Asa, Gideon, Rehoboam, and Jeroboam are hardly household names in twenty-first century America. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, average Americans were much more familiar with these Old Testament figures. After all, most American schools in this era typically used the bible as a text for teaching children to read, and clergymen of all Christian denominations frequently referenced the Old Testament in their sermons. In *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War*, Eran Shalev demonstrates how Americans' general familiarity with Hebraic biblical history made the Old Testament ripe for non-religious appropriation, particularly in the political arena.

The Old Testament's political utility in America's early republic and antebellum eras is a familiar subject to historians of religion and American politics. Yet, *American Zion* is surely the most comprehensive examination of American political Hebraism in terms of chronological breadth and analytical depth. Shalev ably builds upon the excellent work of historians such as Ruth Bloch, Ernest Lee Tuveson, and Nicholas Guyatt, each of whom has written extensively about the religious aspects of American exceptionalism, particularly as it relates to the sense that God had chosen America to play a special role in His plan for the moral redemption of the world.¹ By examining oft overlooked areas of America's rich history of political biblicism, Shalev breaks new ground by fully exploring both the political and cultural ramifications of the Old Testament's prominence in the public sphere. He argues that Old Testament biblicism identified "the United States as a God-chosen Israel, provided a language to conciliate a modern republican experiment with the desire for

biblical sanction," and "could thus help alleviate anxieties related to the limits of human authority and legitimize the unprecedented American federal and republican endeavors" (2).

Until now, historians have typically focused on the Exodus narrative when writing about the ways American Revolutionaries used Old Testament language, symbols, and stories. But Shalev goes beyond the obvious political utility of the Exodus to explore lesser-known (but equally popular and meaningful) examples of American Revolutionaries appropriating the Old Testament for political ends. Among these is the story of Gideon, the Jewish military leader who left private life to lead his country into battle against the Midianites. After returning from battle victorious, Gideon declined pleas to become the people's king. Americans quickly connected Gideon with a counterpart in classical Roman history, Cincinnatus, who similarly left private life to lead his country, and readily resigned his absolute authority after military victory was secured. As one anonymous observer claimed, Gideon was "the Jewish Cincinnatus," (15-16) and George Washington was the American exemplar of both historical figures. But deeming Washington America's Gideon was more than a mere declaration of the general's virtuous character. According to Shalev, it was a way of depicting the Continental Army as a modern Army of Israel and the Americans as God's chosen people.

To eighteenth and nineteenth-century American partisans, the Old Testament was an appealing source of political fodder in part because it was so easily adapted to current scenarios. For instance, Shalev demonstrates that during the debates over the ratification of the Constitution in 1787-88, several Americans declared that the Israelite nation had been a federal republic. Some thought that it was more than a coincidence that the thirteen American states were equaled in number by the tribes of Israel (if one creatively divided the tribe of Joseph into the separate tribes of Joseph and Mannasseh). Others compared the new federal model of shared sovereignty to the Mosaic constitution which allowed each tribe its own government while it participated in national politics via the Sanhedrim (comparable to the proposed legislative branch). Alas, Shalev explains that the Hebrew constitution was hardly a practical political model on which Americans based their Constitution. Instead, public appeals to the supposed federalism of ancient Israel were primarily propaganda, a means by which Federalists sought "powerful historical vindication for their own political endeavor" (75). Though eighteenth-century Americans easily invoked the Old Testament as proof that republics were God's favored form of government,

Shalev again demonstrates the Hebrew bible's malleability when he shows how nineteenth-century Americans similarly depicted the ancient nation of Israel as a democracy. In Americans' ever-evolving and anachronistic appropriation of the Old Testament biblicism, the ancient Israelites were at first Jeffersonian, and later, Jacksonian democrats.

