POLITICS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

God, Man, and Government

MATTHEW B. SCHWARTZ • KALMAN J. KAPLAN

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and
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FOREWORD

This volume dealing with political thought in the Bible is organized around three focal concepts:

- Individuation and Differentiation Against Uniformity and Conformity
- Organic Morality Against Abstract Equilibrium
- Hope Against Fear Regarding the Future

This volume is a very innovative work that elucidates biblical political and moral thinking in comparison with Occidental thought and provides a very timely analysis of the types of relationships that have been at the center of the deliberations of polical scientists, psychologists, theologians, and philosophers.

It is important to point out that indeterministic Judaic morality is significantly different from the deterministic thinking of Occidental philosophy. Because the Bible is the fount of indeterministic morality, it is interesting to see how Professors Schwartz and Kaplan compare Judaic thought with other modes of thinking in religion and political science.

The psychology of the Bible is a discipline that has not been well received by students of the Bible. Most of them are scholastic thinkers who are not well-versed in psychology and those who are seem to not know how to relate psychology to their biblical concerns.

It is therefore with great interest that I welcome this volume and recommend it highly to biblical scholars, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and intelligent laypeople.

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PREFACE

The Hebrew Scripture enjoins the Israelites to "Put a king over yourselves" (Deuteronomy 17.15).[1] However, later we read in Psalms the following warning: "Put not thy trust in princes" (Psalms 146.3). The first directive is clearly not anti-monarchial. Yet the second warns us not to trust princes. How do we reconcile these two directives which seem at first glance to be contradictory? Were the Israelites pro- or anti-monarchial? Were they better off with or without a king, or even a prince?

To us, it means that although a king may be desirable, he has his limits, and God is the real king. Many ancient kings saw themselves as gods. The kings of Israel did not. Israelite kings should be obeyed and honored, but not abjectly as divinities. And people must be aware of potential abuses of the power they give their king. The prophet Samuel, for example, warns the Israelites that kings will "take your sons, and appoint them to him for his chariots and for his horsemen, and they will run before his chariots . . . and he will take your daughters for perfumers, for cooks and for bakers. . . . And he will take the best of your fields, and your vineyards" (I Samuel 8.11f.).

Monarchy can be a preferable form of government to a democracy which is controlled by mobs or where a powerful majority can suppress a weaker minority. Think of the often-used example of "two wolves and a sheep voting on what to eat for dinner." Totalitarian governments often begin democratically but become dictatorships with no respect for genuine civil liberties, protection of minorities and the defenseless, or due

process under the law. The expression is used "one man, one vote, one time," that is, one election and never another.

In contrast, the Hebrew Bible envisions a benevolent, concerned king anointed at God's command in a godly way. "Put a king over yourselves." This is not, however, a ruler thinking he is a god, but one acting righteously. When he does not, even a king as great as David can be chastened—as David was by the prophet Nathan. Thus, the important Biblical declaration—"Put not thy trust in princes." A monarchy may be a suitable form of government. Yet no ruler is so perfect as to be trusted completely. This is far different from ruling by portraying oneself as divine or infallible.

NOTES

1. All biblical quotes are taken from personal translation into English of Kaplan, Ariyeh, The Living Torah (see Bibliography).

I

Classical and Hebraic Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

Listening to conversations in meeting, locker, or waiting rooms could lead one to feel that many Americans are disgruntled with politics. This results in part from the unique nature of modern life. We are exposed, through the media, to a constant barrage of political talk, much of it presented through highly argumentative and deliberately provocative talk shows and blogs. The media dictates much of our politics even as it controls much of sports, so that voters may feel they are being subjected to the blandishments of the candidates' ad people and not so much to the real-life candidates themselves.

American presidential election campaigns go on not for a few months as in the old days, but for well over a year and a half. It was not so long ago that the candidates were selected by party conventions in July and August, and the active campaign kicked off around Labor Day. Candidates campaigned but little. Warren Harding won the presidency in 1920 while hardly venturing beyond the front porch of his Marion, Ohio, house. Has politics really degenerated, as many think? This is an arguable point. Let us remember that leaders have always been criticized by both political rivals and the press. Even our greatest presidents were not immune. George Washington was attacked in the press, and newspapers publicized Thomas Jefferson's alleged liaison with Sally Hemings. Andrew Jackson and his wife, Rachel, were vilified, and Abraham Lincoln was called a baboon and worse.

Americans are a sporting people who view politics somewhat as they do a football game—our side versus your side; let everyone play hard and

use every trick they know to win. Yet even if politics has not degraded, why has it not grown better? Why are we still fighting and complaining? Furthermore, why does our economy go through periodic slowdowns and painful failures? Why can we not bring stability to our families and cities or elevate the level of our schools? How do we find truly capable leaders?

This book presents insights from the Hebrew Bible about politics and government. Ancient peoples faced challenges often much like those of our own time. The Bible offers its own unique wisdom on how to govern, how to choose leaders, and how to address public problems. Its ideas are of a universal sort and useful not only to believers but to anyone who seeks wisdom. Our book will present a series of stories from the Bible, using a variety of literary, psychological, and historical interpretations.

Every form of government has its advantages and disadvantages, and much depends on the character of the leaders or on societal structures and practices. Fifth-century BCE democratic Athens, for example, achieved its golden age under the wise and vigorous leadership of Pericles (462–429 BCE). It flourished in commerce, war, literature, the arts, and in opportunities for its citizens. Yet the same democracy collapsed precipitously under Pericles's successors in the Peloponnesian War, and Athens's own historians record its cruelties toward weaker states, like Mytilene and Melos.

Ancient Israel too was hardly in a perpetual golden age. There were good kings and bad ones. Periods of moral and social uplift intermingled with times of weakness and decline. The worship of Baal and Moloch competed with the monotheism of great prophets and sages. The Bible does not whitewash or glorify its protagonists. It does present a truthful and instructive account of the ancient Israelites' political history and government.

The ancient Biblical and Greek worlds held very different conceptions of society, government, and political life. As philosophy was profoundly important in the thought world of ancient Greece, it is not surprising to find among the Greeks philosophical studies of government, as written by Plato and Aristotle—as well as political writing, as that of Isocrates and Demosthenes. Athens, Sparta, Thebes, and others each produced its own unique system of government. The way of life described in the Hebrew Bible places much less focus on political forms and theories. The Bible is a profound work, but its current is historical, psychological, and behavioral. Philosophical theory is of far less importance. The ancient Israelites

never developed a theater as did the Greeks, and they related to the spiritual world through the Bible, the Midrash, and later the Talmud, not through myth and philosophy.

The Israelites, who were not by any means a docile people, were nevertheless ready at a certain point in their history to accept a king and even pressed the prophet Samuel to give them one. Although they could rebel against a king or even assassinate him, they seemed to accept the institution. The messiah too, they believed, would be a king, descended from the house of David. God Himself is often addressed as Father and King.

The Greeks of the Mycenaean era were ruled by kings, some of whose names have made their mark on Greek mythology—Agamemnon of Mycenae or Argos, Nestor of Pylos, Menelaus of Sparta, Oedipus in Thebes. The Greeks too were not docile, and the kings in the early poleis were gradually, typically replaced by aristocracies, then tyrants, then democracies, most notably in Athens. Yet the Greeks could never unite under a single national king until they were conquered by Philip of Macedon in 338 BCE. They preferred to continue their style of constant intercity warfare, unproductive as it was. Perhaps part of the discomfort with a king had to do with the mythological picture of Zeus as a capricious and sociopathic father and king. The Greeks preferred their independence even if they did not manage it peacefully. The Romans hated monarchy for a very different reason. They were frightened by the episode in their early history when the city was conquered and ruled by Etruscan kings. The popular story centuries later of Julius Caesar's assassination claims that it was prompted by senators' fears that Caesar wanted to be crowned king. When Augustus finally became Rome's first emperor, it was after a century of civil turbulence and bloodshed, and the people longed for normalcy as well as feared Augustus's power.

The Israelites seem to have accepted monarchy as a matter of course. The kingship was not in itself hated, and God as a king was seen as a loving father and not as a narcissistic, avaricious, and cruel tyrant. Let us first examine three representative Greek and Roman scholars regarding the theory of government and then turn to three rabbinic thinkers.

Classical Greek scholars studied the theory of government in the abstract. Plato was Socrates's disciple and Aristotle's teacher and himself very interested in political theory. He wrote two books describing possible utopian societies: his first book, *The Republic*, describes a radical

utopia; his later book, *The Laws*, suggests ways for people to improve their governments. Aristotle in his *Politics* discussed brilliantly the various forms—democracy, tyranny, monarchy, oligarchy, and others—using specific examples from Greek history. Sallust, a Roman historian of the first century, took a hard-nosed critical look at the bloody civil wars and political rivalries of his own time in his narration of the conspiracy of Catiline, in 63 BCE.

For the Greeks, Zeus as ruler of the gods and of the world is a figure of frightening and capricious power, neither benevolent nor reliable, and certainly not moral. For the Bible, national government is monarchy. The king carries various responsibilities toward God and his people. He is to be honored and respected, but his power is not absolute. God is king of the world, all-powerful and all-benevolent. After the time of Moses and Joshua, the Israelites were led by judges, who arose irregularly to lead according to the needs of the hour and who governed only parts of Israel.

Saul was the first king, anointed ca. 1020 BCE, and both later Biblical kingdoms, Israel and Judah, were ruled by kings. In the Talmud and for medieval rabbis like Maimonides, kingship is the preferred and normal form of governing. The king at his best is a pious servant of God, devoted to his faith and to serving his people. Only Don Yitzchak Abravanel argues that democracy is better than monarchy and that both history and reason show the virtues of democracy.

Rabbinic scholars of the Bible have generally preferred monarchy to other forms of government. First, the Pentateuch itself encourages and commands the appointment of a king. This would seem only natural in a world in which God Himself is addressed as king. The presence of a king was thought to lend dignity to a nation and to create a standard for people to live up to.

Let us now look at some of the main writers, representative of classical and rabbinic views on government. We turn to the classical thinkers first.

THREE CLASSICAL POLITICAL THINKERS

Plato (429–347) and Aristotle (ca. 384–322) were philosophers who studied governments, among many other things. Plato was more theoretical and esoteric. Aristotle wrote in the manner of an academic political scien-

tist and researcher. The importance they assigned to government and its structures differs greatly from the view of most Biblical commentators, who saw government as merely one tool people would use to develop the sort of world that God wanted. The Roman Sallust (ca. 86–35 BCE) was no theorist but was closer to an astute journalist recording and commenting on the events of his own times.

Plato

As mentioned above, Plato was Aristotle's teacher and himself a political theorist. He wrote two books describing possible utopian societies: *The Republic* and *The Laws.* In *The Republic,* which describes a radical utopia, Plato uses his teacher Socrates as the instructor. This republic would be very unlike the Athenian democracy in which Plato lived. People's lives would be rigidly controlled. Men would not be able to choose their own professions and marriages. These would be dictated by the state, which would be ruled by men trained in philosophy. Most citizens, however, would not study subjects like literature that seemed unnecessary. How would citizens become willing to accept such restrictions? A myth would be promulgated explaining that all people are descended from earlier races who were made of different metals—gold, silver, and others. Those descended from the gold people would be the philosophers and so on. One's life pattern is thus fixed by his supposed ancestry. The philosophers constitute a unique elite which would rule the republic. All this may well reflect Plato's personal disillusion with the Athens that had failed disastrously in the Peloponnesian War and had executed his beloved teacher Socrates.

Plato's republic is not a monarchy, and it is far from democratic. He intersperses important ideas on truth, religion, and transmigration of souls, saving some of the spiritual material to the last section of the book. *The Republic* almost seems more concerned with spiritual issues rather than political philosophy per se. In Plato's later book, *The Laws*, it is no longer Socrates expounding but an unnamed Athenian, who advises two men from Sparta and Crete on how to improve their own governments. Plato himself had been called upon to form a constitution for the city of Syracuse, in Sicily. His plan was not followed, leaving Plato disappointed and perhaps more ready to participate in political talk with his fictional Spartan and Cretan.

In both books, Plato shows himself a brilliant and creative thinker, who is not beyond occasional silliness and even cruelty. His Athenian sage criticizes the Persian government as too authoritarian, keeping its people heavily subjugated. Cyrus and Darius were great kings, but most of the others were raised in harems and grew up to be debauched, weak fools. However, the Athenian democracy offers too much freedom, and this too will not work. The very fact that citizens compete for office encourages the winners of elections to try to take control so completely as to deny the losers any share of power. It is better that we should run our lives, homes, and cities in dedication to the little spark of immortality in us (*Laws*, 123–124). The best and noblest policy is to pray and sacrifice to the gods. Worship the Olympians and after them the gods of the Underworld. The highest honor for a person is to cling to something spiritual (191). Plato goes on to describe in detail every aspect of life under his laws—marriage, slavery, business, and also a detailed bureaucracy led by a group called the Guardians. Thus Plato, in a sense, leans toward the Biblical view in calling for a strong spiritual content in society and yet advocates in detail a government which will have strong control over its citizens' lives.

Aristotle

One of the most brilliant, comprehensive, and insightful treatises on government was written over 2,300 years ago by Aristotle, a thinker so admired that even pious rabbis and church theologians of the Middle Ages would call him "the divine Aristotle." In *The Politics*, he analyzes various forms of government, both popular and despotic, using specific examples to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each. There is no evidence today to indicate that Aristotle knew the Hebrew Bible, although there are stories of his students encountering Jews. (We shall both quote and paraphrase extensively from Benjamin Jowett's translation of *Politics.*)

Man, says Aristotle, is by nature a political animal, meaning that he is best fitted to live in a state (polis). When he is perfected, he is the best of animals. Separated, however, from law and justice, he is the worst. Without virtue, he is the most unholy, lustful, and savage. Justice is the principle of order in a state which enables people to live purposeful lives. The

state is prior to the family and the individual since the state is the whole and the others are merely part of the whole (1253a).

Any government which has regard to the common interest must be built on strict principles of justice and truth. A state which regards only the interests of the ruler is defective and perverted. A state is at its best a community of free people. Every form of government has its good and bad aspects. True forms of government are those which the one, the few, or the many govern with a view to the common interest (1279a). The true state is not merely a group of people with common location or interests such as to further business or to prevent crime, but to encourage noble actions and the highest development of virtue (1280b–1281a). In a state where the multitude is supreme rather than the few, the government is less likely to err, for it combines the knowledge and abilities of many. Indeed, it is better that the mass of free citizens should not hold high office, for their folly can lead to error and crime, but there is danger in not letting the masses have the power. They should therefore be given suitable deliberative and judicial functions in the state, although not supreme power. Thus Solon, the wise Athenian lawgiver of the early sixth century BCE, gave even to the lowest classes of people the power to elect public officials and to publicly call them to account. Elections are best entrusted only to those who have knowledge. Yet the people as a body will generally choose well enough (1281b–1282b).

The state and its laws are concerned mainly with those inhabitants who are equal in birth or capacity. However, for men superior in virtue, there can be no binding law, for justice cannot be done to him if he is reckoned merely as equal to his fellows, who are in truth inferior to him in virtue and ability (1284a). Such a man should be a king in his state for life (1284b).

Monarchy is a true form of government. However, it is easier for the few to be corrupt than the many, as in a democratic government. And a single ruler is more liable to be overcome by anger and passion. The first governments in history were ruled by kings, until the time when increasing populations set up for themselves popular governments and constitutions. The best form of government is still that administered by the best individual or by many excelling in virtue (1286a–1288b).

In a democracy, the free majority who are not rich govern the state. An oligarchy is ruled by the few rich and noble. Both forms of government can work but err when they push too hard—for neither can function

unless it includes both rich and poor (1309a). Oligarchs should be supportive to the people and not do them any wrong. Democracy can err in believing that equality means the supremacy of the popular will and that freedom means doing what one likes. This is all wrong. Men should not think it slavery to live according to their laws (1310a). A tyrant can survive by one of two approaches. He can eliminate the most high-spirited citizens and can permit no public meetings, clubs, education, and so forth, which might move his subjects against him. He must operate an elaborate spy system to know everything his subjects are doing. He may wish to encourage quarrels among them and should keep them poor and hard at work, as the pharaohs did in forcing thousands of their people to labor on the pyramids. He may impoverish the people with heavy taxes or make wars so that the people can never have their own leaders. And he may even encourage people to inform against members of their own households (1313a and b)—shades of Stalinism. The tyrant dislikes anyone who has dignity or independence, for he wants to be alone in his glory. In sum, (1) he sows distrust among his subjects, (2) he removes their power, and (3) he humbles them (1314a).

The second method of tyranny is very different. The tyrant will seem a benevolent public servant but without relinquishing any of his ruling power. He will give an account of the public funds and should seem to collect taxes and use public services only for the good of the state. Neither he nor any associate should ever offend the modesty of any of his subjects, and he should not openly indulge in vice and pleasure. He should seem a guardian of the state, devoted to the gods and honoring men of merit. Both rich and poor should see the tyrant as benefactor. Such a tyrant, Aristotle quips, will not be wicked, but merely half wicked (1314b–1315b).

Every form of government has its advantages and disadvantages and much depends on local circumstances. Yet, in general, the best government is one in which every person can act in the most virtuous manner and can live happily. Both a wise state and a wise person can act in the most virtuous manner and can live happily. Both a wise state and a wise person will regulate life according to the best end. Most people think that the art of despotic rule is statesmanship, but a good lawgiver knows how states may participate in a virtuous lie and in the happiness attainable to them. The life of a freeman is better than the life of a despot, for there is nothing noble in having others as slaves. Happiness is found only in

activity and virtue, and the actions of the just and wise will be a realization of much that is noble (1324b). For an individual or a state requires both right goals and correct means. Happiness comes from understanding and exercise of absolute virtue. Three things make people virtuous and good—nature, habit, and rational principle. Ultimately, a state needs philosophy, temperance, and justice (1323a f.).

Aristotle's approach is theoretical and structured, in a way which the Hebrew Bible is usually not. Yet there is much with which a Biblical person would agree except in two important areas. First, God and faith play no role in Aristotle's polity. Second, the Bible presents detailed rules for virtuous behavior while *The Politics* leaves this area unexamined.

Sallust

The Roman Sallust, approaching from the point of view of a hard-nosed, practical historian, wrote about the Conspiracy of Catiline of 63 BCE and offered some pungent remarks about both the citizens and the leaders of Rome. People seemed to act with poor judgment to their own detriment, ready to destroy the stability of the empire in order to satisfy their short-term desires. The excellent foundation for governing set by the great accomplishments and exploits of the early Romans was due to the eminent merit of a few citizens, who left an important and positive imprint. Centuries later, after the state had become demoralized by extravagance and laziness, the state in its turn was able, due to the greatness of its foundations, to sustain the shortcomings of its later leaders. In Sallust's own time, he says, there were no men great in merit except Cato and Julius Caesar.

Catiline, a young nobleman dissatisfied with his lot, gathered a large number of malcontents to overthrow the government. The conspiracy probably would have succeeded if not for the determined response of Cicero, who pushed a somewhat reluctant Senate into sending troops to quell the attempted coup in a hard battle.

Let us paraphrase Sallust. (See his *War with Catiline* and other works translated by John C. Rolfe, 1960.) At no time has the condition of imperial Rome been more pitiable. The whole world was subdued to her. Yet there were citizens who from sheer perversity were bent on their own country's ruin. Despite the large rewards offered, no man was induced to betray Catiline's plot, and not one deserted his army. The ordinary people

desired a change; as in every community the poor envy the rich, exalt the lowly, hate what is old and established, long for what is new, and desire upheaval. They respected the empire as little as they respected themselves. People of the opposition party preferred to see the government overthrown rather than be out of power. Nobles strove ostensibly in support of the Senate but really for their own personal advancement. Some claimed to be supporting the Commons and others the Senate, but all strove really only for themselves. And all parties were ruthless.

Sallust's description of the selfishness of too many Romans sounds much like too many other governments both before and since. He is a practical recorder of events and not a philosopher. It is not his intent to propose another form of governing as by nature better or worse than the Roman. He describes human nature and how people behave when in power or when trying to pull others down from power. Yet his view of the rampant selfishness is not unfamiliar to many times and places.

THREE RABBINIC POLITICAL THINKERS

Let us now turn to three representative thinkers from the rabbinic world and their explanations of the Bible's view on political life. These thinkers do not agree on all matters. They lived in different eras and places—twelfth-century Egypt, fifteenth-century Portugal/Spain/Italy, and nineteenth-century Germany. They all agree that good government is important, but its purpose is always to maintain the Torah life, not to govern a polis. For these thinkers, politics is a means to an end and in no way an end in itself.

Maimonides

Moses ben Maimon, eminent Talmudist, philosopher, and physician (1135–1204), includes a section on "Kings and Wars" in his masterful compendium of Jewish law, *Mishna Torah,* which he published late in the twelfth century. Partial manuscript copies in Maimonides's own handwriting still exist. There was no Jewish king or kingdom during Maimonides's time, and his description of a king is not a study from history but rather of laws based on the Talmud and Bible. The king rules as an appointee of God. His purpose is to serve the people, and he must rule

wholly in accordance with that fact. Where he must be tough or gentle, it is not simply because this suits his natural inclinations but because the law requires that approach at that moment. He bears a mission to build and improve a God-centered nation.

The *Mishna Torah* is a book of laws, and Maimonides shows no interest in the theoretical study of variant political systems as the Greek thinkers did, although he highly admired Aristotle. Instead, Maimonides speaks of a kingdom and seems to ignore the possibility of any other kind of government. Yet Maimonides's king is not an absolute ruler but is very much a part of a Torah-centered society. The law requires that Israel have a king. Nevertheless, God was displeased when the people of Israel asked Samuel to appoint a king since their request was formed in a way rejecting of Samuel and of God (I Samuel 8.4–9). The people wanted a "king like all the nations," not necessarily a godly leader as Samuel himself had been.

A new king who does not succeed his father needs to be appointed by a prophet along with the high court, and he must be anointed with a special oil and near a river, symbolizing the continuing flow of his reign. Kings succeeding their fathers do not typically require anointing. A new king must be God-fearing and hopefully wise as well. Men of professions that people regard as coarse shall not be kings, for example, bathhouse attendants, tanners, and butchers, because people will not respect them.

The king must be treated with great deference. One may not ride his horse, sit in his chair, or use his scepter or crown or any of his implements. Nor may anyone marry his widow. He may not compromise his honor. People should bow before him. Only he is permitted to sit in the courtyard of the Jerusalem Temple. Despite the respect due to the king's person and possessions, he is not an absolute ruler. He must be very humble, as the Scripture says that Moses was the humblest of men. The king must dedicate himself to helping people with their problems as a nurse helps an infant (Maim. 2.6).

Each king must write out a scroll of the Pentateuch and correct it from the scroll kept in the Temple. One copy should be small enough so that he can keep it with him at all times. There should also be a second full-size scroll.

He may marry eighteen wives (or concubines) but no more. (Biblical law, of course, permitted polygyny.) He shall keep only enough horses for his actual needs, no extras. He should not aim to build up his treasury

beyond what is required to pay the expenses of his government or for public needs. To add more is seen as a punishable offense.

Let the king devote himself totally day and night to the study of the Torah and to attending to the needs of the people. "His heart is the heart of all Israel," and he must live in unfailing devotion to that ideal (3.6).

A king may levy taxes and draft men into his army or to government jobs. He may take half the spoils of an enemy defeated in war and keep land that he conquers. In all that he does, he must be devoted to God and to justice and to support for his people. He may enter a necessary war as he wishes. However, to begin any other war, he must obtain the consent of the high court of seventy-one. Detailed regulations govern how the king must deal with various enemies and lands where he fights.

Maimonides writes nothing of politics in the way that Aristotle does. It is taken as understood that a king will need occasionally to play political games. However, politics will be for him no more than a method of serving God's higher purposes for himself and his people. Democratic government is not mentioned.

Yet this portrait of a good king does not quite suffice. Situations arise that call for a response beyond what the law books cover. In such a case, how rigid or flexible should the king be? For example, in his section on the laws of murders, Maimonides points out that there may be a body of a man who was clearly murdered but where the evidence, though pointing obviously to the murderer, is not of the type to convict and punish him. In such a case, it can be possible to step beyond the Torah law and to act according to the king's law; that is, the king has the power to promulgate royal law, which supplements and sometimes substitutes for Torah law. The king, in this case, may convict and execute the murderer based on royal law alone (Code: Laws of the Murderer 2.4). Local courts too may assume powers to render judgments that go beyond Torah law, if it seems necessary to protect the community. Rabbinic responsa literature notes cases of rabbinic courts in medieval Christian Europe that rendered and carried out such special decisions.

Don Yitzchak Abravanel (Abarbanel)

Don Yitzchak Abravanel (1437–1508) had served most ably as a trusted advisor to both King Alfonso V of Portugal and the powerful Dukes of Braganza. However, Alfonso died of the plague in 1480 at age forty-nine

and was succeeded by Joao II, suspicious, greedy and tyrannical, and determined to reduce the power of the nobles. In May 1483, Abravanel was summoned to appear before the king. En route, he was warned of the arrest of the duke and of the great danger to himself. Abravanel quickly fled to Castile, taking a longer route to avoid the king's agents. In the autumn of 1483, in Segura, a small border town, he wrote his commentaries on Joshua, Judges, and Samuel: four large volumes, a product not only of research but of his own observations of politics. His reputation as an expert on finance preceded him, and he was summoned before King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Aragon/Castile and given a major position in their government. Ferdinand was crafty and ruthless and anxious to get his hands on Jewish money. He had brought in the Inquisition in 1480, and in May 1492 surprised the Jews by ordering them all either to convert to Christianity or to leave Spain. Abravanel again fled, this time to Italy where he became an advisor to the Doge of Venice and published the remaining volumes of his important Biblical commentary.

In his commentaries, he expresses his views on government. He is one of the few Jewish scholars to prefer democracy to monarchy, a view quite possibly affected by his personal experiences with both forms as well as by his wide knowledge of Torah and of classical and Christian writers like Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas, and others.

In his interpretation of the story of the anointment of King Saul as the first king of Israel by the prophet Samuel, he cites five reasons given by earlier scholars for the people's request for a king. (1) The people wanted someone to lead them into the worship of idols. Abravanel regards this as highly unlikely. (2) The Israelites asked for a king simply to be "like all the nations," and not for any good purpose. (3) They wanted a military leader. (4) The people rejected Samuel and wanted a form of government different than what Samuel and his predecessor Judges had provided. This, however, says Abravanel, does not fit the text. (5) A king can submit himself to follow God's law, or he can seek absolute power with no attention to truth, justice, and righteousness, that is, a tyrant.

According to Abravanel, Saul, the king whom Samuel anointed, did not succeed as king because he followed the dictates of his own heart and did not sufficiently humble himself before God. David, who succeeded Saul as king, established his dynasty because he humbled himself before God and followed His law and His commands. Nevertheless, in most circumstances, a democracy is preferable to a monarchy because it is

more likely for a king to err than for many people to err. Monarchies have many evils of violence and corruption. Abravanel argues that Rome grew as long as it was a republic, but declined under the emperors. In his own times, the kingless Italian city-states like Venice, Florence, Genoa, Siena, and Bologna all flourished. Kings are not really necessary, and even if they are all right for certain nations at certain times, they are not for Israel. Jews do not need kings to fight their wars, to make laws, or to act as judges, and bad kings contributed to the fall of the Biblical kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

God did not object to the ancient Israelites having a king per se, but they should have allowed God Himself to command it and not asked for a king "like all the nations." (See Abravanel's commentaries on Deut. 17 and I Sam. 8.) When a king does rule, his most essential quality should be humility. He must not follow pride or personal inclinations or desires.

He should maintain a strong army but only in order to keep peace, not to pursue glory. People should not rebel against a king, for it is by God's will that he comes to power and only God should remove him. On this point, Abravanel disagreed with most medieval writers.

In his commentary on Genesis 10–11, Abravanel proposes an even more extreme view that is reminiscent of certain Greco-Roman ideas on the lifestyle of earliest humankind (for example, the Roman Seneca Ep. 90). People, says Abravanel, sin in wanting better technology and larger cities rather than living simple pastoral lives. They see highly organized governments and societies as goals of humankind—holding high office, prestige, wealth, violence, robbery, and bloodshed are all necessarily expected. However, God did not design people to live that way.

