



POLITICS & POETICS
A Journal for Humane Philosophy

Book Review

**Book Review of Yoram Hazony's *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*
(Cambridge University Press, 2012)**

Authors: Jonathan Harmat

Article ID: 839546

Article publication date: October 2017

Article version: 1.0

Appears in *Politics & Poetics* - A Journal for Humane Philosophy
ISSN: 2543-666X

Part of Issue on

Compassion & Community
(2017 -)

Politics & Poetics is a peer-reviewed journal of the humanities with a focus on philosophy, seeking to contribute to a reconciliation of political and literary discourses. It offers a forum for discussion for the human person as both a political and a literary animal.

For submissions and enquiries please contact editor@politicsandpoetics.co.uk.

www.politicsandpoetics.co.uk

Book Review of
Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

Jonathan Harmat

The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture is an erudite and novel contribution to Biblical studies. Yoram Hazony's contention is for the book to serve as an introduction to an emerging field within Biblical studies: namely, conceiving the Bible as a work of reason. As an introduction, the book contains two main parts: a methodological part on how to read Hebrew scripture philosophically, and an exegetical part comprised of five studies covering the ethics, political philosophy, epistemology, and ontology of Hebrew scripture.

The underlying argument of the book is that our tendency to view the Hebrew Bible as a work of revelation (and not reason) has a long history behind it, which prevents us from acknowledging that the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible could just as well have intended it to be what we would call a 'work of philosophy'. What Hazony means by 'philosophy' and 'reason' is first defined in an appendix to the book, which we shall return to later.

For Hazony, the distorting tendency of sharply distinguishing between *reason* and *revelation*, *philosophy* and *faith* comes from an essentially Christian prejudice (12; 219ff). Hazony fails, however, to address the great number of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians and philosophers (e.g. Philo, Justin Martyr, Origen, al-Farabi, Maimonides, Averroës, and Thomas Aquinas) who has argued that, even if the Bible were not in itself a philosophical document (which it was to some of them), then at least it was coherent with philosophy in its Platonic or Aristotelian forms.

The view Hazony criticises instead, and which he claims the Church has adopted, is the view of Tertullian to whom Hazony dedicates an entire chapter 'Jerusalem and Carthage'. Tertullian taught that the faith of the Christians and the philosopher's pursuit of truth were

irreconcilable, if not mutually antagonistic. Nonetheless, this view was allocated by some philosophers of the Enlightenment for different purposes. In the notorious chapter 14 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza for instance claims: 'The aim of philosophy is, quite simply, truth, while the aim of faith, as we have abundantly shown, is nothing other than obedience and piety'. From Spinoza to Humboldt, the dichotomy between reason and revelation became commonplace in academic discourse about Scripture, which is exactly what Hazony seeks to rehabilitate it from.

How to read Hebrew Scripture

In the first part of the book, Hazony presents a methodology in order to get a better grasp of the philosophical nature of Scripture. The most appealing of these three chapters concerns the structure of the Bible. The books of the Hebrew Bible have been canonized differently by Jews and Christians (and differently, again, by various Christian denominations). To orthodox Jews the Hebrew Bible is known by the acronym *TaNakh*, which stands for *Torah* (the pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (the Prophets), and the *Ketuvim* (writings). Hazony diverges from this division and contends that a different division and emphasis can uncover a rational order and internal structure in the Bible.

Hazony contends that the entire first half of the Hebrew Bible, i.e. the books from *Genesis* to *Kings*, form a single and unbroken narrative which begins with the creation of the world and proceeds to tell the story of the rise and fall of the Israelites, which he calls 'The History of Israel'. The next one-fourth of the Bible is the 'Orations of the Prophets', which includes the orations of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel as well as the twelve minor prophets. The last one-fourth is the various 'Writings', the most pivotal being Psalms, Proverbs and Job.

Such structure, argues Hazony, allows us to see how the Bible presents arguments, which are neither specific nor idiosyncratic, but of a general and reasonable nature. The Bible conveys general ideas and notions through a number of literary tropes, which Hazony masterfully puts into use in his analyses.