Shalev's chapter on pseudobiblical writing is the most provocative of the book. Beginning in the 1740s, American writers frequently used the language and form of the King James Bible in their published political essays and pamphlets. The subjects of such pieces were typically political and rarely religious. Accordingly, Shalev argues that pseudobiblicism "reiterated Americans' understanding of their collective mission" and "positioned politics as the new religion of the republic, a medium that sanctified the nation and articulated Americans' perception of chosenness" (85). Shalev traces this literary trend to 1830 and Joseph Smith's publication of the Book of Mormon. Smith claimed that the Book of Mormon was the scriptural record of Israelites that had migrated to the Americas circa 600 B.C. Shalev points out that like many of the "faux-biblical" pieces that preceded the Book of Mormon, Smith testified that the record was discovered and translated (105-106). However, unlike earlier pseudobiblical writings, the Book of Mormon was religious in nature, claiming to be genuine scripture and not merely scriptural form appropriated for satirical effect. Shalev therefore refers to pseudobiblicism as "the cultural origins of the Book of Mormon" without labeling the book itself pseudobiblical (84). Yet, as the author eventually admits, there is no clear evidence to connect the Book of Mormon to this popular form of political and cultural expression. What he offers here is primarily informed speculation. This is likely an instance in which the author overreaches in his argument: pseudobiblicism clearly illustrates the Book of Mormon's cultural context, but not its origins. That being said, this fresh perspective on the book's cultural context is noteworthy in and of itself.

Yet another fascinating aspect of Shalev's book is the chapter on how religiously-minded Americans viewed Native Americans through a biblical lens, chiefly identifying them as lost tribes of the House of Israel. Some drew this Native Americans-Hebrew connection superficially, merely emphasizing the tribe as the common form of social organization. But others developed elaborate theories of migration patterns by which members of the so-called "lost ten tribes" ventured away from their captivity in Babylon to the shores of the Americas. Others went further still. Shalev tells the captivating story of Mordecai Noah and his failed attempt to establish the settlement of a Jewish colony in upstate New

York called Ararat. Noah read the alleged Hebrew origins of America's native inhabitants as an omen encouraging him to create Ararat as a safe-haven to which Jews in Europe could flock by the thousands. In this sense, Shalev effectively demonstrates that just as many Americans used the Old Testament to vindicate their political experiments, others similarly looked to ancient scripture to justify the complex, multi-cultural sociality that existed in the early republic and the place of white hegemony therein; it was a way of explaining the existence of their North American "others."

When the debate over slavery escalated to a fever pitch in the 1840s and 1850s, many Americans turned to the bible for support of their position. Drawing upon the work of Mark Noll, Shalev depicts the ways in which the Second Great Awakening, the rise of evangelicalism, and the associated increase in biblical literalism limited the ability of anti-slavery Americans to appeal confidently to the Old Testament.² Where proslavery southerners could easily draw their audiences' attention to biblical verses permitting slavery, abolitionists had to make elaborate arguments for why the context of such verses put into question all such anachronistic proslavery interpretations. By using the bible to question the Christian morality of slavery, opponents of the South's peculiar institution risked appearing "to assault scriptural authority" (172).

Ultimately, the Second Great Awakening and the increased emphasis religionists placed on Jesus and the New Testament spelled the end of America's tradition of Old Testament biblicism. However, the Civil War witnessed a momentary return to this trope. Many Northerners declared Abraham Lincoln the "American Rehoboam" and Jefferson Davis the corresponding Jeroboam (187). Southerners, on the other hand, "drew comfort in seeing themselves as the outnumbered kingdom of Judah led by Abijah and Asa, fighting the mightier and errant kingdom of Israel" (187). Alas, Shalev explains that "this wartime resurgence was limited in scale;" it was only a temporary political revival (187). As the United States moved into the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Americans eschewed the once common usage of the Old Testament as a political text in favor of other more evangelical methods of tying religion to the transformation of the American polity.

Eran Shalev has produced a fine work of scholarship. One of the book's greatest strengths is the way in which Shalev seamlessly blends political, religious, intellectual, and cultural history. *American Zion* is each of these, and at once all four. When read along with Shalev's earlier book, *Rome Reborn on*

Western Shores, it becomes increasingly apparent that although many Americans may have believed Thomas Paine's famous claim that they had it in their power "to begin the world over again," many felt more inclined to recreate elements of ancient civilizations.³ *American Zion* is essential reading for any student seeking to discover the origins of American national identity and the complicated, multi-faceted process by which it continues to develop.

Spencer McBride is a Ph.D. candidate in history at Louisiana State University. His dissertation examines the role of politicized clergymen in creating a national polity and national identity.

¹ Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

² Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

³ Eran Shalev, *Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).