Property was, at first, all shared, but people forsook a society rooted in brotherhood and preferred a society based on private property. This led them to be covetous and greedy and introduced all sorts of divisions, classes, and conflicts. In fact, it was wholly unnecessary for people to assist nature, and they certainly must not violate it. However, in the earliest generations of the world, people come to believe that the aim of human existence is a political society, and they substituted worship of material objects for the worship of God. It was for this reason that they built the Tower of Babel.

Samson Raphael Hirsch

Samson Raphael Hirsch (1820–1888), a rabbi and PhD historian in Frankfort on Main, wrote in his interpretation of Deuteronomy 17 that Moses instructed the Israelites that not a human king but God Himself will conquer the land of Israel for them and keep them safe there. It is the land which "I will give you." A king will be first appointed only later after the Israelites have settled the land, and he will be appointed when the people want a king. He will not be a tyrant to whom the people need give up their independence. The main need for a king is to help people to be faithful to their God-given purpose of being an Israelite nation focused on Torah. The king should be a model for fulfillment of duty and spirit. By uniting the nation under his rule, he opposes the dangers of civil estrangement from the national purpose threatened by possible decentralization, as in the story of the concubine of Gibeah. (Judg. 19.1f., "And in those days there was no king in Israel. Each man did what was right in his own eyes.")

The nation of Israel itself will enter Canaan and conquer and divide it without a king. Only when the work of conquest is completed and people can devote themselves to carrying out the lofty mission of life according to Torah will a king be needed. The central Temple, as King Solomon built it, can only then become the central bearer of national devotion to the mission of a Biblical people. The only war the king will need to attend to is the war against Amalek. As it turned out, however, says Rabbi Hirsch, the twelve Israelite tribes did not complete the conquest of Israel quickly nor did they drive out the polytheistic influences. Therefore, their demand for a king from the prophet Samuel was premature.

In the next chapter, we will introduce three organizing principles by which to distinguish a Biblical view of society and political life from that of the Greeks and Romans.

I

THREE ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

This book is about a Biblical approach to politics, and the place to begin is in outlining the Bible's distinct view of society, family, people, and life itself. For the Bible, government is not an end in itself but a means to improve human life, to give a maximum of opportunity for people to grow and develop in faith, individuality, and creativity. Politics at its best is not merely a matter of political campaigns and maneuvering. Certainly, political success is not a goal in itself. The family is of immense importance as representing the crucible in which people may develop and protect each human being from the potential domination by a mechanical political system. In much of what follows, the Biblical view will be contrasted implicitly or explicitly with ancient Greco-Roman views, and implications will be drawn for modern political life and society. We will discuss three areas of important contrast: (1) individuation/differentiation against uniformity/conformity, (2) organic morality against abstract equilibrium, and (3) hope against fear toward the future.

1. INDIVIDUATION/DIFFERENTIATION AGAINST UNIFORMITY/CONFORMITY

Biblical, Greek, and Roman societies held very different conceptions of the organization and purposes of societies. H. Mark Roelofs's insightful essay on Hebraic-Biblical political thinking (1988) makes the following comparisons. "The communal ideal of the Greek philosophers," Roelofs

argues, "was a conceptualized whole within which functionally differentiated participatory elements were organized in harmonious, rational interaction. The vision of the Roman legal tradition was of a universal order within which an all-encompassing law fairly distributed rights and obligations to all persons" (575). The decisive organizing principle for the Hebraic mind, in contrast, is history. "The nation is in essence always a historical fact, an experience to be met and understood in a narrative structure. For the Hebraic mind, the nation Israel was a people who came out of Egypt under Moses in the Exodus and went on to the conquest of Canaan" (575).

For Roelofs, the organizing principle for the Romans was an act of imperial *aggregation*, for the Greeks an *organization* of participants. For the Hebrews, however, the ceremony of the covenant involves an act of *congregation.* At the core of the Biblical-Mosaic nationalist paradigm is the covenant consummated at Sinai after the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do. . . . Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you regarding all these words" (Exod. 24.3–8).

To be sure, the Greeks and Romans knew history; and we know that they produced great historians (e.g., Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy). However, the Greeks and Romans did not have a conception of God entering history as an organizing force for society. All of Greek history and society seem to have been influenced by what the Greeks saw as the primal narratives of their history. The poet Hesiod, in his *Theogony*, tells that the world began with *Chaos* (l, 116) from which comes the English word "chaos." The poet proceeds to tell the chaotic myths of the early titans and of their offspring—the gods of Olympus; stories full of anger, deceit, and violence, indeed a thoroughly chaotic beginning. These ur-stories set a pattern in which it seems that one can protect oneself and finally win only by acting with greater violence and treachery than one's opponent, and this view of the world made its way into the history and thought of classical Greece in the sense that the chaos must be controlled and mastered.

The Olympian gods were very little help in this regard. As such, the glue holding society together was reason, law, military power, and ultimately a stifling force of conformity. The Greek legend of Procrustes is

paradigmatic in this regard. According to legend, Procrustes would offer a night's lodging to travelers and fit them to the bed that they were on. In one version of the story, "Procrustes would lay short men on a large bed, and rack them out to fit it, but the tall men on the small bed, sawing off as much of their legs as projected beyond it. Some say, however, that he used only one bed, and lengthened or shortened his lodgers according to its measure" (Apollodorus, *The Library* 3:16.4; Plutarch, *Lives*, Theseus; Graves, *The Greek Myths: 1*, 96k). Another example of the Greek conception of a pure, unblemished form can be seen in Plato's almost obsessive love of geometry and, by report, his posting requirement of knowledge of it on the door of his academy as a precondition for study with him. "Let none ignorant of geometry presume to enter here."

Ancient Greece contributed words like *democracy* to Western civilization. Yet democracy without freedom and protection for individual rights can generate a tyranny of the majority. Think again of two wolves and one sheep voting on what they will eat for supper. Unless the sheep has protection from the tyranny of the majority, one can imagine its outcome on the dinner plates of the two wolves. So *democracy* in itself can become predatory, and it is also important to remember that the Greeks contributed the term *demagogue*, denoting a leader who gains popular support although he may be corrupt and unscrupulous. Athens featured a series of such people, especially during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), which it lost badly. It is not surprising then to find that despite the Greeks' brilliance in political knowledge, they could never in reality establish a politics that worked harmoniously at a practical level.

Individual differences themselves were suspect, despite pretensions to the opposite. For Plato, the *idea* of something was superior to the *concrete thing* itself, the *ideal* was always superior to the *real*, *being* was superior to *becoming*. The *idea* for Plato provided the glue that held life together. Thus, the idea of humankind was superior to the actual person. Utopian idealists from Plato to B. F. Skinner typically focused on the abstraction of humankind while totally disregarding real individuals. In George Orwell's *1984* and in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the individualist is treated as an outlaw by the society.

The ancient Greeks fought constant wars, so that it seems that their sense of identity was bound up with constant opposition to each other. The *poleis* saw each other as impending and constant threats to both their identities and their possessions. The memory of the brutal Trojan War

served as a foundation story for the classical Greeks. The years leading up to the devastating Peloponnesian War were marred by unending bellicosity, as Athens, Thebes, Corinth, Corcyra, Megara, and others could find no basis for harmony. The long Peloponnesian War devastated Greece, but even afterward the Greeks could not stop fighting until, in their divided, weakening condition, they were conquered by an outsider, King Philip II of Macedon.

In all its history, Europe has never been able to unify. Indeed, it has presented instead a history of constant belligerence and warfare. National differences remained so powerful that even in recent years soccer games between seemingly stable countries, like England and the Netherlands, have led to bloody riots.

Europeans became so sick of centuries of warfare culminating in the two world wars that they have been willing to surrender much of their independence and identity to fuse a European Union. An examination of the constitution of the European Union reveals a Greco-Roman type of organizing principle. A conformity is demanded from member states in terms of values and beliefs that do not surface at all in the American Constitution. Consider the second entry in Article 1-1 of the Constitution of the European Union:

> The Union shall be open to all European States which respect its values and are committed to promoting them together.

But what are these values? Article 1-2 outlines some high-sounding goals without providing any real mechanisms for achieving them:

> The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

This approach unfortunately can degenerate into an intolerant, even totalitarian, push for conformity, disguised as high-sounding principles. In its own words, for example, "The European Union holds a strong and principled position against the death penalty; its abolition is a key objective for the Union's human rights policy. Abolition is, of course, also a pre-

condition for entry into the Union." In other words, the European Union will not admit to membership any state that allows the death penalty, as if the specific legal policies of one country were the business of another.

The Biblical world has a very different approach, one which emphasizes the worth of the individual human being. Each person is created in God's image. "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them" (Gen. 1.27). The human being is not an abstraction but a real living being.

The entire creation narrative of Genesis can be seen as a series of divisions and differentiations. To begin with, creation is divided over seven days (Gen. 1 and 2). The world begins *formless* (*tohu vovohu*), which must be shaped, but this is not the same as beginning in *chaos* in the Greek narratives, which must be controlled. God is portrayed as a potter or a sculptor, providing form, not a dictator enforcing uniformity because he is so afraid of differences. On the first day, God creates the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1.1). Then he divides light (which He calls "day") from darkness (which He calls "night") (Gen. 1.4–5). On the second day, God divides the waters under a firmament which He has created from the waters above this firmament, which He calls "heaven" (Gen. 1.6–8). On the third day, God separates the dry land he calls "Earth" from the waters he calls "Seas" (Gen. 1.10).

The story continues. On the fourth day, God creates lights in the firmament of the heaven to solidify the division between day and night (Gen. 1.14). Further, God then separates "two great lights," the greater light (which we call the sun) to rule the day and the lesser light (which we call the moon) to rule the night; and the stars (Gen. 1.16). On the fifth day, God differentiates the living creatures swarming within the waters from the fowls which fly above the earth (Gen. 1.20). On the sixth day, God creates the beasts of the earth (Gen. 1.24–25) and as mentioned above, creates man in His own image, male and female, and gives them dominion over all the other creatures God has created (Gen. 1.27–28). Finally, on the seventh day, God rests (Gen. 2.1–3).

This is a remarkable narrative, embracing divisions and boundaries rather than being terrified by them. What is the glue which holds these divided elements together, rather than having them break off into chaotic sociofugal fragments? It is the underlying presence of God, the Creator, Himself. The Creator is the bond, allowing necessary division, autonomy, and separation of the individual parts, without threatening the whole.

A case in point is the Bible's first story of an attempt at centralized government, the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). Some years after the great flood, people migrated to the land of Shinar (Mesopotamia) and built a great tower intended to reach up to the sky. It was at one level a means of keeping people together rather than spreading over the entire globe as God had planned. It may have also been an attempt to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, so that the people would feel that they were becoming like gods, and even to battle or rebel against God Himself. God reacted by simply allowing the differences between them to come to the fore, and the people in fact did abandon the construction of the tower and spread out around the world. God had wanted them to expand and grow. He told them to spread out. Let nations and people develop their individualities within the guidelines of God's instructions which provide the glue allowing constructive differentiation.

Significantly, the American Declaration of Independence has grounded the creation of the United States in a transcendent Creator.

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

The US Constitution does not require the uniformity and conformity the European Union seems to demand. Indeed the Tenth Amendment ratified in 1791 reserves *Powers of the States and People* as follows.

> The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

As mentioned before, a case in point is that European nations will not admit to membership any state which employs the death penalty; whereas in the United States this issue is left to the individual states. Some states employ a death penalty, others do not. The United States Constitution seems to contain a basic appreciation for the right to be different and unique, somewhat absent in the conception of the European Union, despite the latter's lofty-sounding goals. In this sense, the American Consti-

tution seems more Biblical in outlook, and the European Union Constitution more Greek.

2. ORGANIC MORALITY AGAINST ABSTRACT EQUILIBRIUM

The history of every nation includes politics, people pushing and striving to achieve certain aims, whether of personal advancement or wider general interest. However, the Greeks showed an extraordinary interest not only in the daily give and take of politics but in its theory. Thus, Aeschylus extolled the democratic polis of Athens in his plays. Plato wrote with equal interest in his *Republic* of a totalitarian utopia, very unlike the democratic polis of Athens, and of an even more rigid state in *The Laws.* Athens had a long history of political change and reform, described in the *Constitution of Athens*, attributed to Aristotle. Their leaders, Draco, Solon, Peisistratus, and Cleisthenes all sought to solve problems in Athenian life by means of political reform. The Hebrew Bible says little on political ideology. Indeed, for some years after Joshua's time, there seems to have been hardly any fixed government at all, although there was plenty of infighting and even civil war. The effort to set up Saul as the first king was managed by the prophet Samuel only with considerable reluctance, and with many caveats as to the burdens a monarch would impose on the nation. For Samuel, Israel remained less a political entity than a Torah-centric polity in which both king and citizens were seen as owing their first allegiance to God and His law.

Some of the basic views of Greek and Israelite civilizations are expressed in the stories of Orestes and Cain/Abel. The themes of blood guilt and of civilization/city come together in the *Oresteia*, the great dramatic trilogy by the fifth-century Athenian playwright Aeschylus. It is striking that the same two themes are also conjoined in the Hebrew Bible in the narrative of Cain and Abel and in the laws of the city of refuge. Both the similarities and the contrasts between the *Oresteia*'s and the Pentateuch's views are striking and instructive. Let us look at how murderers were treated in each of these sources. Both stories deal with murder, punishment, and the role of a city in restoring the killer to a normalized life. However, there seems to be a major difference. Guilt and justice in Aeschylus's play almost seem to be an accountant's reckoning: blood must

pay for blood. A moral anger seems absent. This is not true in the Biblical account, where the moral considerations are paramount. Aeschylus opens his *Oresteia* trilogy with the play *Agamemnon*. The victorious commander Agamemnon, whose return from the siege of Troy is awaited, is in fact an arrogant, insensitive man, who had sacrificed his own daughter Iphigenia to the gods to gain favorable winds for the fleet and who has left the bones of the young men of his city before the walls of Troy. Now he brings Cassandra back with him to Argos, as a captive concubine to display to his wife, Clytemnestra. The queen, however, has not waited in innocent longing for her absent lord. Angered by many hurts from him, including their daughter's sacrifice, she has taken a lover, Aegisthus, with whom she plots and carries through the murder of her husband. The chorus, comprising citizens of Argos comments on the events, expressing a sense of right and wrong. Neither king nor queen seems to hold much sensitivity or guilt about murder, or the history of it in their families. It will not be until Orestes appears in the second play that any family member seems to feel concerned with morality or is able to feel guilt or have second thoughts.

The chorus says that a person can learn but really only through suffering. This is not merely a philosophical statement but a fixed ordinance of the world. Suffering enables people to change their lives and can help a person to be redeemed by that god whose wrath he aroused (l.163). To a man in his despair comes wisdom, and suffering raises his level of awareness and gives insight. It is only wretched delusion that makes men bold (l.215).

The chorus, at one point early in the play, expresses its praise of Zeus. This Zeus is, however, not a personal god of the Biblical type. Most lofty and transcendent, Zeus is manifest in many forms, but none of these take much interest in people's lives or play any role in this drama as the Biblical God did with Cain and Adam and so many others. The guilt which establishes itself through several generations of the family of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra is very hard to remove (632).

The essence of wisdom for these mythological figures is not the reverence for God, as the Bible teaches, but the avoidance of any semblance of hubris or pride. When Agamemnon returning from the war enters his palace on the embroidered carpet laid out for him, "it is not without ground for dread." For only when a man's life comes to end in prosperity, dare we pronounce him happy (923f., and also Herodotus's story of Sol-

on). Agamemnon's hubris in sacrificing his own daughter (223–230) will not go unavenged (154–155), and he is coldly murdered by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

The second play in this trilogy, *The Choephoroi (Libation Bearers)*, continues with the story of this dysfunctional family. Troubled by bad dreams, Clytemnestra has sent a chorus of women with her daughter Electra to bring offerings at Agamemnon's grave. Orestes, the exiled son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, has returned incognito from his long enforced exile, ordered by Apollo to avenge his father's death by slaying Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The powerful spirits rising from the father's blood demand the blood of the killer. The blood (l.400) will not dissolve away (l.65). Malignant underworld powers demand vengeance (l.275). The earth and sea are filled with such hateful horrors (l.585). Yet these forces seem not motivated by any moral sense as exists in the Biblical tradition, but almost out of an obsessive sense of equilibrium. The blood of Clytemnestra and her lover cancels out the blood of Agamemnon.

Orestes and Electra recognize each other and plan their revenge. Aegisthus is soon dispatched. Clytemnestra hopes to dissuade her son, but he kills her too. His work, spurred by Apollo, could seem complete, but in fact, his ordeal has hardly begun. Despite the support of Apollo, Orestes is now assailed and pursued by the Furies—deities hideous, loathsome, and relentless who seek only to make Orestes miserable and to harass and pursue him endlessly from place to place. As the play ends, Orestes hastens from Argos, desperate to escape his pursuers.

The Choephoroi presents a scene of chaos and conflict between earthly and human needs; in a mood of intense pressure, as fierce wrathful powers demand to be satisfied with bloody vengeance. People fear and seem almost obsessed with blood; voracious spirits are ubiquitous and threatening. It is a scene dark and joyless. Revenge is the only course to take, and so Orestes murders Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as the god ordered, but it leads only to new horrors.

In *Eumenides,* the third play in this trilogy, Orestes flees with nowhere to go, seeking only a moment's respite, a step ahead of the Furies and knowing that the cycle of vengeance can never be satisfied. Even after having undergone purifying rites (l.452), Orestes is still pursued, and neither Apollo nor Athene can help him. Yet there is hope. A tribunal will sit in the city of Athens to judge Orestes in the first murder trial in history.

The Furies argue their case to condemn Orestes, and Apollo acts as his defender. The best of Athens's citizens will now decide the issue in accordance with truth. The jury vote is a tie, and Athene herself casts the deciding vote to free Orestes. Athene placates the disappointed Furies, who now become benevolent deities, the Eumenides, to the people of Athens. Orestes expresses his gratitude to Athens, pledging that neither he nor his successors in Argos will ever approach Athens with warlike intent.

Aeschylus's story begins in a city rendered dysfunctional by bloody discords in the royal family of Atreus and proceeds into a wholly chaotic world, where the Furies hold sway and where even mighty Zeus has no presence. Orestes has tried to obey his gods, but even they cannot protect him from suffering. What can resolve the cycle of misery? It is the polis of Athens with its democracy and its citizens who participate in the government and sit on its juries. It is Athens that provides justice and cleansing for Orestes and that turns baneful netherworld forces into benevolent Eumenides. Athens is a civilized, humane polis world for Aeschylus, far better than the world of chaos or the dysfunctional Argos of Agamemnon's family. Yet a Biblical sense of morality and ethics seems glaringly absent.

The motifs of blood and pollution appear in the story of Orestes and also in the Genesis 4 story of Cain murdering his brother Abel. The stories display striking similarities but even more striking differences. Murder is a serious crime which cannot be allowed to stand without response. For Aeschylus the blood of the victim demands revenge. Otherwise, a fearful imbalance of pollution will affect the land. Cain too is told by God that the bloods (*sic*) of your brother cry out to me. The focus, however, is on the loss of a human life and of the good that person and indeed his descendants could have accomplished had he lived. Human life is the most precious entity, and it is life itself that is important, not satisfying a mythical effect of a crime.

Pollution emerges as a very important theme in Greek thinking. For Aeschylus, the land is almost an animate force demanding its due. The murder of Agamemnon has caused pollution in the land, and chthonic deities as well as the spirit of the slain cry for vengeance in the blood of the murderer. Without this the land cannot avoid the curses of its pollution.

The Hebrew Bible also has a concept of ritual purity and impurity. The term *tamei* denotes having come into contact with something defined as unclean, of which the most serious example is a dead human being. This is not looked upon as a curse in the Biblical view but can have the psychological effect on a person of feeling weighted down and both physically and emotionally removed from the divine presence. The Hebrew Bible provides means for a person to cleanse himself or herself whether by a ritual bath or a type of temple ritual. The point here is that the Hebrew Bible sets ways of overcoming this sense of impurity that do not involve the egregious suffering or guilt which so pervades Greek thinking (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, "Purity and Impurity, Ritual," volume XIII, 1405–1414, 19).

The Biblical Book of Numbers 35.33 too enjoins *lo tahnifu et haaretz*. Commentators variously translate *tahnifu* as "the people shall not make themselves unclean" (Siftei Hachamim). Or "people shall not do evil in secret" (Ibn Ezra). Ramban (Deut. 28.38–40) writes that the land of Israel is a special land because the Divine Presence is there. It therefore merits special care by its inhabitants. If the land is subject to *hanaf*, it will not produce to its full capacity. You will sow much and reap little. You will plant and work vineyards, but you will not drink wine (Jer. 3.1–2, Isa. 24.8). Murder is a particularly heinous crime, and the inhabitants must not *hanaf,* that is, make the land impure by ignoring murder—even when the murderer is a powerful or important person. Otherwise, the land's special relationship with God and the people of Israel is disrupted.

The blood itself has no polluting power, as in the Greek myths, but the shedding of blood and the failure to punish creates a fault in Israel's relationship with God and with each other (Mishna Yadaim 4.6–7). The Divine Presence will remain in the land of Israel even during a time of ritual impurity, but the people must also remove the impurity.

Samson R. Hirsch offers further explanation along these lines. *Hanaf* describes, he argues, a condition of hypocrisy, where appearance does not accord with reality. People have no joy in the land when serious crime is tolerated. God has bestowed upon people an almost divine freedom of will. Every drop of human blood is holy, and in that drop heaven and earth touch each other. A society that does not defend every drop of human blood denies the purpose for which land belongs to it and becomes in a sense hypocritical (*hanaf*). The human being is an image of the

divine, and to ignore the shedding of blood is an open denial of humankind's relationship with God.

The Genesis 4 story of Cain treats the same motifs of murder and city as does Aeschylus, but differently. Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve, have brought offerings to their God. Cain, a farmer, has brought of his produce but not the best, while Abel, the shepherd, has offered up the best of his sheep. God accepts Abel's offering, but not Cain's, as Cain has not done his best. Cain feels jealous, upset, and rejected. God tries to talk to him, but Cain does not listen and finally murders his brother. Even at this point God tries to talk with Cain although Cain has committed a terrible murder.

This is not a dysfunctional polis like Argos. Nor do the horrible Furies hound Cain. The bloods (*sic*) of Abel and his potential descendants cry out from the earth. Yet this seems more a poetic metaphor here—human history crying out over its loss. The text does not at all suggest any anthropomorphized subterranean powers going after Cain, in a "blood crying after blood" cycle and a search for equilibrium. God Himself removes Cain from his unhealthy possessive attachment to his farm and gives him a sign to protect him from others who might kill him. This represents a block to prevent the continuing of a long cycle of blood vengeance.

Cain becomes a wanderer for a time until, somewhat like Orestes, he finds an answer in building a city, which he names Enoch after his son. Cain's descendants will go on to be creative people—inventors of various crafts and technologies, even of musical instruments, and they will, in a sense, take up the work of Abel by raising animals.

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This difference in outlook remains when we turn our attention to self-murder, suicide. Another example of the difference between a cold abstract equilibrium and a human position can be seen in the comparison of

the prohibition against suicide as held by many of the Greek Pythagoreans and the Hebrew Scriptures. Suicide is wrong for the Pythagoreans because it upsets an abstract mathematical discipline set by the gods (Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, 2.216). There is a fixed number of souls, according to the Pythagoreans, that is available in the world at a given time. Killing oneself creates a gap by upsetting this mathematical equilibrium and must be rejected. For Plato, death frees the soul from the body, but suicide is generally prohibited because a human being is a possession of the state. "We men are put in a sort of guard-post, from which one must not release one's self or run away" (Plato, *Phaedo*, 62b–c). Aristotle sees it slightly differently. A person is not exactly a possession but definitely is obligated to the state. The state attaches a penalty against suicide "which takes the form of a stigma put on one who has destroyed himself on the ground that he is guilty of the offence against the State" (Aristotle, *Ethics*, 5.11).

The Biblical rejection of suicide is not abstract and mechanical. The individual does not belong to God in the sense of being an unthinking puppet, but he does not have a right to suicide. The notion of ownership implicit in the way the Greeks belonged to the state does not fit here. Instead, the human being, as the epitome of divine creation, has obligations commensurate with his central exalted position in the universe. To commit suicide destroys that position and scars the divine love on which the universe exists.

A person is not an abstract unit but a living being because he is a precious creation made in the image of God (Gen. 1.26). "Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2.7). A soul is not an abstraction but a living human being. "See I have put before you today life and death, blessing and curse, and you shall choose life so that you and your seed shall live" (Deut. 30.19).

3. HOPE AGAINST FEAR TOWARD THE FUTURE

Our third contrast may be the most important of all. It can be described as hope in the future versus fear of the future. Consider several famous incest stories in the ancient world: the Greek story of Oedipus and his

mother, Jocasta, and the two Biblical stories of Lot's daughters being impregnated by their father and of Tamar by Judah, her father-in-law.

In the well-known myth, Oedipus *unknowingly* slays his father and marries his mother. The story begins with an oracle's warning to King Laius of Thebes that there is danger if his newborn son should reach manhood, for the son will kill Laius and marry Laius's wife, Jocasta. This warning leads Laius to hand his infant son over to a herdsman to be destroyed. The herdsman, after piercing the infant's feet, gives him to a fellow shepherd, a kind person who carries him to King Polybus of Corinth and his queen, who adopt him and call him Oedipus (meaning swollen feet).

Many years later, when Oedipus grows up, another oracle presents him with a riddle rather than an intelligible prophecy, and this leads him unwittingly to his destruction. Questioning his identity, Oedipus goes to an oracle. The oracle prophesies that Oedipus will cause the death of his father and will marry his mother, neglecting to inform him that King Polybus and his wife are his adoptive rather than biological parents. Oedipus, who has known Polybus (with whom he has a good relationship) as his only father, takes the oracle to mean that he will kill Polybus.

To avoid killing the man he believes to be his father, Oedipus departs from Corinth. Along the way he encounters an older man on a narrow road. Unbeknownst to Oedipus, the man is Laius, Oedipus's biological father, who is heading to Delphi. A quarrel breaks out, and Oedipus does indeed kill the man (Laius) in self-defense—as well as all but one of his attendants.

Shortly after, Oedipus encounters the Sphinx—a monster part woman, part lion, and part eagle, which has been terrorizing Thebes by devouring all those who cannot guess her riddle. "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?" Oedipus correctly answers "man" and slays the Sphinx. In gratitude for their deliverance, the Thebans make Oedipus their king and give to him in marriage their queen—Laius's widowed wife and Oedipus's mother, Jocasta.

There is no evidence that Oedipus knows he is marrying his mother. Nevertheless, it is interesting to point out that Oedipus's answer to the Sphinx's riddle implies his acquiescence to a curvilinear or cyclical model of aging: the older person is like an infant. Such a view obliterates the demarcation line between generations, representing a hopeless view of

the human condition. The absence of a firm demarcation line between the generations undercuts any possibility of seeing each generation as a link in an intergenerational chain so central to Biblical thinking, and may well create a vulnerability to intergenerational incest.

Oedipus and Jocasta beget four children: two daughters (Antigone and Ismene) and two sons (Eteocles and Polyneices). He had a mistaken identity, unknowingly and innocently killed his father in self-defense (the same father who had tried to kill him when he was an infant), and unknowingly married his mother; yet the story could have ended happily. All is well that ends well. The Greek mind, however, won't let this rest. In Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, a great plague falls upon Thebes, and Oedipus is told by his brother-in-law Creon that the god has sent the plague due to a "defiling thing, which hath been harbored in this land" (ll.98–99). Oedipus innocently and conscientiously asks how Thebes can be cleansed. Creon responds, "By banishing a man, or by bloodshed in quittance of bloodshed, since it is that blood which brings the tempest on our city." This, of course, is part of the same "blood-vengeance cycle" discussed above in Aeschylus's *Oresteia.*

In the process of trying to uncover the reason for the blood-curse, Oedipus uncovers the facts that he has killed his biological father, Laius, and married his biological mother, Jocasta. The uncovering of these facts leads inexorably not only to his own undoing, but to Jocasta's, his sons', and his daughters'. He is filled with shame and self-loathing. "So had I not come to shed my father's blood, not been called among men the spouse of her from whom I sprang; but now am I forsaken of the gods, son of a defiled mother, successor to his bed who gave me mine own wretched being; and if there be yet a woe surpassing woes, it hath become the portion of Oedipus" (ll.1348–1352).