One of these tropes is the use of 'character-types' to represent more abstract concepts, which the Bible in turn develops into general arguments. The *shepherd* is such type found materialized in Abel, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David, and the *Levite* another type, who represents an impulse to zealous purism and an eagerness to confrontation. Levi does exactly this when he and his brother Shimon,

against their father's better judgement, kill those who had raped their sister, Dina. Moses, the son of two Levites, displays the same zeal for justice when he kills one of Pharaoh's servants, who punishes a Hebrew slave - and it is the tribe of Levi that kills three thousand of their kin who had worshipped the golden calf. In this sense, the Levite-type represents an idealistic character who, nonetheless, is too radical to rule men wisely.

Another trope capable of conveying more general features of human life is the repetition of literary patterns, events, or phrases. When Moses ascended from Mount Sinai, the Israelites grew impatient and demanded a God. Aaron, Moses's brother, collected their earrings and melted them into the golden calf. Similarly, when the warrior-judge Gideon refused to be king over the Israelites, he instead collected their golden earrings from which he made an idol. These stories, argues Hazony, show how the childish ignorance and ingratitude of the newly freed slaves was not a unique event but rather displayed a general feature of human nature.

In a similar way, the orations of the prophets could be read as works of reason by means of the function of *metaphors*. Hazony contrasts the prophetic metaphor with Jesus' parables. In the parables, the meaning is hidden and inaccessible to most people who hear them (cf. Mark 4.3-20), because its purpose is to obscure a teaching that is intended for a select few. The purpose of the prophetic metaphor, on the other hand, is to make a difficult subject easier to understand for a broad audience. The prophets could, for instance, better convey an abstract ethical distinction by means of an analogy to something readily familiar to nearly everyone at that time, namely the experience of a harvest that had flourished initially, but then eventually had come to nothing.

While Hazony makes an effort to show how the Hebrew Bible makes arguments of a general nature, the way he juxtaposes this with the Christian use of tropes is less persuasive. There are countless examples of how the writers of the Gospels put similar tropes into use to prove their points. We find, for example, the New Testament authors operating with types and repetition to show how events are not unique (Cp. Esth. 1.1. with Luke 2;1. or Psal. 22 with Mat. 27.). So, even though the authors of the New Testament used these tropes to prove Christological points, i.e. that Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem like David or that he escaped an infanticide like Moses. The main point is that the operation of tropes is not unique to the Hebrew Bible as such.

Hebrew Ethos

In one of the more persuasive chapters of the book, Hazony applies his methodology to uncover the ethical teachings of the Hebrew Bible. This analysis is both well-argued and captivating. Where many readers have tended to see biblical ethics as an ethics of obedience, or in Spinoza's memorable words: 'the aim of Scripture is simply to teach obedience', Hazony wants to argue that the opposite is in fact true: the ethics of the shepherd is essentially an ethics of *disobedience*. Hazony begins his analysis by contextualizing two foundations for ethics: the ethics of the farmer (the Cain-type) and the ethics of the shepherd (the Abel-type).

Cain, a worker of the soil and the founder of the first city, is the representative of a sedimented ethics and thus of the great Egyptian, Babylonian and Greek empires. The farmer's ethics is an ethics of piety, self-sacrifice and obedience, which Cain represents by taking upon himself to follow in his father's footsteps. Adam was cursed to work the ground by the sweat of his brow and Cain could not see any other way than to continue this mode of life. The farmer's ethics, the foundation of the great cities, is an ethics of obeying the instructions of the father, the laws of the king, and the prescriptions of the priests, because these are seen as holding the state together. This ethical view therefore 'begin with the individual *as part of the state that governs him*' (130).

