

# Nationalists Don't See What Is Special About Our Biblical Nation

America ceases to be unique when we reject individual rights and equality among citizens of various origins, faiths and creeds.

By Samuel Goldman

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Does the Bible make us American? On one side of this debate stand those who see America as a "Christian nation." On the other stand those who highlight religious skepticism among the founders and insist on strict separation of church and state.

A third faction has entered the fray. Drawing on recent scholarship, a provocative group of intellectuals argues America can be understood as a "Hebraic" nation, decisively influenced by Jewish scripture (what Christians call the Old Testament). In particular, they emphasize the United States' origins in the ideal of self-governing peoples with defined borders. According to Yoram Hazony, author of "The Virtue of Nationalism" and organizer of a summer conference on "national conservatism," the "idea that the political order should be based on independent nations was an important feature of ancient Israelite thought as reflected in the Hebrew Bible."

Hebraic nationalists have a historical point. Contrary to interpretations of the American Revolution that stress the influence of enlightenment philosophy or Roman republicanism, patriots were more likely to cite the Bible than any other source in making the case for independence. Even Benjamin Franklin, among the most heterodox leaders, proposed Moses crossing the Red Sea as the new nation's emblem and "rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God" as its motto.

But focusing on nationalist elements of the Hebrew Bible can obscure its broader teaching. The ancient Israelites are not only a model of political autonomy. They are chosen by God to model righteousness as a "light unto the nations." If Americans can be compared to the biblical Hebrews, it is as a people with a special responsibility to uphold universal principles. In a moment of nationalist fervor, conservatives should not neglect this distinctive, if paradoxical, aspect of America's heritage.

To understand the complicated relationship between the Hebrew Bible and American national identity, we have to go back to the Puritans. Fleeing what they considered tyranny, Puritan settlers adapted the Exodus narrative to justify their so-called errand into the wilderness. Some ministers went beyond analogy and proposed that New England derive a constitution directly from the Bible. The Yale sociologist Philip Gorski describes this turn to the Hebrew Bible for political inspiration as the "Mosaic moment."

New England Puritans did not consider themselves separate from the mother country. Many of their descendants, however, concluded that Americans had become one people entitled to independence. Even religious skeptics such as Thomas Paine drew on the ancient Israelite example in his brief against monarchy.

Unlike the Puritans, American patriots were not copying political forms out of Deuteronomy. But many read the Hebrew Bible as a template for a self-governing nation with a federal arrangement of "tribes." And biblical stories and language were powerful rhetorical tools. The 18th-century audience was more familiar with Scripture than with the English philosopher John Locke or the Roman historian Livy.

But today's debates have less to do with what America used to be than with what it should be in the future. At the national conservatism conference, Mr. Hazony warned: "You throw out Christianity, you throw out the Torah, you throw out God, and within two generations people can't tell the difference between a man and a woman. They can't tell the difference between a foreigner and a citizen." "The only way to save this country," he added, "to bring it back to cohesion," is going "to be to restore those traditions."

It is far from clear how these traditions could be restored on the national level. Consider education. Since the 1990s, efforts to establish a common curriculum have foundered on public opposition — even without a controversial emphasis on religion. Rather than uniting a fractured people, such an effort seems more likely to divide us.

And the political implications of the Bible are not straightforward. Nationalist conservatives emphasize sexual morality and strong borders. During the revolution, by contrast, the central issue was the danger of monarchy. Not only Paine and Franklin but also more orthodox writers contended that the Hebrew Bible promotes skepticism toward charismatic rulers and the centralization of authority. With the growth of executive power since World War II, this lesson remains essential.

The fundamental problem is that the Bible balances a depiction of an autonomous Hebrew commonwealth with a transcendent standard of justice. "If there is a central political message for Israel throughout the Bible, it is this," writes Rabbi Meir Soloveichik. "For Israel to deserve independence, it must remember that it exists for a calling more important than independence itself." Indeed, much of the biblical narrative is devoted to Hebrews' failure to uphold their covenant.

The Declaration of Independence echoes the idea that sovereignty must serve a higher purpose. Rather than merely presenting a case against British rule of the colonies, it affirms universal truths. In an 1859 letter, Abraham Lincoln put it this way: "All honor to Jefferson — to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to enshrine it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression."

Lincoln further developed that argument following his election to the presidency. During his journey to Washington to take the oath of office, he speculated that “there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come.” Americans, Lincoln concluded, are an “almost chosen people” dedicated to principles of freedom and civic equality.

It is understandable that conservatives — and others — have become wary of this rhetoric. Too often it has served as an excuse for costly and unnecessary wars. Americans’ responsibility to oppose tyranny at home is not a calling to overthrow it abroad.

At the same time, we should resist an impulse that also afflicted the biblical Hebrews. In 1 Samuel 8, the Hebrews demand to become “like all the other nations” by abandoning their special obligation to God and choosing a king who fights for only them. Like Israel in its faithless moments, America is untrue to itself when we neglect individual rights and equality among citizens of various origins, faiths and creeds in favor of cohesion and power. Nationalism that opposes what is unique in the nation is not conservative. It is a contradiction in terms.

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