Reflecting these feelings of shame and rage, Oedipus rushes to confront and probably kill Jocasta: "To and fro he [Oedipus] went, asking us to give him a sword—asking where he should find the wife who was no wife, but a mother whose womb had borne alike himself and his children" (l.1256). Oedipus, seeing that his mother had hung herself, takes out his eyes with the golden brooches on her dress, as he does not want to face his biological parents in the next world.

As the story of Oedipus proceeds, more tragic events unfold consequentially. Aeschylus described it thusly in *The Seven Against Thebes*. After his blinding, Oedipus feels mistreated by his two sons and curses

them to kill one another. "A curse prophetic and bitter [of Oedipus on his sons]—The glory of wealth and pride, with iron, not gold, in your hand ye shall come, at the last to divide" (ll.785–786). One brother, Eteocles, becomes king of Thebes and exiles his brother Polyneices, a rival for the kingship. Polyneices enlists the aid of Argos and leads an army against Thebes to seize the throne. The two brothers do slay each other at the Seventh Gate of Thebes, fulfilling the curse of Oedipus. "And both alike, even now and here have closed their suit, with steel for arbiter. And lo, the fury-fiend of Oedipus, their sire, hath brought his curse to consummation dire. Each in the left side smitten, see them laid—the children of one womb, slain by a mutual doom!" (ll.879–924).

Creon, who has now assumed the vacant throne of Thebes, issues a proclamation that the body of Eteocles, the defender of Thebes, be given the full funeral honors due a hero, while the corpse of Polyneices, the attacker, be left unburied, without proper funeral rites, a punishment and a slight the Greeks viewed with horror. Antigone, their sister, refuses to follow Creon's order and attempts to bury her brother (Sophocles, *Antigone*, ll.406–418). Creon responds by ordering her buried alive (ll.891–896). Antigone subsequently hangs herself while in the vault below (l.1223).

This is a powerful story, and it is easy to be carried away by it. But one must ask why such a disastrous outcome. Why does Oedipus's unknowing killing of his father in self-defense and unknowing begetting children by his mother lead to such terrible consequences for his mother, himself, his two sons, and his daughter?[1] Oedipus is a very decent man, a compassionate king, and probably a good father and husband as well. Why then doesn't the Greek mind possess a psychological, legal, and political stopper, even more in the myth of Oedipus than in the story of Orestes discussed above?

The curse on Orestes is finally lifted even though he has actually killed his mother, albeit at the god's order, in revenge for her murdering his father. Oedipus has not purposely killed anyone in his family, except unwittingly his father in self-defense. Oedipus has begotten four children by his wife, Jocasta, whom he did not know was his mother: Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles, and Polyneices. They all seem talented. So why can't the story end reasonably? A bad beginning can lead to a good ending.

It is the Greek obsession with abstract pollutants that makes the Oedipus story end so tragically. Oedipus finds out Jocasta is his mother as

well as his wife. She hangs herself, he puts out his eyes, curses his sons to kill each other at the Seventh Gate of Thebes (which they do), and Antigone is buried alive because she refuses to leave her dead brother unburied.

Compare this to three Biblical stories illustrating hope for the future in the most difficult of situations. First, let us examine the incest between Lot and his daughters. After the miraculous destruction of Sodom in which their fiancés have been killed, the two daughters of Lot get their father drunk and lie with him because they believe he is the last man left in the world. "And the first-born said unto the younger: 'Our father is old, and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth. Come let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve the seed of our father'" (Gen. 19.31). Both daughters conceive, and two boys are born. The son of the elder daughter is named Moab deriving from the Hebrew words *Mo-Ab* (from the father) and is the ancestor of the Moabites; the son of the younger daughter called Ben-Ami is the father of the Ammonites (Gen. 19.36–38).

Israelites are forbidden to marry Moabite and Ammonite men not because of the incestuous origin of the people, but because their men did not show hospitality to the Israelites in the Sinai and also because they hired the sorcerer Balaam son of Beor to curse Israel (Deut. 23.4–6). Female Moabites and Ammonites, when converted to Judaism, were permitted to marry with only the usual prohibition against a convert marrying a *kohen* (priest). The shining example of this is the Moabitess Ruth. After her husband's death, Ruth chooses to remain with her mother-in-law, Naomi, and joins the Israelite nation. In a very moving speech, Ruth says to Naomi, "Whither thou goest, I will go; whither thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people and thy God my God" (Ruth 1.16). The incestuous nature of the origin of Ruth's family is never mentioned, and subsequently, Ruth marries Boaz (Ruth 4.13). Through their union, Ruth becomes the ancestress of King David (Ruth 4.17) and in Christian tradition the ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth (Matt. 1.1–17).

Another story supports this view—the sexual encounter between Judah and his former daughter-in-law Tamar. Judah, Jacob's fourth son, is a leader among his brethren, indeed the royal family of David and Solomon will stem from him. In Genesis 38, Judah separates himself from the society of his brothers and goes into business with Hirah the Adulamite, a Canaanite merchant. He marries a local woman, the daughter of Shua the

Canaanite (that is, someone outside the family) and the couple eventually raise three sons. Er, the eldest, marries; but God slays Er for an unspecified wickedness, and his widow, Tamar, is left with no children. The levirate law required that the brother (or close relative) of the deceased marry his childless widow to try to have a son with her—a son who would be an heir to the deceased. So Judah instructs Onan, his second son, to take this responsibility with Tamar. But Onan does not want to "give seed to his brother." Pretending to consummate his legitimate (but unwanted) marriage to Tamar, he allows his seed to fall to the ground rather than produce a son to carry on his brother Er's heritage (thus the word *onanism*). Onan's behavior is displeasing to God, and like his older brother, he also dies. Judah then tells Tamar to return to her father's house and live as a widow while she waits for his third son, Shelah, to reach the age when he will be able to marry her and fulfil the levirate requirement. But in point of fact, Judah, seeing that his two older sons have married Tamar and died shortly after, fears that he will be sending Shelah to the same fate. Time passes, and Tamar, who is no fool, realizes that Judah does not intend to send his third son to marry her; but she is determined to bear children for Er's sake—as well as to accept and participate in the God-given mission of Jacob's family.

In the meantime, Judah's wife dies. After his period of mourning, Judah goes to Timnah with his business associate Hirah for the annual shearing of the sheep, an important event that is celebrated with feasting and drinking. Tamar hears of this and is determined to practice a deception of her own, a lie whose purpose is honorable and will be, in Scripture's terms, "eye-opening." Dressed as a prostitute and with her face covered, Tamar approaches Judah at a crossroads as he is returning from the shearing. Though it is proscribed by everything in his upbringing, Judah decides to have relations with this prostitute and begins to negotiate a price. We should note that Tamar, in her deception of her father-in-law, is sitting at a *petach anayim,* which is generally translated as "crossroads"; but the Hebrew term, taken literally, would mean "opening of the eyes."

By deceiving Judah, Tamar opens his eyes and reveals to him what was best in himself. When Tamar is threatened with death for adultery, Judah assumes responsibility for his act and says "She was righteous (because I did not give her to Shelah). It is by me." In impregnating Tamar and acknowledging the act, Judah himself will beget twin sons,

Perez and Zerah to replace the dead Er and Onan. Perez will become an ancestor of Boaz and of King David and his dynasty.

Let us contrast these Greek and Biblical narratives. Each of these stories relates an act of incest.[2] Yet the story of Oedipus and his mother ends in disaster while that of Lot and his daughters and of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar ends happily. Why? The real difference lies in the underlying attitude toward the future and how that impacts on society. The very beginning of the Oedipus legend reflects the Greek distrust of the future. Oedipus is seen as a threat to displace his father Laius, and thus must be destroyed. The father, *afraid of the future*, has the power of infant exposure and uses it. This is the act which precipitates the later incest, unaware as it may be, and the entire tragic events of the house of Oedipus.

However, this is a view foreign to a Biblical view of society. Why doesn't Laius glory in the arrival of a new son who hopefully will surpass him? In the Biblical view, the father is not the owner of his son as with the Roman *patria potestas,* nor does he hold the power of infant exposure. The Bible sees the relationship between father and son in terms of the fulfillment of the covenant. Indeed, this is what the ceremony of the covenant of circumcision (*b'rit hamilah* represents. The urge of father to destroy his son is superseded by the command to the father to teach his children thoroughly (Deut. 6.7; Kiddushin 30a). The father's identity is not threatened by the son; he wants to see his son develop and surpass him.

The incest stories of Lot and of Judah reflect this Biblical *hope in the future*. Lot's daughters get their father drunk and lie with him because they think he is the last man left in the world. Tamar plays a prostitute with her widowed father-in-law Judah to carry on the tribe of Judah. These three women do not fear the future, but create it.

No Biblical story illustrates a faith in the future more than Miriam's calling on her parents to remarry to have more children, even in the face of Pharaoh's decree to murder all the newborn boys of the Israelites. The Talmud (Sotah 12b) fills out the rather cryptic account in Exodus 1–2 by telling how, when Pharaoh decrees that all Israelite infant boys be killed, Amram and Jochebed separate in despair over the doom that would fall on any male child they would bear. Miriam, still a very little girl, goes to her father and argues: "Pharaoh's decree affects only the sons; your act affects daughters as well." Amram accepts his daughter's advice and her

sense of faith, and he and Jochebed remarry (Miriam dances at their wedding). In due course, this reunion produces Moses.

This is the difference between these Greek and Biblical "incest" stories, and it is reflective of the underlying attitudes toward the future in Greek and Biblical thinking. Beneath it all, Greek society fears change and the future (this is why Plato elevates *being* over *becoming*) while Biblical society embraces it. The glue of the Greek political world is *stasis* (always in an uneasy battle with *chaos*). Change is a threat to this equilibrium. The glue of the Biblical world is the Creator. Thus, change is not threatening, and the future need not be dreaded.

As Franz Rosenzweig argues in *The Star of Redemption*, history has a meaning, proceeding from creation to revelation to redemption. God creates the world. God reveals to the human being. The human being by his closeness to God and by his resultant moral creative behavior redeems the world.

We now turn to an examination of Biblical stories as applied to the political world.

NOTES

1. The disastrous consequences multiply. Antigone's sister Ismene attempts unsuccessfully to share Antigone's fate; Antigone's lover Haemon, the son of Creon, commits suicide after he sees that Antigone has hung herself (ll.1221–1239); and Eurydice, Haemon's mother, stabs herself after seeing her son has died (ll.1297–1300).

2. Tamar's liaison with her father-in-law was to be forbidden in later Biblical law, but at this time it was a legitimate form of levirate marriage.

II

Biblical Stories and Their Implications For Political Life

2

INDIVIDUATION/DIFFERENTIATION AGAINST UNIFORMITY/CONFORMITY

Chapter 2 will discuss fourteen political narratives which illustrate the Biblical tolerance for individuation and differentiation as displayed in the creation story itself, in which the formless is given form. The views expressed in these narratives are contrasted with systems which seem to fear differences as chaotic and seem to demand uniformity and conformity. The first seven narratives will deal with the social order, and seven through fourteen with government and leadership.

THE SOCIAL ORDER

The following seven narratives treat the Bible's tolerance and even encouragement for individuation/differentiation within the social order. The first, Numbers 1, describes the actual physical ordering of the Israelite tribes around the Tabernacle as they journeyed through the desert to the Promised Land. Each tribe has a specific physical location in relation to the Tabernacle which serves as the binding center. The second passage describes the method of taking a census and the reasons behind it. This census does not simply treat people as mindless statistics but rather includes each unique person as a contributor to a specific purpose, in this case giving a shekel to the building of the Tabernacle. The third passage describes the degree to which King Saul listened to people's opinions. It

is good to listen to a variety of opinions. Yet, at the same time, it is important to separate oneself from simple conformity to the majority.

The fourth and fifth narratives deal with the relationship to secular authority. A healthy separation must be respected. A religious leader should not overstep his boundaries into the political, and the political leader should not control the religious domain. The sixth narrative describes the incident of the Tower of Babel. Attempts to blur the relationship between a political entity and heaven often push toward a totalitarian utopianism. The final narrative in this section discusses urban planning in regard to the Levite towns, which provides physical areas to give respite from the demands of everyday living.

1. Numbers: A Spiritual Center

God was creating a new nation and giving them a teaching (Torah) by which to conduct their lives as fully as possible. As in all societies, political and social structures would be important. The beginning of the Book of Numbers seems at first glance to be merely lists of names and statistics that the reader might as well skip over. However, closer thought shows how fundamental these accountings are in the formulation of a creative, harmonious social order. The social order would center around the Tabernacle, which would be the home of God's presence and teaching for the Israelite people. We shall compare the effect of the Tabernacle on the Israelites to the chaos and fear which emanate from less beneficent social centers more familiar to recent history, such as the Kremlin. Nor was Biblical society to be a dream-world utopia but rather a society centered on good thinking and good works.

"God spoke to Moses in the Tabernacle on the first day of the second month in the second year of the exodus from Egypt, saying . . ." (Num. 1.1). Numbers, the fourth volume of the Pentateuch, begins with a statement of the exact time and location, for an important event was to take place. It was on that day that God established a structure and unity for the new nation that He was forming. It was, in a sense, the ancient Israelites' Fourth of July.

Yet who were Israelites? How would they determine who was an Israelite and who was not? God commanded Moses to take a census. This was not the first national counting, but the census was to be taken of the tribes and families "according to the paternal line." Descent through the

mother would determine if one was indeed an Israelite at all, but membership in a particular tribe and family would be reckoned through the father. The census was not meant to provide information to economists or gerrymandering politicians. The Midrash suggests that the census was an expression of God's love. He counted the people at each new stage of the Sinai Desert experience as a traveler might check his pocket to find if his compass is still there.

More practically, the Tabernacle had just been erected, and the tribes and families had just been organized in their residences around it. This would be a society encamped around the Tabernacle as its vital spiritual and national nerve center. Every small unit and every individual was an essential cog in the society as every limb is vital to the human body. A person lacking a part of his body is incomplete, as the sky is incomplete if missing even one star, says the Midrash. National unity with individuality would both be important. God loved the nation and everyone in it. He had demonstrated his kindness to them also by multiplying their numbers from the seventy who went down to Egypt with Jacob to the current 600,000 men of military age as well as by the miracles which accompanied the exodus from Egypt.

This new nation that was taking form would have a unity of purpose and of society. It would be not merely a collection of discordant individuals. The ancestor Abraham's assiduous practice of hospitality ingrained in his descendants the importance not only of giving to others but of unifying hearts. The individuals had to join as a unit, without losing their individuality. They could find the truer freedom that grows in a strong base.

"And with you will be one man from each tribe, each one the head of his paternal line" (1.4). One leader from each of the twelve Israelite tribes would join Moses in conducting the census. Moses and Aaron took these designated men and assembled the entire community on that very day. "And all the people were registered by ancestry according to their paternal families" (Num. 1.18). Rashi, the noted eleventh-century rabbinic commentator, suggests that the people actually brought documents or witnesses to support their genealogical claims. Other commentators do not accept this view (e.g., Ramban), but Josephus, the historian, in the first century CE mentions the care taken with already ancient genealogical records in his own time. Scripture then lists the population numbers for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, "according to the records of the

paternal families" (Num. 1.2). The Tribe of Levi was not numbered along with them because the Levites' function was distinct—they would encamp next to and around the Tabernacle to watch over it and to perform its functions, lest a non-Levite approach the Tabernacle and die and so bring divine anger against the Israelites (1.51–53).

The Scripture goes on to say that each tribe would have its own place in the encampment and in the order of march as they journeyed through the desert to the Promised Land. Each tribe would have its own banner with its own symbol appropriate to its unique character, that is, a lion for Judah, a serpent for Dan, and a jasmine for Reuben. There is a strong sense of organization and of order, not necessarily of rigidity, but of structure. The Scripture accepts and encourages individual freedom to learn, to create, and to do well, but it is only by adhering to some pattern or structure that one gains true freedom to grow.

The Levites encamped around the Tabernacle had supported Moses in destroying the golden calf and even in Egypt had, according to Midrash, stood apart from their brother tribes in not being subject to Egyptian slavery, and they served as spiritual leaders. Their tasks and the order of their encampment and march in the desert were now stated in detail. At God's command, the Levites replaced the firstborns as servitors for the Tabernacle and its cultus. Yet the Levites did not own the Tabernacle. The command to build the sanctuary was given to the whole nation. "They shall make me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell in their midst" (Exod. 25.8).

The Tabernacle was the nerve center as well as the physical center of Israelite life in the Sinai. It imbued the divine spirit and the Biblical way of life into the society encamped around it, which would embrace its spirituality, its lofty ethics, and its wisdom. Although God is everywhere, God's presence was more palpable in the Tabernacle, and it was from there that God spoke to Moses. The Levites encamped around the Tabernacle to take care of it and to guard that people should not encroach on its sanctity. It was, in a sense, God's sacred space (perhaps like the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden). This was the place by means of which God's presence could be felt all through the nation. It was natural for such a nation with such a center to live in an orderly, nonconflictual manner, as befitted followers of an all-wise and benevolent Creator. Healthy people do not need to be constantly struggling to figure out who they are. They can be like the players on a baseball team or the musicians

of an orchestra, knowing their positions and their roles and contributing to the total. The people can live balanced, satisfying lives seeking fulfillment in their labors, both earthly and spiritual.

Implications

This all perhaps appears commonplace, but it is not. Think in terms of the contrast with a highly important social structure of the twentieth century—the Soviet Union. The Kremlin was the nerve center of Joseph Stalin's tyranny, as the Tabernacle was the sacred nerve center of the Israelite nation. In Soviet Russia, the Kremlin was the "sacred place," the home of government, and the residence of the families of the leaders like Stalin, Molotov, Malenkov, and the rest. But the government was cruel. During the five-year plans of the 1920s and 1930s, millions starved in the process of implementing changes in economic policies, in line with Marxist doctrine. Many were deported to Siberia. Others were murdered, especially the so-called kulaks (slightly more prosperous farmers). Communist officials reported seeing many groups of emaciated beggars, people who had once made a living on their own land. Stalin appointed officials who sought to please him by murdering many more than Stalin expected of so-called saboteurs, spies, and Trotskyites. Stalin eliminated many leading Bolsheviks—Kamenev, Zinoviev, Bukharin, Trotsky, Yezhov, his own close relatives (especially among the Alliluyev in-laws), and many generals. The longtime KGB leader Lavrenti Beria, who enjoyed torturing prisoners himself, never felt safe from Stalin. People could disappear for uttering a seemingly innocuous phrase. There seemed to be no rules except Stalin's will. He would often show a mark of favor to someone, and then the person would disappear into the gulag a day or two later. Wives were often sent to Siberia simply because their husbands were. It was never clear if Stalin would be pleased or bothered by any act or remark. People could not act rationally in a Kremlin with no order except Stalin's will.

One could speculate that he wanted to be a god, but a sociopathic Zeus or Dionysus, not the benevolent God of the Bible. Everything was subject to his caprice and mood. The world was alien to him, and he needed to control and run it. He did not need to self-destruct like Hitler. He was far removed from what may have to be the first concern of a good leader, "Love thy neighbor" or as per Hillel's interpretation: "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you."

In general, after the war Stalin declined, probably worn out by fatigue and alcohol. He had often interfered in the conduct of the war and not successfully. Marshall Georgi Zhukov was one of the few who could safely disagree with him, but Stalin later turned on him too. Stalin typically kept exhausted advisors awake partying till dawn.

A society needs a spiritual center, a tangible entity which gives nurturance to its spirit and informs all its endeavors. Stalin's Kremlin lacked stability and continuity, except for the capricious and cruel presence of Stalin. What he appeared to approve today, tomorrow he might destroy. Even his closest and most loyal associates could have no faith in him, although they were forced to constantly reiterate their faith. Stalin became a bizarre, seemingly all-powerful deity whose orders and whose mistakes brought about the deaths of tens of millions of people, many of whom were wholly innocent of any misdeed.

The holiness of the Tabernacle consisted in its representation of God's presence on earth. Israelite society in the desert was ruled by a benevolent God, who set up a society with a sacred center and a simple working construct. People knew who they were. They were encouraged to love God and to grow. Both sacred and mundane had their defined place. To be overly holy or unholy was discouraged. There was real freedom as there can be only in a society that eschews chaos and does not need to bow for its life to the will of a Stalin.

The special sanctity of the spiritual center reinforced the feeling among the people that there is a standard of goodness and spirituality to which they can aspire. It elevates the whole meaning of life in that world. The Tabernacle was not constantly open to the public nor was religious excess encouraged. Nadab and Abihu, the two sons of Aaron (the high priest), had brought an extra offering at the dedication of the Tabernacle, and God had killed them by a heavenly fire that snuffed out their lives without burning their bodies. Religious fervor was not to be expressed according to individuals' whims but according to God's instructions. It was not that God was being punitive. However, it was a matter of the utmost importance to maintain that spiritual center that lent a high sense of sanctity and godliness into Israelite society.

The differences between the Bible's idea of a spiritual center and Stalin's Kremlin are profound. The balance in any society can be fragile. A society can tend to lose the organic meaning of its component parts leading people to feel alienated. Protest movements, whether of the right

or the left, are often prompted by people feeling they are disenfranchised and also that they are not unique individuals. Each Israelite tribe had its own place and would have its own land. To be part of a certain tribe did not damage one's allegiance to the nation as a whole. Indeed, being part of one's tribe is how one becomes part of the whole. This contrasts with the situation in Europe today in which many immigrants from North Africa or Asia are not easily absorbed and instead are in violent conflict with European ways.

2. Labeling: Taking a Census

At certain points in Biblical history, a real need to know a census number may have arisen, such as to gather men for a war. Yet the counting is best carried out in the form of performing an act of charity or piety. Even today, traditional Jews, gathering a quorum of ten for communal prayers, will not count directly by one, two, three, and so on, but will use some other device. Labeling creates perceived limitations which can be hard to overcome.

Second Samuel 24 tells the story of a census taken by King David with tragic results. Commentators raise many questions about the meaning of the story, and the great Rashi states simply that he does not know why David did it. God was angry with the people of Israel, says Scripture. Some say because the people supported Sheba ben Bichri's rebellion against David, and then God used David to punish them. Perhaps too, David felt uneasy. He had reached the beginnings of old age after a long career of both severe trials and notable accomplishments. The previous two chapters already name him the sweet singer of Israel and recount the heroic exploits of his soldiers. Yet he had endured two trying rebellions, when people of this same nation whom he loved and served had turned against him. Could the census idea have arisen from a desire to study the effects of these difficult years on the nation? Should David feel reassured, or should he expect new troubles?

David called in Joab, his general, and ordered him to count the population of Israel. David erred in one of two ways. Either because he ordered the census without good reason, or because he did not count by means of the shekels donated to the Tabernacle. Could calling for the census have expressed too a lack of humility? Joab sought to dissuade the king, "but

the word of the king prevailed over Joab and the officers" (II Samuel 24.4).

After many months, the census was completed, but by then David realized that he had done wrong: "And David's heart smote him after he had counted the people, and David said to God, 'I have sinned greatly in what I did . . . for I was very foolish'" (24.10). Still a terrible plague struck Israel, killing seventy thousand people.

David's regret and repentance were sincere. God sent the prophet Gad to tell David to erect an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah, the site of the future Temple. This would mark the end of the plague and the closing of the story with full restoration of the relationship between God and Israel.

Implications

The news in recent years has frequently carried discussions about the pluses and minuses of racial profiling. Our society does a great deal of labeling. Young people moving through an education system take IQ tests, ACTs, SATs, college entrance exams, GREs, LSATs, and many more. Do we feel more comfortable putting a label on someone? Do these tests actually give accurate and useful information? The ancient Spartans used an exam more pressing than any of these. All Spartan life was centered around training and maintaining the best infantry in Greece and being always in a state of complete military preparedness. In compliance with these rules, all newborn boys were taken before the *ephors*, powerful officials. If the ephors judged a baby too weak or otherwise unfit for the military life, that baby was thrown off Mt. Taygetus or otherwise put to death.

What made the ephors such experts in judging babies is not clear to us. Similarly, today many question the value of the constant testing of students, whether the standard national tests or others. Do teachers "teach to the test"; that is, do they teach their course so that students will score well on the exams or do they teach to impart knowledge? Can such labeling reach the point where people lose their uniqueness and special individuality to labeling and numbering in the way that Nazis branded numbers on the bodies of inmates of the concentration camps, as they determined who was fit to live and who to die? Scripture presents a negative view toward the numbering of people. Sometimes it was necessary to take an accounting or a census, and sometimes God Himself ordered one. However, the

people are not to be numbered like sheep passing under the shepherd's staff.

Exodus 30 tells that after the incident of the golden calf, God, in His concern for the Israelites, told Moses to number the people to ascertain how many had died and how many survived. Still, there was not to be a straight numerical count. Instead, God told Moses to have every adult male give a shekel toward the building of the Tabernacle. The census would thus be carried out by counting not the people but the shekels representing a contribution to the community. This would also give the benefit of having each person perform a righteous deed that would make the census an act of devotion and not an act of labeling.

3. Listening to the Polls: Saul

American politicians are very sensitive to public opinion polls, and surely no politician can afford to lose public support. What should a congressman or even a president do when public opinion points him in one direction and his own conscience or intellect tells him to do something very different? While still a senator, John Kennedy stirred great interest with his book *Profiles in Courage*, a study of several senators who did what they thought was right rather than what their constituents or colleagues demanded. This dilemma is not new. The Biblical book of I Samuel beginning in chapter 7 presents the story of Saul, the first king of Israel.

The narrative presents Saul as the son of Kish of a family of the Israelite tribe of Benjamin. The people of Israel had endured years of military harassment from neighboring Canaanites, Midianites, Philistines, and others. In those days, there was no king in Israel and the people lived in a loose confederation of Israel's twelve tribes. The elders came to the prophet Samuel to ask him to give them a king who could lead them in war and judge them. Samuel did not quickly warm to the idea, feeling that the people were rejecting not only his own religious leadership but perhaps rejecting God as well. Nevertheless, God told Samuel to anoint a king, as the people asked. Chapter 8 introduces Saul. The setting and action of the story seem pastoral. Saul, accompanied by a worker, went out to look for two donkeys which had run off. After searching for several days without success, they decided to consult a seer who lived in a nearby town. The men felt that it would be proper for them to bring the seer, Samuel, a gift. They were nearly out of food, but the worker produced a

small bit of silver that they could give. As they entered the town, they came upon a group of girls headed to the well, and they asked directions. The girls were quite taken with the tall handsome stranger, and they responded with a detailed account telling where Samuel was and that he would preside over the sacrifices and the dinner that day. Even as they spoke, Samuel himself approached and, after introducing himself, invited the two men to the dinner where Saul was seated in a place of honor and given the choicest portion of the meat.

Saul first appears in the story as an appealing figure, very tall, handsome, noble, and gentle, a real heartthrob to the young women. He was deeply modest, not holding himself better than his worker. When Samuel hinted at something special in store for Saul, Saul answered that he was a Benjaminite, "the smallest of the tribes of Israel and my family the smallest of all the families of Benjamin" (9.21).

The society seems rural, intimate, and unpretentious, in which the adult son of an established family could join his worker in searching for days for lost donkeys and would consult a seer when he cannot find them. Strangers chat together easily. It was also a society in which a modest, unpretentious man could suddenly, to his surprise, find himself king. For early the next morning, Samuel met with Saul alone and anointed him king over Israel. Saul's elevation would soon be made public at a meeting of all the Israelites. Yet Saul's reign would ultimately be rejected by God, and in a sense it was exactly his qualities of modesty, his quickness in consulting others, and his ability as a warrior that brought him down.

Samuel informed Saul that he would very soon enter a new form of life. Saul would meet someone who would tell him that the donkeys had been found. Then he would encounter several people walking to Bethel to sacrifice to God. Saul would then pass the Philistine military post. As Saul continued on toward the city, a band of prophets would be descending from the city and Saul would prophesy among them, and he would "be turned into another man" (10.5–6). Everything happened just as Samuel had foretold.

All this was perhaps aimed at elevating Saul and introducing him into his new responsibilities and status as king. Samuel then assembled the people of Israel to the town of Mizpeh to announce the appointment of the new king. He went through a process of casting lots until the lot fell clearly on Saul, but Saul was nowhere to be found. In his diffidence, Saul had hidden himself amid the baggage. Consulting the sacred *urim vetu-*

mim (the breastplate of the high priest), the people learned from God where Saul was. Midrash suggests that Saul had not wanted to assume the kingship until God Himself had confirmed the appointment by means of the *urim vetumim*.