Abel – and the other Biblical shepherds – represent a mentality of independence, resistance, and disobedience. Although Abel takes the curse of the soil as a matter of fact, he does not submit to it but opens up the possibility of a new mode of life and ethos. Hazony goes on to analyse how Abraham, Joseph, and Moses partake in this mentality. Abraham and Moses leave the metropolises in which they were born, and the ethics these cities symbolize, in order to become shepherds. They do not follow God's commands uncritically, but make independent judgments and even argue with God. The shepherd shows that humans can leave a state and live a worthy life outside of it, which laid the foundation for this type of ethics outside the political state:

Ethics must therefore begin with a view of the human being – or, to be more precise, with the human family – as being independent of the state. Ethics thus begins with the adult individual responsible for the fate of his family and proceeds from there. If the state can play a role in assisting the individual to fulfill his responsibilities and obligations, which are prior to the state and entirely independent of it, then the machinery of the state and its laws can be seen as having a purpose and a reason to exist. (133)

While Hazony's analysis of the ethics of the shepherd is eye-opening, his conclusion has a rather anachronistic tone. Hazony for instance writes that one goal of the shepherd's ethics is 'establishing and observing property boundaries' and that the political authority and the law of the state only are justified in so far as they work for the liberty and well-being of the man and his household; views, which later were put into form by classical liberalists thinkers. Although the Biblical ethics in Hazony's reading accentuates such liberal values, there is a shift of emphasis, namely that it is not the rights, liberties, and property of the individual which are of central importance, but that of the family or household, which places it outside liberalism.

A Politics for Kings

Something similar can be said of the chapter on the political philosophy of the Hebrews where Hazony draws some rather obsolete implications from an otherwise illuminating analysis. According to him, the political teachings of the Hebrews is to be found in 'The History of Israel', which is advanced as an alternative to two political situations.

First there is the experience of being slaves under the yoke of a tyrannous imperial state, Egypt. Moses redeemed the Hebrews from this imperial model and made them a free people with their own law. However, after the conquest of Canaan the tribal alliances begin to crack. This ushers in the second political experience of anarchy recorded in the book of Judges. In a forceful analysis of the story of the Levite and his Concubine (Judges 19), Hazony shows how civil war erupts among the Israelites who lack a common authority that ultimately results in the almost total annihilation of the tribe of Benjamin. The key phrase expressing this experience, repeated time and again in the book of Judges, is: 'In those days *there was no king in Israel*, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes' (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1 21;25). Finally, David redeems his people from the state of anarchy and creates a political model unique to the Israelites.

The general political argument Hazony draws from these diverse stories is that the Hebrews created the first constitutional monarchy and national state. The Davidic monarchy was both *conditional* and *limited*. The kings – Saul and David at least – were chosen by the people and drew their legitimacy from two sources: the desires of the people and a standard of right independent of these desires. This standard is the minimalistic 'Law of the King' from Deuteronomy, which states that the King must not desire 'gold, wives, and chariots', or in other words, the

means by which he is able to vent into the violent oppression and idolatry of the surrounding imperial states.

A particular disappointment in Hazony's examination of the political theory of Hebrew Scripture is that he does not address the question of the Law of Moses and its 613 commandments (*mitzvot*). What are these laws that formed the legal basis for the Hebrew state? Are they laws revealed by God (merely to be obeyed), laws of reason or in some way both? What is the implication of these laws on the political thinking of the Biblical authors? We are left with no answer.

Jeremiah's Theory of Knowledge

In another chapter, Hazony attempts to elicit the theory of knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. One feels, however, that Hazony isn't presenting an epistemology of *Hebrew Scripture*, but more particularly of *Jeremiah*. Indeed, the privileged status Hazony grants Jeremiah tends to bring into question the generality and internal coherence of a Biblical philosophy. It is commonly known that the teachings of the different prophets vary not only in style, metaphors, and representations but also in the content of their teachings (Compare, for instance, I Samuel 15:29 with Jeremiah 18:8-10 and Joel 2:13 on whether God repents of his decrees). This makes it hard to claim a coherent theory of knowledge, truth, and being, without privileging one prophet and ignoring the views of the others in order to form a coherent picture. We shall return to this problem later.

Notwithstanding, Hazony suggests a reading of Jeremiah which is captivating. Like Plato, Jeremiah argued that most men were mired in illusions resulting from the arbitrariness of the human mind. The only remedy for this defect is to attain knowledge from *experience*: 'The argument that true knowledge is available only "in the end" – or, as we would say today, by way of experience – appears time and again in Jeremiah's writings.' (187). For Jeremiah reality was a single realm potentially accessible by means of experience.