Saul was brought out, and he stood before the people. Samuel proclaimed, "Have you seen whom God has chosen, for there is none like him among all the people" (10.24). The people were thrilled, although some still were overtly unhappy with the new king. Saul soon proved his ability as a leader by defeating an invasion of the neighboring Ammonites. Then the Philistines invaded. Saul called out the men of fighting age and waited for Samuel to come and offer sacrifice before the battle as they had arranged. However, the people were concerned that Samuel might come late, and some began to desert. Saul himself then brought up the offering.

Hardly had he finished when Samuel arrived. "What have you done?" Samuel asked. Saul responded that his men were scattering, and the Philistines were ready to fight. He did not want to go into battle without having sacrificed, "So I forced myself and offered up the burnt offering" (13.12). Samuel responded that God was displeased. Saul had used poor judgment in not obeying Him. For this reason Saul's rule would not become hereditary (13.14). Saul's reasoning as he presented it, was that he needed to respond to the people's impatience and that too many would desert if the sacrifice was not offered. Yet Saul should have been more concerned with God's plan than with the voice of the people. That Saul was concerned about his people was understandable. However, he erred in altering God's plan in order to calm them. There were other ways to assuage them without altering Samuel's instruction. Perhaps Saul was not skilled in handling large numbers of people.

Saul went on to defeat the Philistines in a battle in which his son Jonathan was the hero. Yet Saul had called a curse on any Israelite soldier who would taste food before nightfall brought an end to the victory. Unaware of the vow, Jonathan had tasted some honey. When Saul learned of it that night, he was ready to put Jonathan to death (14.24f.), but the people protested that Saul had to let Jonathan live. The story shows again a certain underlying impetuosity and lack of steadfastness of purpose. Scripture specifies that if people had eaten they would have felt more alert and would have won their battle even more completely (14.30–34).

The vow was probably pointless from the start, and to have executed Jonathan would have been unjustified.

After further victories, God sent Saul to carry out the ancient command to annihilate the evil Amalekites. (We shall rely heavily on M. L. Malbim's interpretation.) This was to be a crucial moment in Saul's reign. His attack was successful; however, he failed to put God's purpose above his own judgment, for he spared the life of the wicked King Agag and allowed Israelite soldiers to keep the best of Amalek's sheep. Saul was a soft-hearted and gentle man and not greedy, and perhaps it was painful for him to kill all those sheep.

When Samuel came to the army camp, Saul was setting up a monument to the great victory. He greeted Samuel with "I have fulfilled the word of God" (15.13). When Samuel noted the sheep and oxen, Saul answered that the people had had pity on the best of them only in order to sacrifice to God. Saul had again failed to carry through a command from God because it seemed that the people wanted to do something else. Saul appeared at this point to have been at first unaware that he had done wrong. Samuel's rebuke was accurate and succinct. "Even if you are small in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?" (15.17f.). God had made Saul king in order to carry out God's wishes. It was not the people who had made him king. The king must obey God to the fullest. Saul had disregarded God's command for reasons of his own. He explained to Samuel that he "feared the people and hearkened to their voice" (15.26). He had held Agag only to execute him later in Israel, and had let the people take the sheep only to sacrifice to God.

Saul probably did not even at this point fully grasp what was wrong. Samuel went on to explain that sacrifice was of no value in itself except as fulfilling God's will. One must not disobey God in order to offer sacrifices. This was too much like relying on magical ceremonies, as the pagan nations did. To debate with God's prophet, as Saul was doing, merely compounded his error and showed that Saul was not really in sync with God's will. Saul now understood what he had done wrong and acknowledged that he had sinned in agreeing with the people rather than with God. Samuel informed Saul that his reign would end and that the kingdom would be given to another.

A. J. Rosenberg in his translation and commentary on I Samuel expresses the trepidation a writer can feel today when studying the story of King Saul. Here was a man selected by God Himself to be king over His

chosen nation. Saul was a kindly man and a successful battle leader. David later lamented him at his death as a man greatly beloved. Yet, as a ruler, he was not wholly successful, and God took his kingdom from him and gave it to David and his descendants. Clearly, Saul was no demagogue. Yet in certain instances, he let his own sense of humanity interfere with what God needed a king to do. His last days were particularly sad as, using hasty judgment, he wiped out the priestly town of Nob, wrongly suspecting them of plotting with David against him. He finally found himself so alienated from God that he consulted a necromancer the night before his final defeat and death in battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa.

Implications

It is interesting to note that George Washington, America's first general and president, was one who often appointed excellent assistants and advisors whose views he would consider carefully—Nathaniel Greene, Henry Knox, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson. He brought dignity and discipline to the continental army and later deplored the rise of partisan politics. It is told that his friend Gouverneur Morris was joking with some companions and accepted a dare that he could greet Washington in a familiar manner. The next morning, he clapped Washington on the back and said, "Good morning, George." Washington responded with an icy glare, and Morris never tried it again. The two remained friends (Davis, 1975, 9). Not by any means arrogant, Washington nevertheless had an unfailing sense both of his own personal dignity and of the dignity of his office, unlike many politicians in our own age of telecommunications and unlike King Saul as well.

King Saul may seem at a glance close to being like a Greek tragic hero. However, Saul was not dealing with fate or gods that had determined his doom. Nor did he pursue fame and glory by bloodshed as did Achilles or Agamemnon. He was essentially a good and honest man who did not handle successfully all the duties of a king. The Midrash holds that Saul was loved by God even to the end, and that he joined Samuel in paradise.

Implicit in this story is the question of what role a society will assign to individual personality. It is good for a leader to listen to a variety of opinions and not simply go along with the majority. Let us distinguish responsiveness to individual opinions from conformity to a majority sim-

ply in the interest of maintaining power. This is unlike Socratic dialectic which sought to impress the opinion of an authoritative teacher on his followers. Nor is it to mindlessly follow herd opinions.

4. Kings and Prophets

Deep in Biblical thinking is the idea that one can disagree with secular authority without rejecting it altogether. Yet the world often seems to see only two choices—angry rebellion or complete submission. In the Hebrew Bible, in contrast, a person's relationship with God is exactly that—a relationship. Abraham, Moses, Job, and others converse and even disagree with God. Neither humiliation nor rejection is suitable. One may question authority, but to wholly reject authority is a very serious step, appropriate only when the authority is misused and blocks the people's search for a more meaningful life. In the Bible, when a prophet challenged a king, it was not due to lust for power or desire for control. Healthy respect for law and for authority is essential. Two examples follow.

Elijah was a fearless, zealous messenger of God who, at great personal risk, carried God's messages to the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel of Israel. Yet Elijah showed Ahab great personal respect. After the memorable incident on Mt. Carmel when Elijah's God answered his prayer by sending fire from heaven to consume Elijah's offering with thousands of Israelites watching, Elijah felt the spirit of God upon him, girded his garment, and ran in front of Ahab's chariot back to the palace—a sign of great respect to this king, misbehaving though he was. The Midrash points out that Moses too showed respect to the cruel, arrogant Pharaoh, who time and again refused God's command to "let my people go."

Two well-known incidents from non-Biblical history offer a strong contrast to the Biblical approach to relations between secular and religious leaders. In both, a religious leader deliberately and publicly humiliated a ruler in order to make his point and assert his power.

(1) In the eleventh century, a controversy developed between Pope Gregory VII and the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV over the issue of lay investiture—Did the emperor have the right to appoint bishops in his empire or could only the pope appoint them? Since bishops of those times exercised governmental functions as well as religious, it had been customary for the king to appoint them. Now, Pope Gregory demanded that

they be appointed by him. Both Gregory and Henry were strong willed and determined. However, the pope held the keys to heaven in his power, and he threatened Henry with excommunication, meaning possible eternal damnation. Not only that, but with the king in such a status, his nobles would not be required to obey him, meaning a total loss of royal authority. In January 1077, after a secret journey, the proud emperor appeared as a penitent barefoot in the snow before the castle of Canossa in northern Italy, where the pope was staying. At first, Gregory refused to reconcile the penitent king into the church. Only after three days, and under pressure from his advisors, did the pope raise Henry from the snow and reconcile him to the church. Henry's kingship was recognized but at the cost of his acknowledging the papacy's right to judge secular rulers. Gregory had publicly humiliated the powerful emperor, which Henry would not forget. The lay investiture controversy ultimately went on for years until it was finally settled at the Concordat of Worms in 1120 CE.

(2) A parallel story goes back to the late days of the Roman Empire. The Emperor Theodosius (379–395 CE) had proclaimed Christianity the sole legal religion. Pagan temples were closed and sacrifices forbidden. The Olympic Games with their pagan rituals were ended, and theaters were shut down. Yet, as devoted as he was to Christianity, Theodosius was twice publicly humbled by Bishop Ambrose of Milan, who had no army but who did wield the power over admission to heaven and hell. In 388 CE, the local bishop in Callinicum, on the Euphrates, instigated a mob to pillage and burn a synagogue. Fanatical monks also burned a Gnostic chapel. Theodosius ordered the bishop to repair the damages he had caused. Bishop Ambrose insisted that the order be rescinded, arguing that Christianity should take precedence over public order. He criticized Theodosius publicly in a sermon with Theodosius present in the church, threatening to exclude him from the sacraments, and the emperor yielded. F. Homes Dudden, Ambrose's main biographer, argues that the incident set a precedent for religious persecution in the Middle Ages as well as for a subservience of the king to the church.

In a second incident, in 390 CE, citizens of Thessalonica, a major city, rioted and brutally murdered an imperial officer, Gotheric, who had arrested a popular charioteer for some civic misdemeanor. Theodosius quelled the rioting harshly. Ambrose decided to excommunicate Theodosius and sent him a toughly worded letter. What happened next is not entirely clear, but church historians beginning with Sozomen and Theo-

doret tell that Ambrose physically blocked the emperor's entry into the church, and the emperor was made to observe a period of public penance before being restored to grace. Like Emperor Henry, he underwent public humiliation by a churchman. Peter Paul Rubens, the great Dutch artist of the seventeenth century painted a memorable portrait of Theodosius's penance.

Another incident of the Middle Ages showed a similar conflict but with a different result. Pope Boniface VIII, a man of combative personality, clashed with equally tough King Philip IV (LeBel) of France. Professor Joseph Strayer (1980), in his study of the conflict, characterized both men as dictatorial and too conscious of their dignity. They clashed testily over issues like the taxing of churchmen and appointments to church offices, as well as over the unthinking statements of a Bishop Bernard Saisset, who was more irritating than actually dangerous. Instead of arriving at solutions to their differences, Boniface issued papal bulls treating the king as excommunicated and stating that every human being must be subject to the Roman pontiff to gain salvation. The conflict ended in 1303 CE, when Philip's agents kidnapped Boniface in Anagni in Italy. Boniface died shortly after that, broken by his experiences. The new pope, Clement V, soon after transferred the home of the papacy from Rome to Avignon across the Rhone from France where it remained for seventy years. Philip went on to consolidate his power and to add to his treasury by destroying the Order of the Templars, a military/religious organization, and confiscating their wealth. He went on to drive all the Jews from his realm, again confiscating their possessions.

In each of these stories, the religious figure showed no respect for the king, and in fact sought to humiliate him.

Implications

Respect is an important quality in any society. A society that lacks a basic commitment to appropriate respect leaves itself vulnerable to all sorts of abuses and extremities. This includes respect for parents, elders, families, the property of others, goodness, law and order, ethics, wisdom, community, government, and the sacred. Democrats and Republicans in the United States today seem to have little respect or patience for each other, quarreling often about many issues, including some connected to religion, like prayer in the schools, abortion, same-sex marriage, assisted suicide, or teaching creationism.

5. Kings Becoming Priests

In eighth-century Judah, king and high priest could cooperate closely, but they needed to stay out of each other's area. Second Chronicles 26 at length and II Kings 15 more briefly tell the story of King Uzziahu of Judah. Uzziahu came to the throne at age sixteen after his father, King Amaziah, was assassinated. Although he failed to remove the illegal high places, the Scripture reckons Uzziahu was generally a righteous king, wise and spiritual, who sought God and learned from the prophets and wise men.

He defeated the Philistines, the Arabs of Gur-Baal, and the Ammonites. He strengthened the defenses of Jerusalem with strong towers and catapults, and he created a standing and well-equipped military force, which kept enemies in fear. Uzziahu loved the land and farming and encouraged and protected agricultural enterprise. Some commentators criticize this as denoting a lack of concern with the king's more important obligation of building the spiritual character of the nation.

Eventually his successes went to his head. Scripture said of the earlier King Jehosaphat that his heart was "raised up in the way of God" (II Chronicles 17.6). Uzziahu's heart was also raised up, but to ruin. The king decided to step beyond the usual privileges of a king and to offer incense in the Temple in Jerusalem. By Biblical law, the Temple service could be performed only by the priests descended from the first high priest, Aaron. Certain other duties were handled by the tribe of Levi, but Uzziahu was neither. In a move to involve himself in the Temple or perhaps simply to fulfill a personal urge to serve God in this way, the king entered the Temple and was bringing the incense to offer it on the altar when eighty priests challenged him, telling him to leave the Temple and that it was no honor in God's view for a king to serve in the Temple.

The king grew angry, and *tsaraat* appeared on his forehead. This was a disease mentioned in several Biblical passages, typically as resulting from bad behavior. Some translations call it leprosy. Uzziahu immediately left the Temple and retired to a small house outside the city, where he spent his remaining years. His son Jotham served as king.

Implications

The cities of ancient Mesopotamia were governed by kings (*lugal*), but every city also had a high priest (*ensi*) who presided over the cult in the

city's main ziggurat temple. The question of the relationship between the religion and the state has often influenced the course of history. Think of the power of the Inquisition priests in Spain.

Commentators generally agree that King Uzziahu was a decent man and that he had been very successful in many areas of his rule. However, trying to expand the kingship into control of the Temple was not what a God-fearing ruler should have done. A king may help the kingdom thrive, but to go too far implies perhaps an acquisitiveness toward power.

6. First Empire: Nimrod and the Tower of Babel

The Talmud tells of the sage who said that before he held high office he dreaded the possibility of public responsibility. Once he held office, he dreaded the thought of giving it up. Perhaps the first king mentioned in the Scripture and therefore perhaps the first in its history was Nimrod, "a mighty hunter before the Lord"—mighty enough that his name was still a byword centuries later when Genesis was published—"it is said 'a mighty hunter before the Lord like Nimrod.' And he ruled Babylon, Akkad, Uruk and Calneh in the Land of Shinar" (possibly Sumer, or Sanharu in Mesopotamia)(Gen. 10.8–10). The three Genesis verses about Nimrod are expanded in the Talmud and Midrash with reflections in Islamic literature later.

The rabbis viewed Nimrod as a man whose prowess and fame as a hunter propelled him into the rule of a Mesopotamian empire whereon he rebelled against God and worked only to augment his power. He enforced an idolatrous religion and persecuted those, like Abraham, who would not conform. For totalitarian governments, conformity is the stuff of life. Historians have tried with little success to identify Nimrod with known kings of ancient Mesopotamia, perhaps Sargon of Akkad or Ninurta, but good evidence is lacking.

As Nimrod built and ruled cities, Midrash sees him as the builder of the most massive project of all—the Tower of Babel, which he built to glorify himself and affirm his power. Today, one can still see the ruins of an ancient ziggurat temple standing near the historic site of Babylon. Are these the remains of Nimrod's tower? Nimrod planned to rule a civilization growing around a tower which would be the symbol and center point of his greatness. There is nothing wrong with beautiful buildings or with any sort of progress. However, focus on growth and expansion can serve

as a cover for more nefarious aims. Was the Tower of Babel the mighty center of a totalitarian society? The last century has seen sociopathic dictators and terrorist chiefs like Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, who promised that they would construct utopias for their followers. Was Nimrod too constructing a tower on which docile subjects would focus and identify while he controlled them, although the people themselves worked as subject laborers? Can political and social structures serve as the base of a healthy, viable nation?

It can amaze us to remember how many highly educated Americans of the mid-twentieth century were duped into believing that Stalin's USSR was a communist utopia and that Stalin himself was a benevolent, avuncular leader. Many rational people sincerely believed that the USSR was a workers' paradise, and they readily dismissed or ignored hints of Stalin's cruelties and of the gulag where so many millions perished. Not until after Stalin's death did these people come to realize how terribly wrong they had been.

In any case, big buildings are fine, but they are not in themselves a mark of a healthy civilization. To be a conqueror like Nimrod does not in itself make a successful king. At some early moment of human history, some people first decided to organize their friends and followers and to attack their neighbors, perhaps to take their possessions, their land, or their women and children, or perhaps simply for the sport of fighting and killing. Unfortunately, this pattern, begun so long ago with Nimrod or someone like him, continues today in much of the world. It is worthy of note, although easily not noted, that the United States and Canada have kept the peace over their border since the War of 1812 and that the American states have not warred among themselves in nearly 150 years.

The Book of Genesis recounts what must have been humankind's first attempt to build an ideal society in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). Human population multiplied after the great flood of Noah's time, and the people eventually traveled westward, finally deciding to build a new home in the valley of Shinar. There they built a new city. So far so good, for God wanted humankind to work toward a good life. However, the people's motives were misdirected. "Let us build a city and a tower with its top into the sky, and let us make a monument for ourselves lest we be scattered over the face of all the earth" (11.4). The utopia had formulated for itself a mission that had no real meaning. The goal of this society was not to enable man to come closer to God, to grow spiritually

and emotionally. No mention was made of helping the disadvantaged, of educating the young, of developing new ideas in art or science. The purpose of the tower society was security based on self-aggrandizement: "Let us make a monument . . ." Ancient man indeed built huge pyramids and ziggurats whose purpose was to glorify the kings and societies that built them. They did succeed in their purpose, at least in the sense that we can still see today remains of those great structures and remember the names of some of the builders.

The people of Shinar stated a second purpose: "lest we be scattered over the face of the earth." That is—the society must form certain controls to prevent people from leaving or changing. People must be rigidly controlled, which is characteristic of totalitarian societies all through history. Subdue progress; stifle disagreement. The tower society was arrogant too—"Let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens" (11.4). The goal of the society was again not producing people who were productive and whole in body and soul. Building a tower all the way to the heavens would keep the masses occupied and would demonstrate the greatness, even the godlike character, of the leaders. Harmony and unity are wonderful goals that are in some measure attainable. However, not every aggregation of people holds these aims. A characteristic of totalitarian societies, including many of the great utopias of literature, is that they foster laws and practices that rigidify and preserve the social *system*, while the people become secondary. The citizens are often little more than slaves. The seeming harmony in the society is false and deceptive. It is merely conformity. Indeed, some societies, Plato's Republic for example, eliminate newborn babies who are judged unfit and refuse medical treatment to people who cannot continue to work their jobs.

To seek to develop a well-regulated utopian society of the type dreamed by so many modern thinkers is not part of the Biblical worldview. For the people of Israel, the best life is not static but dynamic, not achieving a certain state of satisfaction but instead the fulfillment that comes from a life of growth and development in the service of God and humanity. Social and economic challenges will never be met perfectly, "For the poor will not cease from the land" (Deut. 15.11). The Talmud depicts even the messianic era as hardly different from our own except that a descendant of King David will rule over Israel. People will still need to work to make the world a better place, and they will have to work

to develop their own characters and their capacity to understand and appreciate God's creation.

Implications

Of course, the world needs its dreamers and visionaries, but too often utopian ideals are either impractical or unwise or simply false promises disguised in beautiful words for societies that are restrictive and cruel.

A sort of banal utopianism seeps into American politics. The voters listen during every election year to a constant litany of promises; that our party will correct all the mistakes and injustices of our opponents and bring the nation a wonderful time of high employment, lower taxes, generous government programs, and safety from foreign attack. But when we bring in a new party we find ourselves all too often disappointed that all their fine promises proved to be illusory. We therefore are likely to vote them out of power and bring in their rivals, only to find them no better.

While citizens certainly should not give up all hope, they need to understand that politicians' promises do "on water deserve to be writ" (from John Donne, "Song"). In Biblical terms, nations need to remember that God is the only one really able to promise and fulfill, to solve the needs of the people.

7. Urban Planning: The Levite Towns

Nowadays, the blight of many large American cities is palpable: houses broken down, schools failing, crime and drugs rampant, and governments corrupt. There are large neighborhoods that are nothing other than slums. Over two hundred years ago, Dr. Samuel Johnson said that "to tire of London is to tire of life." Yet cities must be cared for and worked on.

To the ancient Greeks, the polis was the center of life, with the teeming *agora* (marketplace), the temples, the assembly where citizens gathered like a parliament to debate and to make laws. Yet the poleis too faced the evils endemic to large urban centers—crime, prostitution, poverty, plagues, and fires. Ancient Israel was in some ways different. It seems to have held no large towns besides Jerusalem, which itself, however, could not match in size or population its great contemporaries like Babylon and Nineveh or later Alexandria and Rome. Other Israelite towns seem to have been smaller and provincial. Bethlehem appears in

the story of Ruth as a small town inhabited by people who knew and joined in each other's lives in a way typical of small-town life.

Numbers 35.2f commands a sort of program of urban planning. "Command the Children of Israel and let them give the Levites cities for residence from their hereditary holdings and common land (migrash) around their cities. The cities shall be for them to dwell and the migrash will be for their animals, property and other amenities" (Kaplan, 1985). The migrash shall extend one thousand cubits from the city wall, with an additional two thousand cubits for farming. (Commentaries debate the exact meaning of these measurements.) The Levites, who had no tribal territory of their own, would receive forty-eight towns around Israel designated for their residence. The one thousand cubits outside the town were to be used for pasturing animals or simply for strolling. They would add to the beauty and utility of the town, making it a pleasanter place to live. The law forbade using migrash for a dwelling or farming area.

The attention to beauty of the towns was not so much a matter of artistic expression as a sign of respect to the holiness of the land of Israel as well as an effort to make daily life pleasanter. Let it be added that some opinions hold that these laws applied to all towns, not only the Levites', while some would apply them even to Jewish communities outside the land of Israel.

Implications

The Biblical Israelites did not worship nature or sacred groves or the environment as many others did, but they respected it. Adam was appointed by God as steward over the Garden of Eden "to dress and to keep it." This may be part of the reason that the quiet common spaces, migrash, were set around the towns as a sort of geographic Sabbath, where one could remind himself that the land was a gift of the Creator. This was not abstract contemplation like the Greek philosophers, but a place for the individual to find the inner voice of the land.

GOVERNMENT AND LEADERSHIP

The following seven narratives examine the principle of individuation-differentiation with regard to government and leadership. The first entry describes the story of David and his son Solomon with a past and poten-

tial future enemy, Shimi ben Gera. David spares Shimi's life. However, when he fears his successor Solomon's reign will be threatened, he advises Solomon to be careful and even to have Shimi killed. The second narrative discusses Korah, who questions Moses's leadership. Moses first attempts to reason with Korah. At a certain point, it is clear, however, that dissent has become insurrection—Korah is attempting to undermine the Israelite experience at Sinai. Moses stands his ground and Scripture recounts God's destruction of Korah and his followers. The third story describes the rebellion of Sheba ben Bichri against King David. There was no dealing with Sheba. The wise woman of Abel-Beth-Maacha saves her city by throwing Sheba's head over the city wall to Joab, the attacking general. In the fourth narrative, Gideon refuses an offer to be king of Israel. He felt quite comfortable in his role as a private citizen. He was not obsessed with ruling others, but was happy to fit in as an individual in the larger community. The fifth entry discusses Moses and David and what made them fit to be good leaders, conduits for the divine will or purpose rather than simply forcible accumulators of power and imposers of conformity on the polity. The sixth entry suggests qualities that God is looking for in choosing a leader—a person with vision and skills of governing under whose rule his subjects can fulfill their special abilities. The final narrative in this section contrasts David with Coriolanus, the Roman general. Both leaders are propelled by events to leave their homeland and take shelter with their people's enemy. However, they handle their situations very differently.

8. Watching Your Enemies: David, Solomon, and Shimi ben Gera

Several passages in II Samuel and I Kings tell the story of David, Solomon, and Shimi ben Gera and how to deal with a defeated enemy. Absalom, David's son, rebelled against his father and led an army against Jerusalem. Surprised and unready, David fled the city with a small group of supporters. As he crossed the Brook of Kidron, Shimi ben Gera appeared. Shimi was a brilliant man and of the family of King Saul. As David passed, Shimi cursed him vilely and cast dirt at him. Abishai, one of David's generals, offered to go over and cut off Shimi's head, but David forbade him, "Perhaps God will see my eye [tears] and will return me good instead of his curses this day" (II Samuel 16.12).

In due course, David raised an army, defeated Absalom, and put down the revolt. Shimi then came to David asking to be forgiven. The Midrash offers an interpretation in the form of a commentary in chapter III of Psalms—"A Song of David As He Fled from Absalom His Son." Shimi argued that if David did not forgive him, other supporters of Absalom would be discouraged from reconciling with David and rebellion would break out again. David saw the sense of Shimi's argument and feeling secure in his restoration to the throne, he spared Shimi. Nevertheless, he knew Shimi was both capable and a troublemaker who would need watching.

Some years later, David, feeling that he was nearing the end of his life, called Solomon, his successor, to instruct him on several important matters. Solomon should devote himself to serving God and to following the law of Moses. Then David warned him about several dangerous people, one of whom was Shimi. "He cursed me a grievous curse on the day I went to Mahanaim. He came to me at the Jordan, and I swore to him by the Lord saying, 'I will not slay you by the sword.' And now hold him not innocent, for you are a wise man, and you will know what you must do, and you will bring his gray hair to the grave in blood" (I Kings 2.9–10).

Commentators disagree as to whether David was telling Solomon to find a way to put Shimi to death or merely to watch him carefully. David knew Shimi to be a dangerous troublemaker and warned Solomon to be on his guard. Solomon summoned Shimi and ordered him to build himself a house in Jerusalem and not to leave the city, for on the day he would leave the city beyond the Kidron he would die. Shimi answered that the "saying was good," and he remained in Jerusalem without incident for three years (I Kings 2.34–35). Solomon may have felt that he could not trust Shimi out of his sight, but as long as Shimi was watched, he would cause no trouble. Other commentators argue that Solomon was setting Shimi up, for what is harder to abide by than a rule that seems restrictive? Shimi would chafe at being limited to Jerusalem.

Solomon's instruction to Shimi specified the Kidron as the limit for his movements. This was next to the town of Bahurim, where Shimi had been living, and it was the place where Shimi had accosted King David. Perhaps there was a hint that for Shimi to go there would be taken as showing that he had no real remorse over his treatment of David.

Three years passed quietly. Then two of Shimi's slaves ran away and went to the Philistine city of Gath. Shimi traveled to Gath to bring them

back. Solomon, learning of this, called Shimi to him and reminded him of his behavior toward David and also of his oath and had him executed. Solomon was much wiser with Shimi than Julius Caesar would be by showing clemency to his defeated enemies in Rome nine hundred years later. Early in his reign, Solomon also put to death the general Joab, on David's instructions, and Adonijah, his own brother, who wanted the throne for himself. Had these three continued to live, they would likely have caused Solomon endless problems. As it was, Solomon would go on to a glorious reign of forty years, and Julius Caesar would be murdered, after just a year, by those to whom he had shown mercy.

Implications

When David returned to his throne after the rebellion of Absalom was suppressed, he felt that it should be a time of peace. He did crush the rebellion of Sheba ben Bichri (see chapter 4), but he spared Shimi ben Gera and had rejected Abishai's idea of killing him. There had been enough bloodshed, and although Shimi could be troublesome, David felt secure enough at this point that Shimi was no threat either to the kingdom or to him personally. He wanted to give the nation a chance to return to normalcy. How well a government can tolerate dissenters or even potential usurpers can depend on how secure the government feels, and David in that moment felt the throne was secure.

However, when Solomon was about to succeed David some years later, Shimi seemed much more dangerous. David was now older, and Solomon's position seemed somewhat unsure, so David either instructed Solomon directly or strongly suggested (depending on what interpretation one follows) that Shimi's gray head be brought to the grave in blood.

In 45 BCE, Julius Caesar returned to Rome after winning his civil war against the supporters of Pompey. Roman armies had fought all over the empire—Greece, North Africa, Asia Minor, Spain. Winners of previous Roman civil wars had typically done their best to purge their opponents. Caesar, as a young man almost forty years before, had come near to being murdered after Sulla had won his bloody civil war against Marius. Caesar, however, decided on a different policy. Cicero, in his letters, recounts that Caesar forgave his enemies. Although a supporter of Pompey, Cicero was himself received most cordially by Caesar. Yet, over the course of a year, resentment of Caesar began to congeal leading to the plot of senators against him. Caesar had not watched his old enemies carefully

enough and had ignored warning signs of danger. The plotters stabbed Caesar to death in the Senate on the Ides of March, 44 BCE, plunging the empire into yet another bloody civil strife.

It is interesting that Shimi, unlike Cassius, who led the plot against Caesar, did not conspire stealthily against the ruler, nor did Shimi try to murder him, despite his grievances and despite David's being in a weak condition. He merely cursed and insulted David. David understood Shimi well and knew that Shimi was no threat for the time being in those days after the rebellion of Absalom had been put down. Nevertheless, David felt that after his own death Shimi would be more dangerous to a young untried Solomon.

In modern times, Mafia leaders are said to want to "keep their friends close and their enemies closer." They want to keep a close watch on anyone dangerous. This is not necessarily vicious but can be based on a need to protect themselves and what they work for. Caesar may have been overly impressed with his own greatness. Only the great Caesar, he felt, could afford to be so magnanimous. Yet his magnanimity did not protect him or the empire. Solomon was less magnanimous with Shimi, but wiser.

9. Reformer or Demagogue: Korah

"Korah son of Yitzhar, son of Kehat, son of Levi, along with Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, son of Reuben rebelled" (Num. 16.1). This incident took place in the second year of the Israelites' forty-year sojourn in the desert. Within a short period before, the people had behaved badly in a series of events, the golden calf (Exod. 32), Tabeera (Num. 11), the spies (Num. 13), and others. God had punished them with plagues and other consequences and had announced that the grown men of that generation would all pass away during the forty years before the nation would enter the Promised Land. People were feeling wounded and vulnerable. Using language and methods typical of demagogues through history, Korah and his allies challenged Moses and Aaron. "All the people in the community are holy, and God is with them. Why are you setting yourselves above God's congregation?" (Num. 16.3).

Commentators have offered many explanations of Korah's behavior, for he was a very smart man. How could he have already dismissed from his mind the great miracles of the exodus and the revelation on Mt. Sinai,

only months before? (1) Korah was a demagogue and a rabble-rouser. Jealous of the leadership of Moses and Aaron and dissatisfied with his own role as a Levite, important though it was, Korah sought to demean Moses and Aaron and accuse them of fraud—God had not made them leaders as they claimed. After all, all the people were present when the law was given on Mount Sinai, and they all are holy. Korah preached equality of all the people, and the Midrash adds that he graphically though falsely portrayed how the priests of Aaron's family oppressed the needy and weak. Such arguments would not put Korah in Moses's position, but they certainly were aimed to hurt Moses (perhaps what we might today call negative advertising). (2) Korah longed for the spiritual uplift that he imagined would come to him by performing the duties of high priest. The most elevating of these was the offering of the incense. In this view, this was why Moses challenged Korah and his followers to actually offer the incense and to see how God would respond (16.6–11). (3) Korah and his followers may have been left depressed after the several events in which the Israelites had behaved badly and been punished. Most notable was the very recent episode of the spies, who brought a disrespectful report about the land of Israel and discouraged the people from going on. After this, God decreed that all the mature adult men of that generation would die during the forty years in the desert and never see the Promised Land. (4) There are people who hardly feel alive unless they are arguing. Disagreements are certainly not unhealthy per se. Mishna (Avot 5) offers the example of two sages, Hillel and Shammai, who disputed various matters of Torah law and wisdom, but whose purpose was to arrive at greater truth. Such people will grow through their arguments. The argument of Korah, however, was not "for the sake of heaven." Such arguments destroy families, nations, and individuals, and the arguers themselves. Like Alcibiades, the famous demagogue of fifth-century Athens, Korah, according to the Midrash, was brilliant and rich. Who would appear to be a better candidate for leadership—this attractive politician who preyed on people's fears and discontents, or Moses who stuttered and who had been the leader during the recent unpleasantnesses? (5) The Midrash offers another view of Korah's thinking. He saw that his sons were very able, and he understood prophetically that his descendants would include very great people. This supported his view of his own fitness and his right to rise against Moses. Korah thus convinced himself that he would win his argument. He did not realize that his own sons

would support Moses and not him. Later scriptural texts mention that the "sons of Korah" survived (Num. 26.11) and their descendants served honorably as Levites in the Jerusalem Temple. An eighth-century pottery inscription from Arad also mentions the "sons of Korah." Korah seems to have been strongly aware of the dignity of his family, ancestors as well as progeny, and this may have prompted his ambition. Scripture introduces him with a full family description as son of Yitzhar, son of Kehat, son of Levi.

Korah gathered around him a group of malcontents, some prominent. They had many different reasons for joining him, and they were allied only in wanting to overthrow Moses and Aaron. The Scripture presents Dathan and Abiram as classic troublemakers. Even if Korah won, they could not have hoped to serve in the Tabernacle as they were not Levites, but they seem to have particularly resented Moses. The Midrash suggests that they were flunkeys of the Egyptians and had prospered from their brethren's misfortunes—something like Jewish kapos in the Nazi concentration camps.

When Moses came to try to reason with them, they responded in a surly tone, standing defiantly with their families at the doors of their tents. They complained loudly, "Is it not enough that you brought us out of Egypt, a land flowing with milk and honey, just to kill us in the desert? What right do you have to set yourself above us? You didn't bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey, or give us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Do you think you can pull something over our eyes? We will not go up" (Num. 16.12–14).

The especially defiant last sentence, "We will not go up" has been understood at several levels. We will not go up (1) to meet with Moses, (2) to the land of Israel, (3) from the pit of *sheol* (the netherworld) into which they were about to fall. Moses could not debate their accusations with them, as they were largely personal and slanderous. He did reject their charges that he was personally corrupt, "Not a single donkey of yours did I take." Moses wisely turned the challenge right back onto the rebels by suggesting that they indeed bring incense offerings as they wanted to do. Aaron too would bring incense, and God Himself would make known which He approved. This would be done the next morning, perhaps to give the rebels a night to think it over and back down.

Korah's political ambition and his desire to perform the priestly service in the Tabernacle were not in themselves evil. Nor perhaps was even

the tendency to be contentious. Korah's fault was that in his rebellion against Moses and Aaron, he was rebelling against God's plan for the people of Israel. To suggest that even part of Moses's teaching was false or was not faithful to divine command was to cast doubt on all that Moses taught in God's name. This would throw a monkey wrench into Israelite history at its very beginning. No Biblical civilization could ever have developed. It was clear that a strong reaction was necessary to show clearly that Moses's teaching emanated from God and that it was Korah and his company who were fraudulent. The people in fact did not flock to Korah's standard. As the final confrontation loomed, Moses warned the people to distance themselves from Korah's group, and they did. In an immense demonstration of might, God then opened the "mouth of the earth," which swallowed up one group of Korah's followers, while fire from heaven consumed the rest.

One view offered by commentaries opines that the unleashing of such powerful primal forces as earth and fire indicated how powerful and chaotic creation would be without the harmonizing effect of God's teaching.

The Talmud recounts a curious sequel. Many centuries later, Rabba bar bar Hana, a Talmudic-era scholar, famous for tales of his travels, related the following experience. As he was traveling with a caravan through the desert, an Arab merchant showed him the spot where Korah's people had been swallowed into the earth, and he could hear them repeating still from deep under the ground, "Moses is true and his teaching is true" (BT Sanh 110a).

Implications

What prompts a man like Korah? Brilliance, energy, and ambition can all be noble qualities. Yet very gifted people can remain deeply dissatisfied with what they feel they have accomplished or with what recognition they have received for it. Power or even the appearance of power can draw them fiercely. Sometimes it can be a feeling that they need to protect what they think is theirs, or they may feel that this is the best way to make their mark on history.

Some such motives clouded Korah's judgment and made him feel that he should reject the teachings which the Scripture claims that God had given Moses to teach to the people. All this was despite his having expe-

rienced the great events of the exodus and of the revelation on Mt. Sinai only months before.

10. A Rabble-Rouser: Sheba ben Bichri

Second Samuel 20 relates the story of a rabble-rouser, Sheba ben Bichri, who sought to undermine the rule of King David. The very dangerous revolt of Absalom had just been quelled, and David was returning to Jerusalem with much work to do in order to restore the stability of the nation and government. Ten Israelite tribes were quarreling with David's own tribe, Judah, as to who should lead the welcome of the king to Jerusalem, the capital. At that critical moment, Sheba ben Bichri stepped up. Scripture describes him as a "son of Belial," that is, a rabble-rouser and troublemaker. He blew the ram's horn and proclaimed that "we have no portion with David, nor any inheritance with the son of Jesse. Each man to his tent, O Israel" (20.1). His point was that the tribes should not argue over who should welcome David, for no one owes him allegiance, and he is the son of Jesse, not of a king.

Many followed Sheba, and David could count only on the tribe of Judah. He recognized that Sheba's threat was serious, more even than Absalom's rebellion. If Sheba could gain a hold on several fortified cities, a long disastrous war could follow (20.9).

The new disturbance had to be put down quickly. King David sent Amasa to assemble fighting men of Judah in three days. However, Amasa moved too slowly, and David sent out a smaller force under Abishai to catch Sheba. David may have hesitated to put the force under the direct command of Joab, Abishai's brother, for although Joab was a highly able commander, he would not always follow David's orders. Indeed, Joab seems to have acted here too as general. When Joab came across Amasa, perhaps suspecting that Amasa sympathized with the rebels, Joab murdered him. Once any war begins, things can happen that no one expects.

Joab's force marched to Abel-Beth-Maacha, to which Sheba and some followers had fled, and they began to build up siege mounds and to batter the city's defenses.

A bloody all-out attack was imminent. Perhaps the most notable role in the story is played by the "wise woman," as she is termed. She called to Joab from the city wall, wisely and bluntly: "Are you Joab?" seeming to imply, "Are you Joab who thinks he is so smart? Surely, people will say

that they should have offered peace to Abel, and thus they would have had peace." She was reminding him of the Biblical injunction to offer peace to a city before attacking it. She went on to point out that she and her fellow citizens were peaceful and loyal, and how could Joab seek to destroy a city that was a "city and a mother in Israel. Why will you swallow up the inheritance given by God?" (20.16–19). The wise woman was pleading for the city, yet rebuking Joab's quickness to fight, in such a way that Joab could only be impressed with her honesty and intelligence.

Joab answered, "Far be it from me that I should swallow or destroy. However, Sheba ben Bichri has raised his hand against King David. Give him over, and I will depart." The woman replied that Sheba's head would be thrown to Joab over the wall. She knew both by law and by good sense what had to be done. The text does not tell exactly how she persuaded the city leaders to hand Sheba over. However, Abel was a Benjaminite city, and Sheba was of that tribe, perhaps a kinsman. A later source suggests that she approached the city leaders (reminiscent of Abraham's approaching God about possibly saving Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 20). Joab, she told them, is demanding that we turn over fifty people to be executed. She then pretended to be bargaining with him, gradually reducing the number of people to be executed to only Sheba ben Bichri himself. At that point, the city fathers were grateful to get away so lightly, and they readily agreed. The Talmud also uses the story to discuss the question of what people should do in a situation where enemies demand that a group give one of their number to be murdered or raped. In Sheba's case, the Talmudic law would agree that he could be given over to save the rest because (1) the enemies demanded Sheba specifically, and (2) he was guilty of rebellion against a legitimate king and therefore in any case subject to a death penalty.

The city fathers were won over by the woman's wisdom, and they threw Sheba's head over the wall to Joab. They had ended the war before it began and had also prevented the besieging army from entering the city, which is always risky even if there is peace.

Implications

Governments face the challenge of dealing with discordant elements or individuals who love chaos and present a threat to peace and stability. Recent years have seen how devastating internal discords can be. Think of Cambodia, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Darfur, and so many more. Individuals

and small groups have also disrupted American society, like Timothy McVeigh, the Weathermen, or Father Charles Coughlin. Sometimes the rebels will come down in history as heroes, legitimate foes of tyranny and oppression. Many, however, are nothing more than enemies of an establishment that is committed to justice and to doing its best for its citizens.

Sheba was not simply disagreeing with David but trying to undermine the kingdom. Nathan the prophet had also, through parables, criticized David's behavior after David's liaison with Bathsheba. However, Nathan's approach was entirely truthful and constructive, directed, says the Scripture (II Sam. 12.1), from God Himself. Sheba attacked the legitimacy of David's kingdom and was a threat to the meaning of Israel as a nation.

11. The Man Who Wouldn't Be King, and Others Who Would

Rudyard Kipling's famous short story "The Man Who Would Be King" was later made into a movie starring Michael Caine and Sean Connery. Many men would give everything they have to be a king. Yet here we relate the stories of two men, one a Roman and the other a Biblical warrior, who turned away from the prize.

The Roman historian Livy tells that in 458 BCE Rome, still a rural town and not yet even dreaming of empire, was invaded by the neighboring Aequi. When the Roman army, under Minucius, was surrounded and in grave danger, the Romans turned to Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus for succor. Cincinnatus was a leading patrician, though not wealthy, who was little liked by the average citizens. However, he was a tough, able man with a strong sense of duty and honor. The Senate's messengers found him plowing his three-acre farm. They called on him to accept the post of dictator and to defend the city against the invaders. The dictatorship was an emergency temporary appointment with none of the opprobrium added to the term by the evil dictators of the last century. Cincinnatus relieved the siege of Minucius's force and led the Romans to complete victory. Only fifteen days of his six-month term had passed, but staunch and high principled as he was, he resigned his dictatorship and returned to his plow. Livy uses this story to exemplify the noble character of the heroes of early Republican Rome. Cincinnatus did his duty to the state to the best of his ability and sought no honors. Such stalwart men, says Livy,

enabled the small rural town to grow over the centuries into the mighty Roman Empire.

The Book of Judges, chapters 6–9, tells the story of Gideon, who refused an offer to rule over Israel, seven hundred years before the story of Cincinnatus. After the days of the judge and prophetess Deborah, some Israelites had lapsed into worship of Baal and fell prey to the Midianites, Amalekites, and the "People of the East." They would sweep down on Israelite villages, ransacking and pillaging, especially for food. In those days, the Israelites had no central leadership. God appeared to Gideon and told him to destroy the idol of Baal and to lead his people against their tormentors. A righteous and brave man and a good battle leader, Gideon with his small army of three hundred men completely defeated the large invading army and slew their two kings, Oreb and Zeb. Pursuing the remnants, he scored a second great victory and captured their princes, Zeba and Zalmuna, who had murdered Gideon's brothers at Mt. Tabor. A strange dialogue ensued as Gideon asked the princes, "Where are the men whom you slew at Tabor?" and they answered, "As you are, so were they. Each was of the form of a prince" (Judg. 8.18). Gideon then told the princes that those men were his brothers, and if they had not killed his brothers, he would not kill them. The two princes were put to the sword. Gideon then showed diplomatic skill as well as a desire for harmony by quelling a serious tension with the Israelite tribe of Ephraim. The Ephra imites felt deeply insulted because Gideon had called them to the battle very late. He mollified the Ephraimites, telling them that he had started the job but they had finished it. They had captured the two kings and "What have I done now in comparison with you? Are not the gleanings of Ephraim better than the grapes of Aviezer [Gideon's home] . . . What was I able to do compared to you?"(Judg. 8.1–3).

Gideon was a national hero, and the grateful people asked him to rule over them, but he refused the honor, saying that neither he nor his sons after him should rule, but only God should rule over them. Israel had never yet had a king. Perhaps Gideon felt that if God wanted Gideon to be king, he would likely have told him so, either directly or through a proph-et. Gideon would not accept the kingship either for his own benefit or as recognition of his victory. He had a right too to a large share of the spoils looted from the enemy, but he did not take it. Don Yitzhak Abravanel suggests that Gideon responded that God will rule over Israel because he felt that only God was fit to rule, as man was too ephemeral. Instead,

Gideon continued to live quietly in his own home on his own land for the remaining forty years of his life. Nevertheless, Abimelech, his son by a concubine, murdered all his brothers (but one) and made himself king of part of the land for three miserable years.

The sequel to the story of Gideon is worth studying during every election campaign. We use extensively M. L. Malbim's interpretation. Gideon's youngest son, Jotham, escaped Abimelech's massacre of all the seventy brothers. When Jotham heard that the people of Shechem had named Abimelech king, Jotham went to the top of nearby Mt. Gerizim and called out to the people the following parable. Listen to me, people of Shechem, and let God judge between us. The leading trees went about to find a king over themselves and asked first the olive tree to rule over them. But the olive did not want to leave off its work of providing oil which serves to honor God and delight people. The trees went then to a fig tree. Its work was less enlightening than the olive, but its fruit still provided great pleasure to humankind, and it too turned down the offer to be king. The trees then approached the grape vine, which also refused, protesting that it was busy producing wine which gives such pleasure to people, besides its use in religious service.

Unable to find a king elsewhere, the trees then approached the thornbush who answered, "If in truth you anoint me king over you, come take refuge under my shade, and if not, then let fire go forth from the thorn and consume the cedars of Lebanon." In fact, a thornbush provides only minimal shade; nevertheless, it insisted that the mighty cedars should humble themselves before it, and if they did not, do not think that the thorn won't hurt them, for fire will spring from the thorn and consume them. Thorns crackle well in a fire (9.7–15).

Jotham went on to make his message totally clear: And now if you have acted in truth and honesty in elevating Abimelech, and if you have behaved well to Gideon and his house and requited him good for all the good he did you, then it is well. However, if instead you have murdered his sons and made Abimelech, the son of his maidservant, king over Shechem because he is a relative to you, so rejoice in Abimelech and consume the inhabitants of Shechem, just as the thornbush consumed the cedars. Jotham then made good his escape.

The parable hardly needs comment. It seems so often that power is sought by people whose lives are otherwise empty and who feel concern

or love for their own ambition and honors, not for the people they wish to rule.

Implications

Although the stories of Cincinnatus and Gideon seem similar at first glance, there are important differences. The Bible's story indicates that people may have purposes far different than being king. Livy presents Cincinnatus as a man of patrician background but still a poor farmer. He was stern, haughty, and rather caustic and was not a popular figure among the Romans. Perhaps Cincinnatus even considered himself too good to have to rule others. Furthermore, the Romans had a particular hatred for monarchy ever since they had been conquered and ruled by Etruscan kings who had been driven out not long before.

The Bible's story of Gideon has a different impact. It is not that Gideon is too good to be king; rather, he does not feel that kingship is suitable for him. Jotham's parable of the trees tells that everyone has his own function in God's creation. It is not special for everyone to be a king.

Many rulers want power for power's sake. Witness the number of European monarchs, for example, Napoleon, who styled themselves not only as king but as emperor, while two figures who rejected talk of kingships were George Washington and Simon Bolivar.

12. Qualities of a Good Leader

There is no perfect leader flawless in character and judgment nor will there ever be one. Yet there are those who are recognized as far superior. For the Hebrew Bible, the best leaders would probably be Moses and David. The Biblical text supplemented by Midrash touches on several characteristics of Moses as a leader: (1) He worked for some time as a shepherd and showed great compassion and attention to his sheep. God saw, says the Midrash, how on one occasion Moses searched long and hard to find a strayed lamb and lovingly took the lamb to water and then back to the flock. Moses's devotion to a living creature and his honesty in his labors moved God to say that so compassionate a man was fit to lead God's own flock—the Children of Israel. Moses did indeed lead the Israelites with love and dedication even when they were contentious and difficult.

(2) Moses was wise and knowledgeable, able to learn and comprehend God's law and to teach it to the people. Deuteronomy 34.10 says that no other prophet like Moses ever rose again in Israel. His knowledge was surpassing in both earthly and celestial matters.

(3) Moses was very humble—"And the man Moses was very humble, more than any man on the face of the earth" (Num. 12.3). He earned the high praise of being called the "servant of God" (Deut. 34.5 and Josh. 1.1). True humility demands realistic self-appraisal and appropriate ambition, not inaccurate, masochistic self-criticism which can move a leader to appease those who do not deserve it. This greatest of prophets and teachers did not hesitate to learn from others—Jethro, Aaron, the daughters of Zelophahad.

(4) Along with his sincere humility, Moses was strong and courageous and could make tough decisions and carry them through. When God commanded him to make all-out wars, he did so, knowing that God's command had to be obeyed fully. He had shown great strength of character earlier in his life too, slaying an abusive Egyptian overseer and another time chasing away the shepherds who were bullying Jethro's daughters at the well in Midian. And this humble stutterer could stand and represent God and the Israelite slaves before the mighty and imperious pharaoh. Midrashic stories tell of his victories in battles leading the armies of Egypt and of Ethiopia. When he descended from Mt. Sinai and found people dancing in front of the golden calf, he did not hesitate to smash the tablets on which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments.

(5) Moses also had a strong sense of the historical purpose of his nation. He recorded the Israelites' historical experience carefully in the Pentateuch and encouraged the people many times to inquire into their history—from whence they came and to what they were headed.

(6) Moses did experience moments of weakness, disappointment, and discouragement, nor could he always prevent his people from following wrongheaded plans of their own. Several times he himself did wrong. Yet he was a man of faith and came to understand deeply with God's help the real meaning of penitence and forgiveness (Exod. 32.7–14, 30–32, and 33.17–34.10).

Implications

Most historians would not hesitate to name Abraham Lincoln and George Washington as the best of American presidents. It is interesting that Abra-

ham Lincoln shared many of Moses's qualities of character and intellect. He too was deeply compassionate and high principled and could act decisively in difficult situations. His speeches show a strong love of his nation and his close sense of its history. The Gettysburg Address begins with reference to the foundation of the United States. Again like Moses, he was very smart and a serious intellect, able to think through tough problems, and he possessed a strong spiritual sense.

Some commentators argue that Moses was not a great politician or political organizer. Certainly it is hard to picture him dashing around the country making campaign speeches and trashing opponents, as some modern American candidates are wont to do. Lincoln may well have been a better practitioner of politics and debating, that is, his debates with Senator Stephen Douglas, while Moses stuttered, at least through part of his life.

One quality that allows a leader to be successful and even great is having a sense of being a conduit of God's plan rather than seeing leadership as merely an ego trip. Good leadership rises not only from assumption or accumulation of power but from the person bursting with the ability to give.

13. David: God Chooses a Leader

King Saul had not obeyed God's command sufficiently in his war against the Philistines, and had failed later to fulfill the divine command to obliterate utterly the Amalekites. The prophet Samuel informed Saul that "God had torn the Kingdom from you [Saul] and has given it to your fellow who is better than you" (I Sam. 15.25). Saul would remain king for the rest of his life, but his sons would not succeed him. Samuel loved Saul who, despite his weaknesses as king, was of very fine character, and he grieved over this man whom he had once anointed at God's command. God then told Samuel that he had mourned for Saul long enough and now it was time to move on. Samuel was to fill his horn with oil and go to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem, where "I have seen among his sons a king for Myself" (16.1). God had chosen Saul at the people's request, and perhaps Samuel had been too quick to try to please the people. The new king would be God's choice alone and should obey God and not be dependent on popular goodwill. Commentaries point out that while Saul was anointed with oil from a flask, the new king would be anointed from

a "horn," more befitting a king. The horn was a more powerful symbol. Hannah, in I Samuel 2, had prayed "may my horn be exalted in God." Yet God did not tell Samuel who would be the choice. The process had to be kept quiet, for Samuel was concerned that Saul might be angry enough to kill him if Saul discovered his role in the affair. Abravanel suggests that Samuel was not, in fact, afraid of Saul, but he was reluctant to anoint a new king to replace Saul whom he loved so deeply, and he knew that Saul loved him as well.

Saul had come to Samuel at Mizpeh and had been anointed. But now the prophet would go to find and anoint the new king who was very much God's choice. The process by which the new king was being chosen gave a lesson which the people of Israel, including Samuel, needed to learn.

Samuel went to Bethlehem where, under pretext of conducting a sacrifice, he would meet Jesse's sons. He would not be told beforehand which one to anoint, for several reasons—first, to recognize that only God can make a fully wise choice, and second, so that he would not endanger anyone if Saul found out what he had done.

Samuel's arrival in Bethlehem frightened the local elders. Was there some problem that had brought the prophet to them? Samuel reassured them that he had come only to sacrifice and to conduct a feast. Samuel was able to meet Jesse's sons. "And he saw Eliab, and he said, 'Certainly God's anointed is before Him'" (16.6). Samuel's picture of a king was still Saul, handsome and tall, as Eliab was. Eliab was not only imposing of appearance but a firstborn, and Samuel was impressed by him, as he had once been by Saul. Samuel may have felt that a tall handsome king would more quickly inspire obedience from the people. However, God told Samuel not to give attention to the outer appearance, for only God sees the inner truth, and Eliab is later referred to as irascible, "For it is not what a man will see. A man will see to the eyes, and God will see to the heart" (II Samuel 16.7). Rashi sees the remark as a soft rebuke of Samuel, who had at least on one occasion called himself the seer (one who sees).

Jesse's sons each came before Samuel, who responded that none of these was God's choice. Samuel asked if there were more sons, and Jesse answered that the youngest was tending the sheep. "And he sent and brought him, and he was ruddy with beautiful and pleasant appearance, and God said, 'Rise, and anoint him, for this is he'" (16.12). The fact that David was shepherding sheep spoke well for him. Jacob and Moses had

also been shepherds tending their flocks with great compassion. "And the spirit of God imbued David from that day on" (16.13).

A modern candidate who wins a race for political office may attribute his or her success to a campaign manager or to brilliant ideas or to judging well the mood of the voters. The manner of David's anointment made clear to him that he would be king because God chose him. David did have wonderful talents and abilities that he would need to use. However, although he would do his best for his people, his real allegiance was to God and to God's plan for history.

Samuel's difficulty in picking the correct son of Jesse is also telling. Samuel was a wise prophet and the chief judge of Israel. Yet he was mistaken in his choosing a king, being overly focused on externals. What shall a modern voter do when bombarded during an election with carefully planned TV sound bites that pit the ad people of one candidate against his opponent's ad people? How many American citizens really know the candidates for president or Congress or governor whom they will vote for or against?

Implications

Politicking and politics are not exactly the same thing. After the 1992 US presidential election, the losing vice presidential candidate, Dan Quayle, complimented the new Democratic president-elect, Bill Clinton, saying that if Mr. Clinton was as good a president as he was a campaigner, he would be a fine president indeed. Whether Mr. Clinton fulfilled that blessing, let the reader decide for him- or herself.

What is it that makes a leader great?—a Washington, or Lincoln, Winston Churchill, King David. Over 2,400 years ago, the Athenian historian Thucydides said of two leaders of his century, Themistocles and Pericles, that they knew how to make good decisions. Wisdom, courage, devotion, toughness are necessary. A superb leader needs to understand the soul of his people. This is what makes speeches like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address so remarkable, or Pericles's Funeral Oration, or Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" or Winston Churchill's "We Shall Never Surrender." Our representatives in DC often seem to be more like lobbyists who seek whatever prizes and perks they can for themselves and their constituents, not people with a well-thought-out vision of the national good.

Let us consider the story of how David was selected to be king. Did God err in choosing Saul as king? Perhaps the story can be seen in the following light. Saul was a temporary choice, to occupy the throne until David was grown and ready. One might compare this to a major league baseball team that has drafted a terrific centerfielder just out of high school. He might develop into an all-star, but he will not be ready for the major leagues for two years. The team must search for a good player, perhaps an older experienced veteran, who can fill the gap for the two years. Israel needed a king, and the people were pressing the prophet Samuel to choose one. Saul was a man of courage and modesty who could suit the purpose well. That he could be occasionally too soft or too hard did not seem great drawbacks for a temporary appointment. Perhaps some sense of serving only a transitional role contributed to Saul not feeling very secure or legitimate in his kingship.

14. David versus Coriolanus: Loyalty, Love, and Duty

Loyalty is a precious human virtue and rare enough in politics. There are cases when a person can devote his life to a certain idea or modus operandi, but does so with no love. Two stories, one from Roman history and one from the Bible, show the contrast.

Roman historians (see Livy and Plutarch) tell of Marcius whose military valor at Corioli against the Volsci won him the honorary name of Coriolanus. Shakespeare's wonderful play on his story, *Coriolanus*, has been produced as a movie. Plutarch describes Marcius as a man of great energy and strength of purpose but combined with so violent a temper and self-assertion that he could not cooperate with people. Indifferent to hardship, pleasure, or money, he trained himself always for war. Honors in battle never satisfied him, fearful that he would fall short of what he had achieved before. His supreme joy was to please his mother, a tough Roman matron of the old school. After his heroism and brilliance in defeating the Volsci, Marcius became embroiled in angry arguments between the upper and lower classes of Rome, and his outspoken insults to the plebeians led to his banishment and almost his execution, despite his glorious military services.