Towards the end of the chapter on 'Jeremiah and the Problem of Knowledge', Hazony points out that the originality of Jeremiah's theory lies in the fact that he grappled with the question of knowledge in a way which was not explored until modern times. Like Karl Mannheim and Thomas Kuhn, Jeremiah perceived human knowledge as advancing, under the pressure of anomalous events, by way of 'sudden and radical shifts in worldview', or what Kuhn called 'paradigm shifts'. If Jeremiah did indeed hold such a view (Hazony doesn't put forth any evidence,

but refers us to his PhD dissertation), then Hazony must prove that the Bible can be read philosophically before it is imaginable that historians of science will critically engage with a biblical prophet as a philosophical interlocutor.

What is 'Philosophy' and is it in Scripture?

Only in an appendix to the book does Hazony attempt at a definition of philosophy. This is a major fault for a book that argues against the grain that Scripture contains 'philosophy'. Even here, Hazony can only give a 'superficial treatment', a 'barest outline', or at best, a 'general direction' for further studies (265). Moreover, the definition Hazony advances does not intend to distinguish between 'philosophy' and 'reason'.

After a brief outline of Scholastic and early modern conceptions of reason, Hazony sides with a Newtonian conception of reason as a 'two stage procedure', which he defines as follows:

[R]eason [is] the exercise of those operations of the human mind by which [1] general causes are derived from experience, elaborated as laws and principles that are likewise general in character, and [2] applied to particular cases. (273)

Following this definition of reason or philosophy, Hazony concludes that Hebrew Scripture can be considered works of philosophy. Scripture, in Hazony's reading, derives general causes or natures from the things encountered in human experience, and it establishes principles or laws of general application to particular cases. Hazony's definition of philosophy is at once very specific and quite vague. The definition of reason with which Hazony works, would equally allow us to call Sophocles' *Antigone* a work of reason.

Contrary to what the title of the book might suggest, Hazony does not believe that the Hebrew Bible was ever intended to be read as 'one giant pastiche' or as a fixed philosophical system, but rather as 'an artful compendium whose purpose is not – and never was – to present a single viewpoint' (22; 41). However diverse the teachings of the Hebrew Bible are, Hazony nevertheless argues that it contains a discernible centre or tradition of thought which *can* be detected. This philosophical core is nowhere directly stated but rather gestured at by way of 'a family or a school of viewpoints, each of which brings us to this centre from a different place' (ibid.).

According to Hazony, this plurality of perspectives is the result of two distinct facts: the plurality is first a result of the fundamentally

political character of the biblical corpus, which was compiled over centuries and represents the views of both common men and kings; the philosophy of the Hebrew Bible is the thought of an entire nation. Second, since the understanding of each biblical author is partial (even Moses's), then the purpose of the biblical editors in assembling the artful compendium we call the Hebrew Bible was not to construe a monolithic work with an explicit and unambiguous message:

It was rather to assemble a work capable of capturing and reflecting a given *tradition of inquiry* so readers could strive to understand the various perspectives embraced by this tradition, and in so doing build an understanding of their own (65).

The conclusion seems to be that the Hebrew Bible *can* be read philosophically, if what we understand by this is not the systematic exploration of a given author or school, but a common tradition of inquiry made up by a plurality of schools, authors, and editors, who ultimately point to a common philosophical centre.

There are certainly times when Hazony's readings of the Hebrew Bible is quite strong. In his chapter on the shepherd's ethics, Hazony manages to present a convincing argument about a special Hebrew ethos. At other times, for example in the chapters where he attempts to distil a Biblical epistemology, the arguments are less convincing. It seems forced to see Jeremiah's orations as discourses on epistemology and not primarily as morally critical orations directed against the decadence of the Israelites and their rulers. Nonetheless, I found Hazony's book bold and inspiring. One of its prime virtues is how the author joins scholarly rigor to a captivating and pedagogical presentation.

It must finally be remembered that Hazony's book is an introduction and as such it suggests, indicates, and promises. This means that more often than not the arguments are more forceful than the conclusions, the details more interesting than the whole, and the individual assessments more robust than the general hypothesis developed. This makes *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* worth reading for anyone interested in Biblical studies or ancient philosophy.