Infuriated and obsessed with wreaking revenge on Rome, he went to the Volsci and persuaded them to attack Rome. As Marcius's Volsci army camped before Rome, two delegations came from the city but could not

persuade him to desist. Roman women then came forth spontaneously to the camp, accompanied by Marcius's mother (Volumnia), wife, and children. Volumnia broke through Marcius's harshness by telling him, "You cannot attack Rome unless you trample on the body of the mother that bore you." Marcius broke down and withdrew the Volsci army. Plutarch says that he was murdered by the Volsci shortly after. Livy, in his history of Rome, tells of another report that Marcius in fact lived on for many years and endured the miseries of exile.

Like Coriolanus, the Biblical David was a war hero, but pursued by the jealousy of King Saul, he left his native Israel with a band of men to live under the Philistines, longtime foes of Israel (I Sam. 27). Yet there the similarity to Marcius ends. David left not because he hated his countrymen but to save his life from King Saul's threats. Indeed, David was the most trustworthy of men, who never turned from his love of his king, his people, and God, despite the king's anger at him. Love was an existential element of David's being, and his loyalties were founded on love, not merely on his own rigid personal disciplines. When David and his troop lived among the Philistines, he carefully avoided doing harm to Israel.

Marcius, an intelligent, able man, was neither greedy nor petty, but his loyalty was focused to his own inhuman self-imposed code of behavior. His actions showed no love for Rome. He displayed scars of his many battle wounds but no sweetness in his manner or thought. Marcius was ultimately loyal to neither his gods nor his nation, nor even to his own children. Rome was for him largely a vehicle to act out his powerful inner drives. David, on the other hand, was no perfectionist, but his humanness and wholeness were remarkable and were expressed in his love for his God, his nation, and indeed his king.

Implications

Coriolanus showed contempt for both the Volsci and his fellow Romans. He felt himself above the people and would do nothing to make himself acceptable to them. When this led to his banishment, he went to where he could take revenge on Rome. In contrast, poet, warrior, and successful leader though he was, David was also a humble man who typically did not show contempt or arrogance toward others, Israelite or Philistine. He continued to love Saul, even though the king had sought to kill him.

Loyalty is a wonderful quality, but it must be human and aimed at a humane goal or it becomes brittle, prideful, and ultimately self-devouring. David was loyal to his land, his family, to King Saul, and ultimately to the God of Israel. He was even loyal in his own way to Achish, the Philistine king who took him in. Coriolanus was loyal only to his abstract sense of what a warrior should be. His dedication to this code had an inhuman, even idolatrous aspect to it and everything could be sacrificed to it.

3

ORGANIC MORALITY AGAINST ABSTRACT EQUILIBRIUM

Chapter 3 offers fourteen narratives (15 through 28) which illustrate the Biblical focus on an organic sense of morality emerging in the story of Cain slaying his brother Abel and similar narratives. These are contrasted with the focus on an abstract conception of cleansing a pollutant and "blood paying for blood" emerging in stories like Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. The first seven narratives in this section (15 through 21) focus on domestic relations with the last seven (22 through 28) examining societal relations.

DOMESTIC RELATIONS

Blessings can uplift the quality of life of an entire society or of an individual. The first entry examines the priestly blessing as a general benediction that can transmit such a sense of well-being. The second entry describes the unusual chapter in Biblical law regarding the *sota*, a wife suspected of infidelity. Closer examination indicates that the sota is less about sexual immorality than about the restoration of trust in a marital and family relationship. The third entry focuses on the real human emotions that emerge in the discussion of the rebellion of Absalom against David. Though David and Absalom are locked in a rivalrous conflict for the throne, one gets the sense that they continued to love each other throughout their political struggle.

The fourth describes the relationship between Solomon and Sheba, on the one hand political and on the other hand closely personal. The fifth deals with the nature of the relationship between Cain and Abel. Cain's intense reaction to God's rejection of his sacrifice goes beyond an abstract sense of failure and involves a deeply emotional jealousy of his brother Abel. The sixth narrative offers a vivid instance of what happens when a squabble between the Persian king Ahasueros and his wife, Vashti, is abstracted from the realistic, emotional domestic relationship and foolishly generalized into a prototype of an abstract threat to a husband's authority, leading to her execution. How different this is from King David's reaction to biting criticism from his wife, Michal, and its effect on the marital relationship, which started a domestic argument but not an execution. The final entry builds on the American Puritan connectedness to the Israelites and on their sense of the responsibility of individuals to families and to society as a whole.

15. The Priestly Blessing

Blessing was infused into history at its very beginning as God repeatedly referred to His ongoing creation as good and finally as very good. God also blessed Adam and Eve and later Noah (Gen. 1.28 and 9.1). As blessed beings, people in Biblical thought are free and are encouraged to fulfill themselves and the meaning of God's creation. People need to be aware of their blessings, to be reminded regularly, and to respond with wisdom and gratitude. This will not sound very new to many Western people today. However, among ancient civilizations, the beneficence of neither deities nor parents could be taken for granted. Mythological gods could be capricious and vicious, and parents in Greece and Rome had the legal power to expose their newborn infants or to kill an older son or daughter as they often did. People and gods cursed each other easily, and the curses were often horribly fulfilled as was Oedipus's curse on his two sons or Theseus's curse on his son Hippolytus in the Greek myths.

In the Book of Numbers, the Levites and the priests played a special role in the new society as guardians of the Tabernacle and of its rites. The Israelites could well have feared them. Priests could have become domineering and predatory. Their very closeness to the sacred things could be frightening, for they would enter the sacred precincts and do things there that other Israelites could attempt only on pain of death. The role of a

priest in presiding over the sota ritual could particularly have frightened people. How could these priests not become cruel, greedy, fanatical inquisitor-like clerics?

Numbers 6 speaks of the priestly blessings. Certainly the Tabernacle was awesome, but its sanctity would be a source of blessing. Blessing is a key motif in the Pentateuch. God blessed Adam and Eve, Noah and Abraham, and blessings are central in the stories of Isaac and Jacob. The Tabernacle and the priests were also sources of blessing to the Israelites in the wilderness. Daily the priests would pronounce God's blessing upon the people. In fact, the blessing was given from God, and the priest was merely the conduit. Nor in Talmudic law would the priests pronounce the blessing until the nonpriestly prayer leader would formally call them to begin. Thus God, the priests, and the people all participate in promulgating the blessing. The priests have no special power to bless anyone. Rather, "and they will put My name on the people, and I will bless them." People will learn to see the Tabernacle as a source of God's blessing, not of superstitious fear. Curses are much more a feature of ancient mythology than of the Bible. Biblical parents often bless their children. In many traditional Jewish homes today, it is customary for the father to bless the children when returning home from the synagogue on Friday evenings. It is noteworthy that two silver amulets from about 600 BCE have been found near Jerusalem, each inscribed with the Biblical priestly blessing in a slightly abridged form. The blessing is recited nowadays in Israeli synagogues every morning and in diaspora synagogues only on holidays.

There was no magical efficacy in the blessing, nor did the priests have any power to give or withhold blessings. The blessing can have the purpose of regularly expressing God's love to the people and His confidence in them. A man well known to the writers has never forgotten a blessing given him by an elderly man over sixty years earlier when he was a small boy.

The words of the priestly blessing are unlike the blessings of the patriarchs in the Pentateuch. They do not promise the receiver anything specific like Isaac's blessing to Jacob, "the dew of the heavens and the fat of the land, "or "by your sword shall you live," to Esau. Nor are they personal and instructive like Jacob's to his sons or Moses's to the tribes.

Implications

People can find themselves fixated at a certain stage of their life development, often by their feeling of a lack of validation or recognition from parents. These feelings may or may not be realistic, but they can seriously impede one's life. The regular act of blessing from the priests can help overcome disappointments and traumas. One becomes not a victim but a survivor, even a thriver, constantly being reminded that he or she is an important human being who can survive the wear and tear of human existence and come through whole. The priestly blessing seems warm, reassuring, and more general than a specific parental blessing—the same words for everyone (6.25). "May God bless you and keep watch over you" notes the continuance of the importance of blessing among the Israelites. They are in essence a blessed people, as even the enemy soothsayer Balaam would note repeatedly (Num. 23 and 24, especially 24.10). And God will watch over them as the Levites watch over the Tabernacle to prevent anyone from violating its sanctity. One watches over and protects what is precious. "May God make His presence [literally—'face'] enlighten you and grant you grace"; that is, you will find favor in His eyes. You will please him (6.26). "May God direct His presence [literally—'raise His face'] toward you and grant you peace." "Raising the face" also implies that God will show you a cheerful countenance, not typically downcast or angry. He will answer prayer. You will feel the imminence of God's care for you. You will have peace in being satisfied with what he gives you, and in not desiring what others have.

16. Sota: The Errant Wife

A most unusual chapter in Biblical law sets forth the rules about sota, the suspected wife. A man and a married woman who commit adultery are both punished with death, if there is sufficient evidence, according to the Ten Commandments and to further rules regarding sexual misconduct stated in more detail in other Biblical passages, particularly in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The sota is a wife whose husband suspects her of having had intercourse with another man. Her husband shall bring her to the Tabernacle, or in a later era, the Jerusalem Temple. There a priest will weary her with questioning and remove her hair covering and her ornaments and muss her attire with the purpose of inducing her to admit her

guilt and repent. If she maintains her innocence, then the priest will give her a drink of water mixed with dirt from the Tabernacle courtyard and ground up pieces of a scroll on which the Biblical verses about sota are written, including the divine name. Scripture goes on to tell that if the woman had indeed committed adultery her internal organs would swell and she would die. According to the Mishna, her face would immediately begin to pale, her eyes would bulge, and her innards would rupture. In some cases, this result might be delayed.

If she had not committed adultery, then the waters would not harm her, and instead she would become fruitful and bear children. The sota process is understood as a miracle, the only instance in Biblical law where judgment is rendered based on a divine intervention rather than on regular court procedures. The Talmud tells that the sota procedure was still in practice in the late days of the Second Temple, ca. 50 CE, when it was discontinued by R. Yohanan ben Zaccai because of an increase in promiscuity (M Sota 9.9).

Some of the ancient law codes of Mesopotamia speak of procedures that are similar but that differ in important ways. In Hammurabi's Code and in the later Assyrian Law, a woman accused of adultery could be required to jump in the Euphrates for trial by water. Modern scholars are unclear about what happened next, but it is likely that if the woman began to sink, it was decided that the water acknowledged her purity and she would be pulled out. If she did not sink, it was because the water judged her impure and had rejected her (Driver and Miles, 1935). Trial by water was used in medieval Europe as well.

What is the nature of the Bible's sota procedure, and why does the Scripture discuss it in Numbers 5 right after the census and the instructions in the order of encampment? In fact, sota deals not so much with sexual misbehavior as with the issue of mistrust in a family. A marriage cannot easily survive suspicion and mistrust or people acting on willful passions. God intervenes here to bring clarification so as to restore trust between husband and wife, when no wrong had been committed, and to assure the end of the marriage if the woman had in fact committed adultery. Of course, any marriage not satisfactory can be ended by divorce.

Sota laws deal with a woman who acts in a *ruah shtut* (foolish spirit). Rashi notes the connection between the words *sota* and *shtut* (foolish). The Numbers text had been talking about social structure and family. Here is an issue of suspicion, jealousy, and *ruah shtut* that can wreck a

family. God will judge each case, and the family can be sure that His judgment will be true. Suspicions of illegitimacy will not have to follow the children and grandchildren for generations as might otherwise happen. In Greek society, a married man would often take a young boy as a lover. In Rome, deterioration of family bonding led to problems so that Emperor Augustus passed laws which sought, unsuccessfully, to strengthen families. Yet Augustus himself married Livia, stealing her from her husband, by whom she was then already seven months pregnant. The Scripture reveres marriage, and the Talmud labels it a compact not only between the husband and wife but also including God as a third partner (BT Kiddushin 30b). The purpose of sota is thus not simply to punish the guilty or to prevent adultery but to strengthen bonds of trust in family and marriage that hold society together. The issue is mainly trust and security and the importance of maintaining the integrity of the family structure. The real problem is falsehood and distrust. Where sota differs from the Mesopotamian laws is exactly in the fact that it is not a judicial trial but rather a means to make clear the unimpeachable authority of God Himself whether this family should continue to exist. If no wrong was done, then the family need carry no stain and can be a fully functioning family in the nation of Israel.

Sota is not a warning against sexual immorality. It is rather a measure to remove a threat to stable families in a society in which family plays a major part. The woman is under suspicion. The husband may have been aware of her inappropriate behavior with another man, including being alone with him. There were no witnesses of actual adultery, yet the marriage relationship is now clouded. Can the marriage survive these suspicions? Indeed, should it? In a way of life for which identity is so important, will this woman's children always be in doubt as to who their father (or fathers) is? How can such a suspicion be removed beyond all doubt? Only by God Himself. The Scripture therefore enjoins the sota procedure by which God makes clear, miraculously, whether the woman has or has not committed adultery and whether her children are tainted.

A man who involves himself with strange women will impoverish himself. His wife will come to suspect him and "be false to her husband" (Num. 6.12). The sota procedure was not to be used on a woman whose husband was likewise cheating on her. Further, all this can begin with the man skimping on his gifts to the Tabernacle, thereby prompting deception and a lowering of standards in other areas as well. The woman's crime is

described as *ma'al*, meaning to be false, the same term that is used to denote disrespect toward the sanctuary. She has perhaps played false to her husband, to the nation, and to God. She has perhaps played false to the high standards of loyalty to the whole, which the opening chapters of Numbers emphasize. The situation of sota involves distrust, falseness, and betrayal, all ruinous to a society based on high integrity. As one can *ma'al*, be untrue to, the Sanctuary (Num. 5.6), so one can *ma'al* a husband and family and God (Num. 5.12).

Nor is the burden only on an adulterous woman. Rabbinic commentators argue that when she dies, her paramour will die in the same manner. Also, if the husband has sinned, the entire sota test will not be effective.

Implications

For Scripture, adultery and the breakdown of marriage are not subjects for bawdy comedy as they have been in Western literature for centuries. Think of the Reeve's and Miller's tales, in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Biblical marriages are not taken lightly. They aim for maximal satisfaction, mutual intimacy, and growth in a long-term, sanctified relationship. In Chaucer's tales, there is little sympathy for the cuckold and too much for the adulterer. The laughter demands callous disregard toward people's humanity. The treatment of the sota is different than the idea of putting someone to death for adultery. It differs from the trial by water used in ancient Mesopotamia or in medieval Europe.

Modern sensibilities revolt entirely at the idea of punishing adultery. Yet indeed, the idea of sota is not so much punishment as restoring trust based on divine sanction in the foundation of a marriage and a family. The process allows for the reemergence of a healthy relationship. It is a family issue and not really a court matter. This is not a barbaric process by which a husband may punish or harass his wife.

17. Civil War: The Rebellion of Absalom

Absalom, the son of David and of a princess of Geshur, was the handsomest man in all Israel. From the soles of his feet to the crown of his head, there was no flaw in him. He let his beautiful hair grow very long, cutting it once a year so that it should not become intolerably heavy (II Sam. 14.25–26). Absalom became David's oldest surviving son and presumed himself fit to be heir to the throne. However, Solomon, much younger,

had in fact been designated heir by divine decree. Absalom was capable and active and not hesitant to push his advantages. He murdered his older half-brother, Amnon, in revenge for Amnon's violating Absalom's full sister, Tamar. David was very torn by the murder, and Absalom fled to his mother's father, King Talmi of Geshur, and remained there three years. David grieved for Amnon, but as time passed, he missed Absalom too. His general, Joab, realizing that David was longing for Absalom, sent a wise woman from Tekoa (see II Sam. 14) to tell the king an elaborate fiction about her own sons. One, she said, killed the other, and now the townspeople wanted to kill the killer. She used the story to let the king express his love for the absent Absalom. David accepted her play-act and allowed Absalom to return to Jerusalem but still would not see him. After two years passed, Absalom called on Joab to again intercede, but Joab would not speak to Absalom, so Absalom provoked his notice by burning Joab's field. Joab agreed to represent Absalom before David, who restored Absalom to the royal court.

Soon after, Absalom took another big step. With Amnon gone and a second brother, Cileab, apparently either dead or uninterested, Absalom reckoned himself heir to the throne. However, it was Solomon, much younger than Absalom, who was designated as heir. Absalom made his play, taking advantage of some people's restlessness and disappointments with the government and of tensions in the country; David, already in his sixties, may have seemed to some too old and weak to rule, whereas Absalom was still a vigorous forty. It is likely too that the whole matter of Bathsheba and of Solomon's birth had become public knowledge and that people were unhappy that Solomon and not Absalom was marked as successor to David.

Absalom would greet people bringing petitions or lawsuits before the king, responding to their accounts with, "Your words are good and right, but no one from the king will listen to you. . . . Oh, who will appoint me judge in the land and to me would come everyone who would have a quarrel or court case, and I would treat him justly" (II Sam. 15.4), as though he loved the people and wanted not to be king but merely judge because of his love of justice and righteousness. And when someone would come near to bow to him, Absalom would raise the person up and kiss him . . . and Absalom stole the heart of the people of Israel, presenting himself as one who loved the people, asking each where he lived and

why he was in Jerusalem. Absalom displayed himself with the trappings of monarchy—a horse and chariot and footmen.

Gathering support, Absalom went to Hebron and declared himself king. Hebron was the city in Judah where David had begun his rule, and Absalom probably had strong support there. Or he may have sought the backing of those close to his father, cleverly adding support all over Israel. David's brilliant advisor, Ahitophel, joined Absalom, having complaints of his own against the king. A messenger came to tell David that "the hearts of the people are after Absalom" (15.13).

Civil wars can devastate a nation. America had its own experience in a civil war in which well over half a million people died. England suffered through the War of the Roses, and Russia had a terrible civil war right after the Communist Revolution of 1917. Ancient Greek cities constantly battled each other, nearly self-destructing in the internecine Peloponnesian War. Absalom's revolt proceeded from his own ambition. God had declared through the prophet Nathan that Solomon should be king after David, but Absalom was ambitious and ready to fight for the crown. David might simply have surrendered, and Israel would have avoided a bloody fight. Sometimes, however, once a course of events begins, it is hard to stop.

David was forced to flee Jerusalem with a small band of loyalists (15.3–16.14). Absalom entered Jerusalem, encountering no resistance. Most commentators feel that Absalom did not plan to murder David but wanted instead to be associated with David as coruler and eventually sole successor. He felt that David had reached an age when he was too old and weak to rule well. It was perhaps still possible to avoid a bloodbath. Then Ahitophel stepped in. He wanted to destroy David perhaps because of David's affair with Bathsheba, who was Ahitophel's granddaughter. Ahitophel first advised Absalom to seclude himself publicly with David's concubines who had remained in Jerusalem, thus publicizing and fortifying Absalom's claim to kingship and making the commitment to rebellion seem irreversible. Then Ahitophel advised to let him pursue David with a small picked force and to kill David before he could raise an army of his supporters (16.15–17.4).

Many commentators argue that Absalom was not without feeling for David and that although he wanted to succeed his father, he did not want to kill him. So he hesitated to send an army that would bring about David's death and gladly opted for the advice of Hushai, secretly an agent

of David, who persuaded Absalom to delay pursuing David until Absalom had gathered his full forces. Ultimately, David's army won the decisive battle, and Absalom was murdered by Joab, David's general, after the battle, despite David's order to spare Absalom (17.5–18.15).

It is not clear early in the story of Absalom's revolt that David was ready to fight. He loved his son, despite the son's misbehaviors, and mourned deeply when he was killed. David may have at first hoped that a settlement or compromise of some sort might have brought peace and avoided war. However, when David heard that Ahitophel had joined the rebellion, he knew that there could be no settlement and that Ahitophel would make the killing of David a high priority, a sine qua non. And, in fact, this is exactly what happened. Ahitophel made war to the end unavoidable. David had to fight in self-defense as well as to preserve the kingdom over which God had anointed him. When Ahitophel saw that his advice to pursue David immediately and kill him was not implemented and that David might return to Jerusalem, he went home and hanged himself.

A final twist. Joab disobeyed David's order not to harm Absalom. When Joab heard that Absalom, in flight after losing the battle, had become entangled by his hair in a terebinth tree, Joab put three darts in his heart. Joab may have feared that if Absalom survived, David would forgive him and Absalom might still become king. If this happened, then Absalom might have put Joab to death in revenge for Joab having led David's army against him.

Implications

Should David have avoided the war by simply surrendering his throne to Absalom? Fast-forward several millennia—should Abraham Lincoln have avoided the terrible casualties of the American Civil War by giving in to Southern demands, possibly even agreeing to secession? This is always a heartrending decision for a conscientious leader. Rome suffered through the bloody civil wars of Marius and Sulla and of the Triumvirates that brought the end of the Republic and that were largely the product of ruthless men who sacrificed others for their own advancement. Lincoln fought mainly to preserve the Union and the ideals of the Constitution. He understood that a government that would not stand up for itself could not continue to exist.

David loved all his children, and although he must have been very torn as well as infuriated with Amnon, he did not punish him. Ahitophel was successful in making reconciliation very difficult, and Joab made it impossible. In this story, at least, all who strove to cause trouble were destroyed, Ahitophel by his own hand and Joab years later by Solomon. Although not a pushover, David was humane and compassionate, not bloodthirsty. He mourned deeply for Absalom as he had for Saul years before, although both had hurt him. David suffered but was not destroyed by his suffering, as were so many Greek heroes.

18. Rulers and Friends: Solomon and Sheba

What compels a queen to travel one thousand miles by camel to pursue reports of an unusually wise king. The story of the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon is told in I Kings and in Chronicles. The Quran and Arabic literature offer their own version of the story, and the later emperors of Ethiopia believed they were descended from the child of Solomon and Sheba. In the later stories, she is named Balqis or Makeda. Boccaccio in *The Decameron* calls her Nicaula. Emperor Haile Selassie styled himself the Lion of Judah, and when he was driven from Ethiopia by the Italian fascists' invasion of 1935, he spent part of his exile in Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, the story of Solomon and Sheba has had little impact in Jewish tradition. One opinion in the Talmud even suggested that Sheba was the name of the kingdom and that the ruler who visited Solomon was a man. An opinion in the Kabbalistic literature states that the union of Solomon and Sheba produced Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian conqueror who destroyed Jerusalem four centuries later. The story is presented in the Bible in the context of descriptions of the wisdom, wealth, and glory of King Solomon.

Solomon, in partnership with King Hiram of Tyre, sent ships to trade in the land of Ophir not far from southern Arabia, where Sheba ruled, and perhaps it was sailors who first brought stories of Solomon's wisdom and grandeur, "because of the name of God, and she came to test him with riddles" (I Kings 10.1). She traveled the thousand miles to Jerusalem by camel, with a large retinue carrying spices, gold, and precious stones, "and she spoke to Solomon of all that was in her heart." Sheba was not flighty or compulsive. It seems that she and Solomon related at a deep level, and he responded to her deepest thoughts. She grasped "all Solo-

mon's wisdom" and admired as well the wealth and order of his court. She was probably impressed by the "ascent" made of precious wood by which Solomon would ascend from his palace to the Temple. Sheba praised Solomon's wisdom and goodness as far exceeding her expectations. "Blessed be the Lord your God who preferred to place you on the throne of Israel . . . to do justice and righteousness" (10.9). Sheba and Solomon exchanged costly gifts, and she returned to her own land.

Let it be noted that Solomon's reign over Israel was generally peaceful. Perhaps Solomon's foreign policy contributed to it, including his marriages to many foreign women. His favorite wife was the daughter of the pharaoh, and the mother of his ultimate successor was Naamah the Ammonite. In addition to the good relations with Egypt and Sheba, Solomon had too a pleasant, long-term relationship with King Hiram of Tyre.

Implications

It is a great benefit when leaders or diplomats get along well on a personal level. One thinks in more recent times of President Franklin Roosevelt's friendship with Winston Churchill and also with the Queen of Norway, who spent much of World War II as a refugee in the White House after her homeland was conquered by the Nazis. Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menahem Begin of Israel developed a great mutual, personal respect and were able to bring peace between their two countries. Benjamin Franklin made quite a hit in Paris during the American Revolution, and he was instrumental in winning the support of France for America's revolution against England. Solomon and Sheba liked and respected each other personally, and this helps build relationships between flesh-and-blood people and between nations as well. One thinks of the many dynastic marriages all through history which were contracted to further political aims, and in which the couples had little personal relationship.

19. Responsibility: Cain and Abel

The Book of Genesis views the beginning of human society as growing from the union of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was the nature of their relationship that the woman will be a "help meet opposite" to the man. That is, she will be a suitable support to him, which also means opposing him when it is appropriate. Ancient non-Biblical writers too, generally looked at the family as the basis of societies of later times.

The story of the second Biblical generation more clearly defines the meaning of society and of people's mutual responsibilities. Adam and Eve produced two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain was a highly intelligent man but very troubled, and the two brothers did not get along well. Cain, the farmer, brought to God an offering of vegetables, and Abel, the shepherd, brought the finest of his sheep. It was Cain who first thought of offering his produce to God. However, he apparently did not invite Abel to offer with him. A combined presentation would have been much finer, but Cain was acquisitive and wanted all the credit for himself. However, Cain did not offer his best produce, and when God disapproved of his offering, Cain grew rebellious toward God and angry at his brother. Cain spoke to Abel. The text does not record the nature of the conversation, but it must have gone badly, for Cain killed Abel, one half of the society annihilating the other half.

God then approached Cain, "Where," He asked, "is Abel your brother?" Cain's reply defined his view of human relations. "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (perhaps better—watchman or guardian). Cain was a man who experienced life as a heavy load and tended to see things in extremes. Later, God sent Cain away from tilling the land to lead a nomadic life for a while, and Cain's response was, "My sin is greater than is bearable. You have driven me from on the face of the ground, and from You I will be hidden . . . and all who find me will slay me" (Gen. 4.13–14).

Cain overreacted to his new situation. God had not driven Cain from the face of the earth, and had not at all hidden Himself from Cain, and there is no indication that anyone would kill Cain.

Of greater concern is Cain's idea that he is not his brother's keeper. Of course, he is not. God is the keeper of all people ultimately. Yet people need to be helpful and supportive to each other and also need to receive empathy and support in return. Adam and Eve were supposed to interact supportively with each other. The Bible will later explain in detail its instructions on mutuality and responsibility. For the moment, Cain seems to have distorted his obligations both to and from others—with terrible results. He did not initially show a healthy sense of responsibility.

It seems that he adjusted to his new way of life away from the land, and at some point he settled down again but not as a farmer. Instead, he married and begat a son, Enoch, for whom he built a town which he called Enoch. Perhaps there was still a bit of selfishness in naming the

town after his son. Cain's descendants were productive and creative, inventing tools and musical instruments, and raising sheep, just as Abel had done.

Implications

Why did Cain feel unloved? Perhaps he tried to compare himself to Abel, not accepting the fact that God could accept both offerings. This transforms a fixable situation into a competition. There was no intrinsic joy for him in the act of bringing the sacrifice. God tells Cain that his offering has nothing to do with his brother; Cain's offering can also be accepted if offered in a better way. Cain responded by killing Abel.

There are healthy and unhealthy competitions. Cain showed characteristics of competitiveness and acquisitiveness. He had a hard time dealing with a feeling of being overburdened. He brought an inadequate offering and instead of talking to God and trying to correct matters, Cain turned it into a competition which led to a murder. Cain felt rejected and unloved, and found unhelpful ways to express it. He compared himself to Abel and came out the loser in his own eyes. People in many walks of life can suffer from such problems, including many who reach high positions in national leadership. It is interesting that several of America's recent presidents had little or no relationship with their fathers. In a competitive view of life, someone has to win and someone has to lose. A person with this view is defining himself more by what he has than by what he is or what he has done. Government leaders must learn that their main responsibility is toward their fellow man and not toward their own egos or toward merely getting elected.

It is not uncommon for politicians to act in personal competitiveness between people hypersensitive about their honor rather than in honest disagreement about what is best for the country. One curious expression of this was the dueling that was all too common even among leaders in early America. Historian Thomas Fleming describes this in a fine article in a 2011 edition of *American Heritage.* The most famous duel was former vice president Aaron Burr killing Alexander Hamilton in 1803. In May 1777, a Georgia legislator, General Lachlan McIntosh, killed Governor Button Gwinnett in a dispute impelled by a military defeat in the war against England. John Randolph dueled with Henry Clay in 1824. Neither was hurt. Andrew Jackson fought at least thirteen duels before he was elected president in 1828. There were also memorable brawls in the

Senate. In January 1798, Senator Roger Griswold of Connecticut attacked Senator Matthew Lyon of Vermont with a hickory cane. Lyon grabbed a poker from a nearby fireplace to defend himself. Onlookers cheered them on as new fights broke out. Debates over slavery often produced violence. In May 1856, Congressman Preston Brooke of South Carolina beat Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with a heavy cane so severely that Sumner did not fully recover for several years.

20. Catastrophizing a Small Event: Ahasueros and Vashti

A strange episode in the Book of Esther shows how transitory and often trivial matters can be blown up in such a way that they can prompt major decisions of state. In the very first chapter, King Ahasueros gave a huge men-only drinking party in his palace at Susa. "When the king's heart was merry with wine," he proposed a thoroughly undignified entertainment. He ordered his seven chamberlains to bring Vashti, the queen, before the "people and the officers" to show off her beauty, for she was indeed very beautiful. No self-respecting woman, certainly not a queen, wants to be displayed, at her husband's whim, before a company of drunks, and Vashti refused to come. The marriage sounds like one long troubled by lack of both communication and mutual respect. Still heavily inebriated, Ahasueros turned to his "counselors who knew times . . . who knew law and judgment" (1.13), and especially to the seven princes who were closest to him, to seek a legal opinion as to what to do. That any advisor should have aided the king to make a major decision when he was very drunk and very angry passes all bounds of rationality. Get the king to sleep it off and talk with him tomorrow. However, Memucan, youngest of the seven counselors, raised the slippery slope argument. "Not against the king alone has Vashti, the queen, offended but against all officials and all nations in all the provinces of King Ahasueros. For the word of the queen will go forth to all women to despise their husbands in their eyes" (1.16–17). Memucan argued that unless this matter was immediately suppressed, women all over the empire will rebel against their husbands, "and there will be much contempt and conflict" (1.16–18). Vashti must be deposed, and the king must take a new queen. Memucan turned a nasty argument between a drunken king and his wife into a general threat to male authority, whatever of it there was, all over the empire. This could turn into a major feminist revolution.

A time was needed for calming down and lucid thinking, but Memucan did the opposite. Apparently, Vashti was executed. When the king sobered up, he missed Vashti, and some commentaries suggest that he executed Memucan and his fellow advisors too, for they are not mentioned again in the story.

Memucan's advice was enough to persuade a drunken monarch to hasty, unthinking reaction. In Scripture's view, all the strange events in the story were part of God's hidden plan to save his people. Yet governments often follow policies that are not well thought out and that lead to unexpected difficulties.

Implications

Ahasueros does not seem to be that terribly angry with Vashti. This sounds like a fight that a married couple can have and then kiss and make up the next day. Instead it ended with a queen being executed and was extended, following Memucan's advice, way out of proportion into an empire-wide edict designed to protect husbands against their wives. Memucan's abstract thinking catastrophized the situation and left no way out. The conflict should have been limited and thus restricted in the harm it could do.

The Persians' handling of this affair differs far from the story of the argument between David and his wife Michal. David had accompanied the procession bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, dancing with all his might and joy. Watching from her window, Michal felt that David had behaved like a common man, not as suited a king, and when he returned to the palace, she criticized him sharply. David responded to her, but the argument remained verbal. He did not punish her and certainly did not execute her or build the situation into an attack on all the women of the kingdom.

21. Courage: Nehemiah

In 1667, Jonathan Mitchell, an intellectual leader of New England in his day, preached an election sermon entitled "Nehemiah on the Wall in Troublesome Times." He drew meaning for his own day from the Biblical story of Nehemiah. About 460 BCE, Judah was a province of the Persian Empire ruled by Artaxerxes. Judah had been conquered in 597 BCE by the Babylonians and was laid waste when it rebelled in 587.

In 539, the Persians and Medes led by King Cyrus conquered Babylon and became the new masters of its empire. The Persians treated the Judeans more easily, and some returned to Judah from Mesopotamia, to which the Babylonians had carried them into exile. However, Judah remained a poor province beset by hostile neighbors, social discrepancies, poverty, and a lack of religious direction. Nehemiah was the cupbearer of the Persian emperor. A group of visitors from Judah described to Nehemiah the many problems of their homeland. Moved to tears, Nehemiah was able to gain permission from Artaxerxes to go to Judah and look into the problems. Determined, intelligent, and fearless, Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, improved religious observance, strengthened family life, and corrected some of the worst social problems, despite constant threats and harassment from neighboring Ammonites, Arabs, and others. There were opponents among the Jews too, including leaders who had married into leading non-Judean families.

Mitchell expounded, using Nehemiah as his text. Let us paraphrase Mitchell. Leaders must seek the people's welfare, that is, they shall do what is for the general good. What is good for the people is by definition what is right. This will include religion, safety, and preservation of their being, both personal and political. These principles shall be applied in each individual instance. Difficulties and troubles shall not excuse nor discourage leaders from their work to which God has called them. Mitchell points out that Nehemiah heard of the affliction and reproach of his people. Though he had a comfortable and important position at the Persian court, he left it to help the Judeans.

Mitchell went on with his sermon: The Judeans were a small, weak, despised people in the midst of adversaries and ill-wishers (*sic*). Among the Jews themselves, there were discontents and divisions, and some Judean leaders carried aid and information to Judah's enemies. In Mitchell's words, "Scripture often teaches that the best and greatest works, God delights to carry on through many difficulties and oppositions and in much felt infirmity of instruments."

In Mitchell's terms, the people of Judah were poor, low, and weak. The instruments too were weak and the work hard. Despite the obstacles and threats, Nehemiah pushed the people to work hard with courage, constancy, and confidence in God, and He did prosper them. They could not ignore or remove all the difficulties. Instead they worked through their difficulties and infirmities.

From this, Mitchell drew a lesson for his own Puritan audience, "Go on therefore in the work of the Lord and in the service of your several places, and be not taken off by troubles, difficulties and oppositions, felt infirmities in yourselves, weakness and distemper in person and things around you. . . . It is a time for patience, faith, self-denial." Mitchell calls upon his hearers to continue their work despite afflictions, distresses, labors, and false reproaches.

Implications

Courage bred in faith is necessary and realistic for meeting challenges both for individuals and nations. The early settlers in New England were devout Calvinists, many highly educated, who left Europe for the American wilderness so that they could live their lives in the fully Biblical Christian way, as they interpreted it. They often expressed the desire to build a government and society that represented God's will. In many ways they identified with the ancient Children of Israel and their struggles to survive the forty years in the wilderness and to build a home and nation in the Promised Land. The Puritans' writings are replete with Biblical citations and references that show how deeply they connected with the Israelites.

America today is experiencing very challenging times. Much of the economic burgeoning many Americans have taken for granted can no longer be so. Much of the easy living Americans have enjoyed is no longer available, at least for many people. As life becomes more difficult, a resolve becomes necessary to continue to live a productive and positive life. In the words of Knute Rockne, the legendary football coach of Notre Dame University, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

Yet the toughness emerging out of the Hebrew Bible is not a callous hardness, oblivious to the needs and sufferings of others. Rather it is a determined resolve to overcome obstacles. The modern state of Israel is a prime example of this resolve, turning a desert into a flourishing modern state, with agricultural and technical ingenuity, all anchored by an underlying faith, whether articulated or not.

The implications for America are clear. People will be called to make sacrifices for the common good but not in a utopian scheme that destroys one's own personality and abilities. Rather, Biblical courage is based on hope and faith, and the sense that the American community is truly a family, an organic "country" rather than a disconnected abstract "conti-

nent," to quote from the first inaugural speech of former president George W. Bush. In a family, members are not turned into robots for some illusory abstract end, but work together, as interconnected individuals who feel responsible for one another, and who embrace the future rather than dread it.

SOCIETAL RELATIONS

These next seven stories describe the Biblical emphasis on an organic sense of morality in society rather than simply in domestic, family, and personal relations. The first entry focuses on the human aspects of a Biblical judiciary which attempted to make the legal workings more down-to-earth, understandable, and responsive. The second describes the Biblical conception of a City of Refuge as a place where an accused person can find a home for himself in a protected environment. This presents a concrete means of giving the legal system a very human face. The third narrative describes the struggle for power after Solomon's death between his rather obtuse son, Rehoboam, and Jeroboam, the latter seemingly much smarter in understanding real human relations.

The fourth section describes the Biblical conception of the Jubilee year, which is neither capitalistic nor communistic but simultaneously godly and human in its conception of ownership of private property. God is the master of the world, and all that one holds is at God's behest. People need a certain sense of ownership and belonging; yet they should not focus on endless accumulation either. The fifth entry describes a Biblical sensitivity to signs provided by God with regard to human character, as opposed to the polytheistic and pagan fascination with divination and astrology. The sixth narrative in this chapter involves the effects on society of a leader who makes inhuman demands for respect and obeisance. Such an obsession plagues Haman, the villainous and insecure prime minister of the Persian Empire, with regard to the Jew Mordecai, the uncle of Esther. It leads to Haman's downfall and execution, hung on the same gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. The final narrative of this section deplores the unresponsiveness and indeed corruption of Hophni and Phinehas, especially toward women who came to worship at the Tabernacle in Shiloh.

22. A Wise and Efficient Judiciary: Jethro

Exodus 18 tells of the forming of the Israelites' first court system. This narration is preceded in the text by the attack of the Amalekites and is followed by the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that Scripture does not always follow chronological order, and that the events of chapter 18 actually took place after the Sinaitic revelation. Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, was a priest in Midian. A serious thinker, he heard and understood the meaning of what God had done for Moses and Israel, His people, when God had brought them out of Egypt. Accompanying Moses's wife and two sons, Jethro now came "to the mountain of God." He sensed the profound spiritual and historical importance of what was happening and wanted to experience it for himself. He rejoiced as Moses recounted to him the details of the events of the exodus, and he thanked God both by word and with offerings for saving Israel from Pharaoh.

The next morning, Jethro noted that many people came to Moses whether to judge disputes, to seek advice, or to ask Moses to pray for them, and he was disturbed both at the workload on Moses and at the strain of the people having to wait so long a time for their turns. Clearly this was not going well. Yet, could Moses not see this for himself? The Midrash suggests that indeed the problems were visible to God as well as to people close to Moses, but they may have thought that suggestions from them would seem overly critical, implying that Moses was not doing a good job as leader. Moses himself seems to have felt that the people wanted to come directly to him and that he had to accommodate them all as best he could, even if it caused difficulties, for who else but Moses, after all, could present problems, arguments, and inquiries directly to God. S. R. Hirsch suggests also that with all his wisdom and spiritual greatness, Moses was not adept at political organizing and did not really know quite how to deal with the problem. Jethro was perhaps the best positioned to offer criticism. He was a man of wisdom and world experience, a foreigner, and perhaps from a father-in-law criticism is not unexpected.

Jethro pointed to two issues: (1) Why did Moses do all this alone? and (2) Why did the people need to stand and wait? Moses replied, "That the people come to me to inquire of God," that is, to learn God's law in general and also so that Moses could judge and advise them with their

problems according to the law (Exod. 18.14–16). Jethro said simply and bluntly that "what you are doing is not good. You will wear yourself out as well as the people who are with you, for the responsibility is too much for you, and you will not be able to do it by yourself" (18.17–18).

Jethro went on to give Moses advice, "and God will be with you." Moses shall represent God to the people. He will bring their concerns before God and will clarify and teach the law to them. Moses's role was to be the wise and devoted leader chosen by God. However, Moses must also seek out "competent, God-fearing, truthful men who hate injustice," and Moses will appoint them as "officers of thousands, officers of hundreds, officers of fifties and officers of tens." There would not be professional lawyers or judges in the modern sense. More important, the judges would be men of good character. They would be available to small units of people to advise, to teach, and to judge, more like the rabbinic courts of Eastern Europe where the rabbi served as psychotherapist, spiritual leader, and general support system as well as judge, and so unlike the American judiciary where the judges' work is largely limited to presiding over court cases.

Two features of Jethro's plan are particularly instructive. First is the insistence on appointing only people of high character, who are God-fearing and not overly interested in money. This should help the courts maintain a serious interest in honest and correct decisions. Second, thousands of advisors/judges will serve in this nation of 600,000 adult males, plus women, children, and aged. People will more easily receive needed advice and support, and when a legal dispute would arise, it would be settled very quickly and not turned into a case prolonged by delays and quibbles through months or even years. This would set a limit on frivolous, nuisance suits. Criminal trials too would be judged speedily, thus discouraging criminal activity. Nor would people typically have to travel far to settle cases.

More complex problems or arguments which local officers did not have the knowledge to handle would be sent on to higher officers and, where needed, even to Moses. This meant not necessarily cases involving large sums of money where indeed the issues might be straight forward and simple. "Big matters" (18.22) meant issues where the correct decision was complex or unclear. The money amount involved was not relevant. Even small cases had to be decided as accurately as possible.

Jethro went on to assure Moses that, subject of course to God's concurrence, this new system could give Moses greater strength and "this nation will be able to attain its goal of peace" (alternately—"all the people will be able to go home in peace") (10.23). "Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law, and did all which he said," appointing capable men as officers of the thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens (18.24–25). The people would bring before Moses men whom they wanted as officers, and he would appoint them, for it was not possible for Moses to know personally all the thousands of new appointees (Deut. 1.13).

Implications

We may well shudder at the thought of a major swindler like Bernard Madoff sitting on the board of the Securities and Exchange Commission, as indeed he did, like a ravenous fox presiding over a chicken coop. Not only government offices but courts, which should be the arbiters and protectors of justice, are far from ideal. Ecclesiastes noted centuries ago that "there is wickedness in the site of justice; there is wickedness in the site of righteousness." In actual practice, both Biblical and post-Biblical literature note instances of governmental and judicial injustice. Every American today is aware of flaws in the American legal system. Relatively uncomplicated cases can drag on for years, and expenses can be forbidding. Many judges are elected by voters who know nothing about them beyond what comes through a TV ad, a mailing, or a taped phone message. Supreme Court justices are nominated by the president of the United States, and they go through an examination by the Senate which seems propelled largely by partisan politics. The question often is not how well qualified the nominee is by his character, knowledge, or experience, but how closely does he agree with a senator's political agenda. Is it in this way that a nation will put its best qualified people on the judicial bench? Although many attorneys are fine, honorable people who love the law, the legal system opens large temptations to those flawed people who want to use the system largely as a means to advance their own pecuniary and career ambitions. Law for the ancient Israelites was a godly function, but an attorney cannot play God. He may be capable in a technical sense, but he must also see the higher purposes of law as God's means of expressing Himself in this world. For many legal practitioners, law does not seem to be a noble function. Western culture has a certain antinomian streak, a disdain for law, and enjoys telling attorney jokes. Often, it seems that the

purpose in a court proceeding is to reach the best deal rather than to pursue justice, and the attorney serves as his client's broker. The court system established by Moses would need to remember that it served God and His law and thereby sought to foster true harmony and fairness in Israelite society.

23. Cities of Refuge and Cain versus Orestes

The Genesis 4 story of Cain and the Greek story of Orestes treat the same motifs of murder and city, but differently. Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve, have brought offerings to God. Cain, a farmer, has brought of his produce but not the best, while Abel, the shepherd, has offered up the best of his sheep. God accepts Abel's offering, but not Cain's as Cain has not done his best. Cain feels upset and rejected. God tries to talk to him, but Cain does not listen and finally murders his brother. Even at this point, God tries to talk with Cain. This is not a dysfunctional polis like Orestes's Argos. Nor do the horrible Furies hound Cain. The bloods (*sic*) of Abel and his potential descendants do "cry out from the earth." Yet this seems more a poetic metaphor here—human history crying out over its loss. The text does not at all suggest any anthropomorphized subterranean powers hounding Cain. God Himself removes Cain from his unhealthy possessive attachment to his farm and provides him a sign (probably not on his forehead) to protect him from others who might kill him. This can all serve to prevent the continuing of a long-term cycle of blood vengeance.

Cain becomes a wanderer for a time until, somewhat like Orestes, he finds an answer in a city. He builds it himself and names it Enoch after his son. Cain's descendants will go on to be creative people—inventors of various crafts and technologies, even of musical instruments, and they will, in a sense, take up the work of Abel by raising animals.

The city for Cain was not the wonderful denouement that it was for Orestes. However, it seems to have marked a point in Cain's development, albeit not perfect nor idealized in the Scripture's view. Yet this city is not the ultimate perfect solution as it seems to be for Aeschylus. Genesis will soon tell the story of failed cities—God will disperse the people gathered to build the Tower of Babel. Later, He will destroy the wicked Sodom and its neighbors with fire and brimstone. Even the holy city of

Jerusalem will be destroyed by the Emperor Nebuchadnezzar centuries into the future.

Cain named his city after his own son, perhaps to commemorate himself. He feared the oblivion of being forgotten by history, so, like the Egyptian pharaohs, he built something to make his permanent mark, just as leaders today often talk of leaving a historic legacy. In the Bible's view, it would not be the city itself that would make life good but the way people would behave and think. Good people would have good cities. Bad people would have bad cities.

A number of motifs appear and reappear in these stories of Cain and Orestes, which display striking similarities and even more striking differences. (1) Murder is a serious crime which cannot be allowed to stand without response. For Aeschylus, the blood of the victim demands revenge. Otherwise, a fearful imbalance of pollution will affect the land. Cain too is told by God that the bloods (*sic*) of your brother cry out to me. The focus is on the loss of a human life and of the good that person and indeed his potential descendants could have accomplished had he lived. Human life is the most precious entity, and it is life itself that is important, not satisfying a mythical effect of a crime. (2) The city is a second important theme. Pursued by the horrifying Furies, Orestes will find his resolution for having murdered his mother, Clytemnestra, by coming to Athens and being tried and purified in an Athenian court under protection of Athens' laws. Aeschylus, who wrote the *Oresteia*, was a patriotic Athenian who viewed his service at the Battle of Marathon as a high point of his life. It is not surprising that he would view Athens as a great civilizer, freeing Orestes from the pursuit of the dreaded, primitive, and uncivilized Furies. For Aeschylus, Athens offers the best in life, as it does for Pericles in his famous oration several decades later. This view worked for Aeschylus. However, at the end of the fifth century, the comic playwright Aristophanes would challenge it in his play *The Frogs*. Aeschylus and Euripides, another brilliant Athenian playwright, are shown in Hades debating the merits of their plays. The two great tragedians indeed represent very different points of view on the meaning of Athens. In Euripides's *Medea*, the title character is a brilliant but deranged woman who reacts strongly to her husband Jason's leaving her to marry a princess. Medea murders the princess and the king and finally her own two young sons by Jason. While all this is being planned, King Aegeus of Athens happens upon Medea, and she arouses his sympathy to provide her a

refuge in Athens, claiming that she is being unjustly driven from her home. She does not tell Aegeus of her murder plans. Strangely, Athens will thus provide a refuge for Medea as it does for Orestes, but Medea is a liar and a murderess. One can hardly imagine any standard of law which could offer her sanctuary.

For Euripides then, Athens is a city that can act foolishly and is not a near-perfect homeland of wisdom and virtue. Clearly Euripides's world presents a far more pessimistic view that humanity remains primitive and violent and that civilization as embodied in the polis is merely a glittering veneer.

It is striking that Cain too goes through something of a citifying process. After killing Abel, Cain is sent by God away from his fields to wander. Cain is, in one sense, by nature an emotional wanderer. He was deeply attached to the land he owned but found little satisfaction in the land so that he was moved to murder Abel. Now he wanders, detached from his land for a time, until he "built a city and called it Enoch after the name of his son." This may signal some betterment in Cain's life, for a city implies perhaps some interaction with people and even some sense of responsibility toward them. Cain too now has a family. Yet it is interesting that he names the city after his son. People have often named cities or raised monuments to perpetuate the memory of themselves—for example, all the Alexandrias founded by Alexander of Macedon, or the pyramids of the pharaohs.

In any case, Cain like Orestes turns from wandering to the benefits of a city and of civilization. However, as we noted above, cities are not, for the Bible, a panacea for all problems. There are evils in city life too. Remember the Tower of Babel and Sodom and Gomorrah or even the incident of the concubine gang-raped in Israelite Gibeah (Judg. 19). Cain's city may well reflect partially an awakening of his own creativity. Yet it is also a move toward some of the less benevolent aspects of life that cities can likewise foster.

The Hebrew Bible sets cities of refuge as home for a person who has killed without premeditation. However, here the purpose of this city appears to be different than the usual city. Six cities of refuge were named initially, and ultimately (according to the Talmud) there would be forty-eight. These were the cities designated for residence for the Levites, who did not have a territory of their own like the other Israelite tribes. The Levites were scholars and teachers, so the effect of these cities would

mean not only the benefits of normal human society but of a higher level of learning and a higher sense of sacredness. Thus exile there was meant not to be a jail sentence but a chance for the killer to reconstruct his life in a positive surrounding.

The Hebrew term *ir miklat* is usually translated "city of refuge" but could be more accurately termed "city of absorption"—a place where the person can find a home for himself in a protected environment—protected both from bad influences, as one would expect to find in a jail, and also from the avengers of the person whom he slew. The city here represents not so much the citifying civilizing effect of a polis as the higher ethical, moral, and spiritual ways of the Levites. The fugitive can be absorbed in these influences.

The avenger-redeemer is a third important theme. In both the story of Orestes and in the Bible's case of the unpremeditated murderer, someone is designated to go after the killer, though in each case the functions and personnel differ. Cain expresses the fear that "whoever finds me will slay me." He feels himself a marked man whom anyone is free to kill. God reassures Cain of divine protection as he wanders. The so-called mark of Cain is not a brand on a criminal but the sign of God's protection. The man who reaches the city of refuge will also be protected from avengers.

In the *Oresteia*, Orestes is harassed and pursued by the Furies—vengeful deities who hound Orestes mercilessly, forcing him to wander from place to place, never able to rest. Yet Orestes himself has also been an avenger, appointed by Apollo to avenge the murder of his father, Agamemnon, by killing the murderers, Orestes's own mother, Clytemnestra, and her paramour, Aegisthus. And their murder of Agamemnon is itself only another in a string of murders and other horrible crimes in their families, one after another through several generations. The final declaration of Orestes's guiltlessness is made easier by the fact that in the myths the killing of a mother is less serious than the killing of a father, because the mother is less closely related to the son. She is merely a repository for the child that grows from the father's seed. The Furies are impelled by the need of primal vengeance, the cry of blood for blood.

Numbers 35 tells that if a man kills, he is liable to be killed by the *goel hadam*—the "redeemer of the blood." This will most typically be a close relative of the victim, but if there is no familial redeemer then the court may appoint someone else as *goel*. If the killing is judged not to be premeditated, then the killer shall flee to a city of refuge, and he is safe

there. The court shall provide him protection on his route from the court to the city of refuge. If the killer does not go to the city of refuge, or if he leaves it later, then the redeemer is authorized to slay him on sight. If the court judges the killing to have been premeditated murder, then the redeemer will be called upon to carry out the murderer's execution, even if the killer has already settled in the city of refuge.

Implications

The direct participation of the redeemer outlined in Numbers 35 will seem unusual by modern Western practices, for which matter commentators have offered several explanations. First, the victim's relatives are probably very anxious to see justice done and to take personal part in it. Aeschylus depicts first the terrible harassment by the odious Furies and later the turning of the Furies into beneficent Eumenides. The Scripture accepts neither extreme but seeks a just solution that strengthens the society and the people who dwell in it. It satisfies the need to punish the guilty, and it also brings a small sense of relief or closure to the family of the victim. In addition, to put the case into the hands of both the family and the court reduces the need for interference by outsiders, for example, attorneys, who may use the case more to aggrandize themselves or their pocketbooks, and less for the needs of complete justice.

24. Who's Number One? Jeroboam ben Nevat

The Talmud tells a story that God made an offer to Jeroboam ben Nevat to walk with God and King David in paradise. To this, Jeroboam replied, "And who will be in front?" First Kings tells the history of Jeroboam. The mighty and brilliant King Solomon was nearing the end of his illustrious forty-year reign, but problems were showing. He had married seven hundred wives and had three hundred concubines, many of foreign origins who continued to worship the gods of their native cults even in Solomon's palace. There were also several "opponents," troublemakers who rebelled against Solomon or harassed his kingdom. It seems too that Solomon was short of funds. He had built a magnificent temple and a royal palace and had maintained an opulent court. Gold was common in his time, and silver was as plentiful as dust. Yet there came a time that Solomon had to tax his people, and one of his ablest administrators was the young Jeroboam who presided over the collections from tribes of

Manasseh and Ephraim, he being himself an Ephraimite. However, Jeroboam criticized Solomon publicly for building the Millo structure, which blocked an opening David had left in the city wall of Jerusalem. Commentaries offer several ideas as to what the Millo was—for example, David had left the extra opening to allow pilgrims or petitioners for the king's justice to enter the city more easily. Solomon had blocked the opening perhaps for one of his building projects or perhaps to limit access to the city or to himself. In any case, Solomon was angered by Jeroboam's criticism and sent agents to seize him. Jeroboam fled to Egypt, where he found refuge with Pharaoh Shishak (Sheshonk), who was hostile to Solomon. It was probably shortly before his escape that Jeroboam, leaving Jerusalem, was approached by the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite, who told him that God was going to take the rule of the Israelites from Solomon and would place Jeroboam as king over ten of the twelve tribes.

Jeroboam was very capable, but he would have to deal with his own flaws as well as with external challenges. "And I shall take you, and you shall rule in all your soul desires and you will be king over Israel" (I Kings 11.37); that is, you must learn to rule over your own self; you must be humble (see Malbim, 1956). "And it will be if you listen to all which I shall command, and you will walk in My ways and you will do what is righteous in My eyes to guard My statutes and commandments as David My servant did, then I shall build for you a faithful house as I built for David" (11.38); that is, you must obey God and not simply follow your own notions—almost as though to say "be like David and not like Saul or Solomon." Jeroboam was smart and capable, but he would need to be careful to curb certain tendencies to egocentrism. Jeroboam remained in Egypt until Solomon died and Rehoboam, his son, succeeded him.

Rehoboam went to meet his people in the city of Shechem. The people were about to make certain demands of the new king, and they wanted to do this on their own turf, for Shechem was in the territory of the tribe of Ephraim, while Jerusalem, the capital, was in Judah's territory (and partly Benjamin's), and David's family was of Judah. The people sent for Jeroboam to return and to lead them in their encounter with Rehoboam. The new king played his cards poorly. He not only met the people on the ground of their choosing but in that city of Shechem, which had seen the attack on Dinah and the abduction of Joseph back in Genesis times. He also faced their leader Jeroboam, who had cause for personal anger against Solomon and who had been promised a kingship by the prophet.

Led by Jeroboam, the people demanded lower taxes. Rehoboam answered tactlessly, demonstrating little sense of politics or people. Ten tribes refused to be ruled by him and proclaimed a new nation with Jeroboam as king, just as Ahijah had foretold. Jeroboam held the new kingdom of ten tribes in his hand. What would he do with it?

A sage of the Talmud would opine centuries later that before he came into public office, he did all he could to avoid it. Once he held public office, he could not have been pushed away from it. There is something about public office that grabs hold of people. Jeroboam turned out to be such a one, to the detriment of all including himself. In order to discourage his subjects from traveling to Jerusalem to worship in God's Temple, he reinstituted the worship of statues of calves in new temples in Dan and Bethel, and even served as priest himself. This was, of course, a complete betrayal of the Bible's view of what a leader needed to do.

Implications

Roman historians tell that when Julius Caesar was marching from Gaul to Rome on his way to seize imperial power, his army camped near a small town in northern Italy. One of his officers wondered out loud if people in that little town competed for power just as people did in great Rome itself. To this Caesar remarked that he would rather be the number one man in that little town than number two over the whole empire. What did Julius Caesar really mean in the anecdote? Would he actually have been willing to accept a position as mayor of a small rural town; or was he expressing instead a need for power so insatiable that he would tread over anything to get it? God had considered Jeroboam fit to rule over ten tribes—more fit than Rehoboam, Solomon's own son. Yet, sometimes in wanting too much, one ruins what one has. To be acquisitive can mean to want too much. Nothing is ever enough for such a person. Political considerations should not have prevented Jeroboam from encouraging his new subjects to fulfill their religious obligations in Jerusalem. It was almost as though Jeroboam were saying "I am Jerusalem." He may have allowed a sense of competitiveness toward David and Solomon to get the better of him, although he was not a mere usurper like Abimelech in narrative number 11.

25. The Jubilee Year: Beyond Capitalism, Communism, and Greed

In 2006, an international conference of economic and government leaders, headed by former US president Bill Clinton, discussed some of the world's major economic issues. Much attention focused on the problems raised by the fact that in developing countries large numbers of poor people owned no land. Not only was it difficult to earn a living, but it was nearly impossible to obtain a loan, since the people could offer no collateral. The ancient Hebrew Scripture was concerned with building a society in which poverty and subjugation are minimal. However, those conditions are not an end in themselves but a means of preventing the suppression of the human spirit in its search for God and truth (Leibowitz, 1981; Leviticus, Behar). In the years following 2006, the Western powers found themselves heavily affected by powerful economic forces that threatened the bedrock of the West's economic system.

The worldwide economic depression seems as we write to show little sign of abating. Why does the Western world suffer these periodic depressions? Are these cycles avoidable or at least more easily correctible? American history features a series of economic downturns. Even in the first days of the republic, when George Washington was president and the brilliant Alexander Hamilton led economic policy, a panic (as they were then called) was caused by the machinations of William Duer, Hamilton's assistant, who dishonestly used insider information to enrich himself at the cost of others. Duer ran his scheme for some time before Hamilton and others caught on. He eventually died in jail but not before doing a lot of damage.

All through the nineteenth century, the economy was repeatedly hit by panics that were usually started by magnates seeking ruthlessly to destroy rivals and to pad their own wealth. Frederick Lewis Allen's book *Since Yesterday* offers a revealing study of the 1930s Great Depression. The book was published in 1939, when Franklin Roosevelt was still president and the Depression was not yet ended. Today's reader will be shocked by how familiar is Allen's description of business leaders who cared only for lining their own pockets and who did not care even about their own businesses. They arranged huge bonuses for themselves whether deserved or not and seemed to be unaware and unconcerned with the severe hard-

ships of the millions who were out of work and failing to make ends meet.

The downs of the cycles in modern times are caused in large measure by simple human greed. Thus, it is not automatic cycles that affect us. It is rather that every so often, greed overcomes the natural give and take of the economy. We forget that a nation must exercise some control to limit greed, must protect its weaker members from the rapacious and powerful.

People in the middle stages of life are often deeply troubled by a feeling that they have failed to acquire certain items or have failed to attain certain levels of wealth or financial security. The Bible's concept of a Jubilee year resolves their problem in teaching that property does not really belong to a person but to God. The landowner is, in truth, God's tenant and an excessive drive to acquire is simply playing out the illusion that the person himself owns and controls his property. Indeed, God has both rich and poor in His world so that they can benefit each other by interacting.

As early as the third millennium BCE, the ancient Sumerians already had certain ideas of helping the poor. Kings would at times issue a *mish-arum* (act of equity, justice) decree. One such decree survives almost intact from the reign of King Ammi-Saduqa of Babylon (1646–1626), a descendant of Hammurabi. Other decrees are known as early as the twenty-fourth century from King Urukagina of Lagash. Ammi Saduqa's edict dictates in large measure freeing certain people from debts, rents, or payments owed to the government or to others (2, 4, 12, 14). Certain interest-bearing loans were voided. Some leases on lands held from the king would not be foreclosed (19). The edict did not mandate a total release from debt or even from interest on loans, but instead aimed to bring relief to certain sorts of people. It is interesting that Hammurabi's famous code itself shows little interest in the burdens of the poor and downtrodden and indeed openly favors the upper classes.

A second example of an effort to help the underprivileged comes from ancient Athens. In 594 BCE, Solon, a brilliant statesman, was named archon with a mandate to bring reform to a polis on the verge of being torn apart in strife between rich and poor. Solon formed a compromise which became the basis of the Athenian democracy of its golden age and perhaps equally the basis of Athens's swift decline after. Pressed to take all the land and distribute it equally among all the citizenry, Solon accepted instead a compromise measure—the cancellation of debts plus

restricting land speculation. The reform was aimed at easing the pressures of poverty, although not at the spiritual needs of Athenian citizens. What might have been the effect on history had Solon actually redistributed Athenian land we can only guess. Yet it is clear that his reforms were oriented toward sociopolitical needs only, however important, and not to the individual or spiritual. Aristotle in his *Constitution of Athens* 6, reports that Solon prohibited loans based on the person of the debtor, that is, where the debtor himself was the collateral. He cancelled debts both public and private (*seisachtheia*—shaking off of burdens). In one view this included even debts on sales. Yet Solon felt that actual redistribution was too extreme.

Neither the *misharum* decrees nor Solon's measures were as far reaching as the Biblical concept of Sabbatical and Jubilee years. The Jubilee occurs every fiftieth year after seven sets of seven years, each of which ends in a Sabbatical year, which has its own set of laws. In the Sabbatical years, debts shall be cancelled and certain Hebrew slaves shall go free. People shall not sow or harvest the land, and whatever grows anywhere shall be free for the taking to anyone. The Sabbatical years were generally observed carefully during the Second Temple era and during much of the First Temple as well. The socioeconomic effects could be significant. People would find financial relief; slaves would go free. Like weekly Sabbaths, the Sabbatical year would be a regular time for religious devotion and recognition that God is the Creator of the world.

Seven sabbatical periods would be counted totaling forty-nine years, and the following year, the fiftieth, would be the Jubilee. The main features of the Jubilee are (1) all (not only some) Hebrew slaves would go free, including those who for their own reasons declined to accept freedom in one of the Sabbatical years. And (2) all land would revert to its original owners. When the Israelites had first conquered Canaan/Israel under Joshua's leadership centuries before, the land had been distributed among the families within their tribes as permanent holdings. People could sell their lands but not in perpetuity. The sale would be understood as valid only until the next Jubilee. If, say, forty years remained till the Jubilee, the price would be higher. If only five years remained, the price would be lower. In any case, a person could not be dispossessed permanently of his ancestral lands. For these were not simply reforms aimed at correcting an imbalance in the society or the economy. They aimed further, at the core of the human personality, at bringing into being a society

in which greed would be less likely to bring about economic collapse. The Sabbatical-Jubilee format offers people a chance to step beyond their petty fears and needs and to grasp the largeness of God's universe.

This seems radical, almost communistic, when compared to the free market capitalism of the Western world. In fact, it is communistic neither in theory nor in practice. However, it does alter the focus of Western man's drive to unbounded acquisition. The Jubilee inclines people to remember that God is the true master of the world, and that all one holds is at God's behest. It discourages also a reliance and fixation on wealth. Everyone needs money and possessions; however, it is not the accumulation of wealth that brings happiness but the suitable use of what one does have. If great wealth brought happiness, then the wealthiest people should be the happiest, certainly far happier than the average working family. Yet this is manifestly not the case. Love of accumulation is not self-satisfying (Eccl. 5.9): "One who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver."

Zev Jabotinsky, the spiritual ancestor of Israel's Likud Party, wrote once in a letter that the most important law in the Pentateuch was the Jubilee year. Rabbinic commentators have pointed out how difficult the observance of the Jubilee laws could have been both physically and emotionally. Imagine letting one's land lie uncultivated for two years straight. How would people eat? And the penalty for violating the Jubilee is national exile, that is, the collapse of society. These are not simply reforms aimed at correcting an imbalance in the society or the economy. They aimed further, at the vital core of human personality, by bringing into being a society in which greed would be less likely to bring economic collapse. The Sabbatical-Jubilee format offers a chance to step beyond petty feelings and to grasp the immensity of God's universe.

The practices of the Jubilee year bring home the real meaning of ownership and wealth. People should focus on using and enjoying God's bounty according to His teachings. They should not focus on endless accumulation. Yet a person needs a certain base and a sense of belonging. The Jubilee presents him with the assurance that even if he falls into a time of economic hardship, he will not be ground into the dirt. His land and his role as a full citizen will be restored to him with the Jubilee. He can again support himself and contribute to society. He will not forfeit in perpetuity his full function as a citizen of God's polity in Israel. The idea of Sabbatical and Jubilee years thus presents a unique Biblical view of

ownership and possessions. Material wealth is certainly not evil and can be an important part of a person's life—a means of enjoying God's world as He wants us to and of doing good works. The Hebrew Bible does not advocate asceticism or communism. To reject God's material blessing is ungrateful and counterproductive. What people need to learn is to enjoy God's creation productively. The Jubilee year helps to establish a healthy perspective on wealth and freedom and personal growth.

Another practice of the Jubilee year is the freeing of Hebrew slaves. A man can reach a level of poverty so severe that he can sustain himself only by contracting himself out as a slave. A second possibility is that a man who has stolen and cannot make restitution for his theft will be sold by a court as a slave under a similar contract. The period of slavery would end with the end of the contract or with the next Sabbatical year. However, if the slave insisted on continuing to serve his master, he might stay until the next Jubilee, when he must go free, willing or not. Slaves were not wholly owned property whom a master could treat or mistreat as he wished, and the law carefully regulated their duties and rights to each other. Nevertheless, a person subject to the will of others could easily forget that he is a human being, sacred and noble, created by God in the divine image. The Jubilee affirms social and political equity of all the people in Israelite society and opens the possibility to renew the relationship with God.

The Hebrew term *yovel* for jubilee is associated by many commentators with the blowing of the ram's horns that signals the onset of the Jubilee. *Yovel* means ram. Ramban (1196–1267) sees the term as connected with the restoration of people to their ancestral lands: thus *yovel* meaning restoration. On the tenth day of the Jubilee year, which coincides with Yom Kippur, the shofar is blown not only in the courts by public leaders, but every individual should blow (Maimonides, *Yad*, 10.10–14). The blowing marks the freeing of the slaves and the return of fields to the families of their original owners. The nation returns to a purer society, people remember the moments in their history associated with the shofar, like the binding of Isaac and the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai, even, in a sense, to the original Garden of Eden. It proclaims the true freedom that comes from people's acceptance of their relationship with God. Commentators also note the association of the start of the Jubilee with Yom Kippur in that both are days of renewal.

How differently did the Romans behave in the last years of the Republic? The Second Punic War in Italy in the late third century BCE had devastated the Italian countryside. Farmers fled the dangers of marauding Carthaginian troops and moved for safety into the walled cities, where they often remained through the many years of the war. When the war ended, people found it difficult to reestablish themselves as independent yeomen and often fell to being tenant farmers or even slaves to wealthy landowning patricians. The poor became poorer, while the wealthy built huge landed estates (*latifundia*). The decline of the independent farmer developed into an immense social imbalance and stimulated the decline of the Roman Republican government and the rise of rule by emperors. Biblical law, as we have seen, blocks this sort of trend. Of course, laws need to be obeyed. Indeed, one Biblical passage tells that King Jehoram of Israel was ready to take as slaves two sons of a family that owed him money (II Kings 4.1). The commentator, Rashi, identifies the creditor as Jehoram.

Biblical law differs also from the arrangement in Europe under feudalism in which the serf in essence belonged to the noble who could tax or take away his possessions and his land, could commandeer his labor or even his women, and could punish or brutalize his body at whim. This sort of serfdom persisted even into relatively recent times in some parts of Europe, in Poland and Russia, for example. The peasant could hold nothing of his own and found it next to impossible to break out of this depressive pattern. Perhaps unexpectedly, it seems that a person gains real freedom and a sense of true security only by accepting his own allegiance to God and by accepting his role as God's vassal and caretaker over the earth rather than its owner. By acknowledging what is his actual place in God's plan for the world, a person can greatly minimize the hurtful effects of many emotional as well as economic crises.

Implications

An ancient Greek myth tells that King Midas found the satyr Silenus hopelessly drunk and separated from his companion followers of the god Dionysus. Midas helped Silenus generously, and when Dionysus returned for his servant, he rewarded Midas by offering to grant him a wish. Midas asked that whatever he touched should turn to gold. However, he soon learned how foolish he had been when food that he touched likewise turned to gold. Amused by Midas's foolishness, Dionysus relieved him of

his now unfortunate gift. Midas would again demonstrate his foolishness in a later incident to the degree that the god would mock him by having him grow donkey's ears.

Why are people often so greedy or stingy in the face of clear experiential evidence that large amounts of money or possessions do not automatically make a person happy? Several generations ago, during the great immigration wave, a man emigrated from a foreign land to America, where hard work and excellent, tough business sense brought him a huge fortune. Yet he was barely on speaking terms with his own children, and he disinherited all but one. What joy or meaning in life did all his money bring him?

A forensic psychologist recently did a statistical study of the importance of money in a person's life. He concluded that money was a very large issue for people who really could not afford basic necessities. However, for people living above the poverty level, acquisition of money did not need to occupy more than four percent of their efforts. Yet we know how powerful is the drive to acquire and to hoard.

Society reacts at times in the opposite direction, rejecting all effort at acquisition and possession. Two hundred years ago, the poet Wordsworth observed that "getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; little we see in nature that is ours; we have given our hearts away, a sordid boon." Some groups have gone so far as to embrace a lifestyle of solitude or asceticism in which they reject ownership of any possessions.

Let us view the character of a miser as presented in Honore de Balzac's wonderful novel *Eugenie Grandet*. In Balzac's novel, set in Saumur in rural France about 1830, M. Grandet represses his pleasant, pious wife and Eugenie, his lovely twenty-three-year-old daughter. He devotes his entire life intently to the pursuit of money, a total miser who can become greatly perturbed over an extra lump of sugar on the table and who does not allow a fire to be lit after the first of April no matter how cold, although he is very, very wealthy. He draws near to people only to use them. Not overtly sadistic, he seems nevertheless obsessed with money matters, and he will connive and push very hard to acquire more of it. He hurries his nephew out of his house, although the young man is in difficult circumstances and greatly in need of a friend. Eugenie cannot openly display her growing affection for her cousin for fear that M. Grandet would banish her from the house. Eugenie's compassion is stirred by cousin Charles's misfortunes, and she gives him her entire savings.

Balzac describes his miser; "The miser's life is a constant exercise of every human faculty in the service of a personality. He believes in self-love and interest, and in no other motive of action . . . for self-love and interest are but two manifestations of egoism. . . . In Grandet as in every miser, there was a keen relish for the game, a constant craving to play men off one against the other for his own benefit, to mulct them of their crowns without breaking the law, and did not every victim who fell into his clutches renew his sense of power, his just contempt for the weak of the earth who let themselves fall such an easy prey?" (109). How important could a daughter be to such a man as M. Grandet?

When some months later, Grandet learns that Eugenie had given all her money to her beloved, he orders her to her room to be fed only bread and water. Minutes later, finding her in Mme. Grandet's room, he tells her that "she no longer has a father" (180). When Mme. Grandet tries to intervene, he threatens to drive them both from the house. "If you want to keep her, take her along with you, and the house will be rid of you both at once. Tonnore! [Thunder]. Where is the gold? What has become of the gold?" All this despite his wife's sickly condition. Then Grandet orders the fire to be put out despite the bitter winter cold.

M. Grandet is incapable of letting go of money. He had always given the barest minimum to his wife and daughter for personal and household expenses. His whole world seems shaken when he learns of his daughter's generosity, and he curses her terribly, "I can curse you and your cousin and your children." "What is the good of having children, he wonders" (192). Eugenie had not behaved badly or even foolishly, but she had implicitly challenged her father's control. The cursing of one's children is familiar in Greek myths, and the effect can only be destructive. Eugenie waits for years, dreaming of Charles's return to France. When he finally does return, it is to marry a wealthy noblewoman. Eugenie accepts the disappointment of her fantasy and agrees to marriage with a local dignitary, having imposed the condition that there shall be no physical intimacy between them. There will be no children. Old Grandet's curse has taken effect.

Widowed after three years, Eugenie directs some of her wealth toward charitable purposes, but her own home goes on as cold and sparse and dreary as her father had always kept it. As much as she is her mother's daughter, she is her father's as well.

Balzac propounds an analysis of a miser's mind, which bears clearly on this story and on the destruction of relations between generations. Misers, he argues, "have no belief in life to come, the present is all in all to them . . . the belief in a future life is a foundation on which the social edifice has been slowly reared for 1800 years." This sort of thinking Balzac found spreading threateningly in all levels of French society, when he wrote the book in 1833. Our one hope and ambition aims to the earthly paradise of luxury, vanity, and pleasure. The thought stamped on our age is "What can you pay?" (105). This sort of narrow egoistic materialism weakens one's own link to higher goals as well as the links between generations.

Underlying all this is the issue of how to integrate our personal interests with the interests of society as a whole. In *The Duality of Human Existence*, David Bakan argued that unchecked growth of an individual person or unit without concern for the larger social organism is like a spreading disease. The Jubilee year puts a check on unlimited growth, and it makes people realize that the life of the individual is important but that unlimited growth can be malignant. Unchecked capitalism can destroy its societal container. Unchecked communism can strangle the individual. The healthy balance of self and other informs the Biblical Jubilee year.

26. Signs and Portents

Should a government leader or anyone else make use of what he interprets as divine signs? The polytheists of ancient times practiced divination and foretelling the future by signs in nature like the flights of birds or by reading the entrails of sacrificial animals. The Hebrew Bible specifically forbids witchcraft and sorcery. Yet there are several stories of people seeking to know by signs what God wanted them to do. Sometimes God indeed provided a sign and everything worked out well, and sometimes He did not. The Talmud mentions Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, who went to Haran to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham's son. Standing at the well in Haran, Eliezer prayed to God that the girl who would come to the well and offer to draw water for both Eliezer's men and for his camels would be the one God had chosen for Isaac. His prayer was answered beneficently when Rebecca came, beautiful both in appearance and in character, and did indeed draw water for them all.

A second case, however, ended most unhappily. Judges 11.30–40 tells that before going to battle against the Ammonites, Jephtah vowed that, if God gave him victory, he would sacrifice to God whatever first came to meet him on his return home. The vow was foolish for what if an unclean animal had been first to approach. Jephtah could have simply vowed to offer a bullock or a sheep, quite legitimate offerings. Imagine then his dismay when on returning as a heroic victor, it was his daughter who came forth to honor him. The text is not clear as to whether Jephtah actually sacrificed her or not. Commentators see his vow as foolish and criticize him for not simply having it annulled. This would appear to be a case where a sign was used in an irreligious manner.

Implications

There are people including some in the highest levels of government who live in deep faith, while others delude themselves with false spiritualities. A fascinating story about Abraham Lincoln comes to us from a memoir written by his two young secretaries, John Nicolay and John Hay (see also Ernest Furgurson).

On September 22, 1862, Lincoln called a meeting of his cabinet. After reading them an anecdote from Artemus Ward, one of his favorite humorists, the president turned serious and announced an important policy move. He had vowed that "if God gave us victory in the approaching battle, he would consider it an indication of divine will" and guidance, and that with the victory at Antietam a few days before, it was time to publish a proclamation of emancipation of the slaves. Lincoln had made his decision, and he sought the cabinet's advice only for editing the document. "What I did," he went on, "I did after a very full deliberation, and under a very heavy and solemn sense of responsibility. I can only trust in God I have made no mistake." Within a few days, the proclamation was published in newspapers all over the country and would become the law of the land three months later.

Lincoln was not a religious man in the sense of formal allegiance to a specific church, although he would accompany his wife to services. Mary would even turn to mediums and séances in hard moments of her own life. Nancy Reagan aroused some concerns when she supposedly consulted astrologers during her husband Ronald Reagan's presidency. However, Lincoln seemed to have held a deep faith and awareness of God. The above story shows Lincoln as making a sort of deal or arrangement

with God, as though looking for a sign from heaven. If God would give the Union victory at Antietam, Lincoln would see this as a favorable sign to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

Fortune-telling can become a self-fulfilling prediction, a sentence. Signs of nature, like a weasel crossing one's path, could be for the ancient polytheist a definitive prophecy. For Eliezer, Rebecca's behavior was largely an indicator of something deeper in her character. Eliezer was psychologically astute, not superstitious. If Rebecca had turned out to be a kleptomaniac, Eliezer would not have been bound by the sign. Human behavior for the ancient Israelite was to be based on God's law and not on portents.

27. Leaders with Personal Problems: Haman

How many people who hold high political office are wholly unfit to wield authority or even to serve as aides or advisors? All people have their weaknesses, areas of moral and intellectual inadequacy. The Biblical Book of Esther describes three people high in the government of the Persian Empire, two of whom clearly failed in their duties and a third, the emperor himself, who often used his immense power without careful thought. Haman, one of Scripture's most detestable villains, was appointed prime minister after the fall of Queen Vashti. Perhaps he is well described as possessing an extreme narcissistic personality disorder. The perks and trappings of power acted like drugs to give him a false sense of fulfillment.

A law was passed that anyone who saw Haman proceeding down the street with his henchmen was required to kneel and prostrate himself. Perhaps this mollified a desire to be recognized and honored almost to the point of deification. But his joy was shallow, as one man did not bow, Mordecai the Judean. Mordecai too was an advisor or minister of state and perhaps did not need to bow to Haman. Mordecai was also a high-principled and forthright man who understood what Haman was and would not give such a man undue honor. In any case, Haman's aides pointed out to him that Mordecai did not bow. "And Haman was filled with rage" (Esther 3.5). Despising the simplest response, which was to kill Mordecai, Haman decided to annihilate Mordecai's entire nation, the Jews, all over the Persian Empire. He then cast lots to determine which day of the year would be auspicious for the mass murdering, and the lot

fell on Adar 14, eleven months later. Haman consistently showed himself quick to overreact with intense emotion, usually anger. He often sought opinions from his advisors, who, however, do not often seem very insightful. In this case he turned to lots, showing his regard for fortune-telling devices in preference to sound planning.

Haman now appealed for the consent of King Ahasueros. "There is one people scattered and separated among the peoples of all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws differ from every people, and they do not obey the laws of the king and to the king there is no value in letting them be" (Esther 3.8). Haman saw things in terms of their utility or value to him. These people are scattered around, he said, and will hardly be missed. There is no benefit in their continued existence. Then came the pièce de résistance—Haman would supply the king ten thousand talents of silver, presumably taken from the spoils. Perhaps the king did not know at first who it was that Haman planned to kill. He certainly did not know that his beloved Queen Esther was Jewish. However, impressed by the ten thousand talents, he readily agreed and sealed the decree with his signet ring. Haman sent couriers to transmit the orders to local officials to carry out the massacre. Prime minister of a great empire, Haman desired to use his power to destroy an entire religious group because one of their number had not adequately assuaged his narcissistic demands. The empire would lose many useful citizens and what they would have contributed to the public good. This is not the behavior of a dedicated public servant.

Another incident shows further Haman's inability to think beyond his personal gratification. Messengers had already been sent to local officials to prepare for the destruction of the Jewish population all over the empire. Unknown to Haman, Queen Esther had learned of the plot and was working quietly with Mordecai to block it. She invited King Ahasueros and Haman to a party. Haman was thrilled, seeing the invitation as a sign of the queen's growing esteem and completely unsuspecting of Esther's intrigue against him. However, for Haman there was still one fly in the ointment—"And Haman went forth that day happy and glad hearted, but when Haman saw Mordecai at the king's gate, he neither rose nor stirred before him, and Haman was filled with anger" (5.9).

It took only a sight of Mordecai to burst Haman's fragile bubble and render him thoroughly angry and miserable. Arriving home, he complained to his friends and to Zeresh, his wife, reminding them of his

honors, his wealth, his many children, and his favor from the king and now the queen as well. "Yet all this is worth nothing to me every time I see Mordecai the Judean sitting in the king's gate" (5.11–12). Haman could not wait out the months till the scheduled annihilation of the Jews, including, of course, Mordecai. His lovely Zeresh and his friends suggested a solution. Build a gallows fifty cubits high (about eighty feet), hang Mordecai on it and go to the queen's party light of heart. Haman always reacted in extremes. No gallows needs to be fifty cubits high to do its work. But this one would be built high, new, and right now, and Mordecai would hang before Haman went to the party. Haman's machinations were ultimately foiled by divine intervention working through Esther and Mordecai, and Haman was hanged on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai.

Implications

How did so vicious, confused, and small-minded a man as Haman rise to such a lofty position in a powerful empire? Unfortunately, such people are all too present. We have seen many sitting in high office in the last hundred years. They may be smart and ruthless enough to gain and hold power, but they lack the character, vision, and interest to step beyond their own need for gratification and viciousness and to dedicate themselves to benefiting others. Instead they try to harm or destroy those who seem to impede their gratification.

Haman's sense of self was not related to anything real. Extremely narcissistic, he was empty at the core and could exist only if he never came to know himself. Why else was his self-esteem so dependent on Mordecai's opinion? He needed complete adulation from everyone to feel secure. Anything less was not enough. His demands for unblemished approval led him to hate Mordecai and to generalize his hatred to all Jews. Haman seemed to want to create a bizarre abstract world in which everyone would adore him. Yet all those honors will mean nothing to him as long as Mordecai is still there. Not surprisingly, his wife Zeresh loved Haman only because of his success, and she and his other friends abandoned him at his fall.

28. Immorality and Bureaucracy: Hophni and Phinehas

Every government has its bureaucracy. While some bureaucrats are efficient and hardworking, there are others who seem to occupy their desks only in order to obstruct every legitimate need and purpose. One interpretation of the story of Hophni and Phinehas, in the early chapters of I Samuel, touches upon this issue.

Eli, the high priest in Shiloh and a learned man of fine character, was the mentor of the young Samuel. However, his sons did not follow in his ways. Hophni and Phinehas served as priests, but when people brought offerings to the Tabernacle, the brothers took more than their share of priestly dues and mistreated especially the women who came with their offerings. The Hebrew word *yishkevun* (I Sam. 2.22), describing their treatment of the women, has been understood in two ways. One is that they slept with them. This is unfortunately not an unheard-of practice in governments all through history. Several cases of relationships between elected officials and junior staffers have made headlines in the United States in recent years. Samuel Pepys, in his famous diary recounting his life in London in the seventeenth century, reports seemingly without shame how he used his bureaucratic position to demand sexual favors from women who needed his help. Hophni and Phinehas may have been using their priestly offices in a like manner.

A second reading indicates that when women would come to the Tabernacle bringing offerings, particularly those brought after childbirth, Hophni and Phinehas were so unresponsive that the women would often have to spend the entire night waiting at the Tabernacle gate until their offering would be received. The priests' lack of consideration was deplorable. The text says of them that they did not know God (2.12). That is, they conducted their priestly offices for their own benefit and not as God wanted.

Already a very old man, Eli heard about his sons' behavior and rebuked them, but they paid no attention. Finally, God sent a prophet to inform Eli that the office of high priest would be transferred from Eli's family to other descendants of Aaron. Eli's descendants would not have long lives, and Hophni and Phinehas would both die on the same day. The prophecies all came true, and Eli's sons were killed by the Philistines.

Implications

Hophni and Phinehas died betraying the very essence of the sacred covenant. For two other men, such transgressions might not have been so serious, but they had to be held to a higher standard because in their position they threatened to destroy what held the society together. Had they differed only in interpretation, they would have had a right and indeed a duty to argue their points. Theirs, however, was an issue of wrong behavior.

What is so threatening in the United States about acts like burning the flag is not simply an issue of dissent but possibly an attack on the system which actually does allow honest dissent.

4

HOPE AGAINST FEAR TOWARD THE FUTURE

Chapter 4 will discuss fourteen political narratives (29 through 42) which deal with the Biblical sense of hope against fear toward the future, illustrated in the stories of Lot and his daughters, Tamar and her father-in law, and Miriam's statement to her father to have more children even in the face of Pharaoh's edict to kill all newborn Israelite boys. This concept contrasts with the Greek myth in which Laius fears that in the future his unborn son Oedipus will kill him. Stories 29 through 35 concentrate on morale and mission and 36 through 42 on foreign policy.

MORALE AND MISSION

This chapter describes how the Biblical sense of hope rather than fear for the future plays out with regard to issues of morale and mission of a society. The first entry discusses the Biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply. Doomsday prophets notwithstanding, Scripture does not counsel sexual abstinence in the service of population control but acknowledges the desire for children as the essence of hopeful living and faith in the future. The second essay discusses the role of Hebrew prophets, such as Jeremiah, in trying to maintain the morale of the people of the Kingdom of Judah in very difficult times. The third describes how Joseph was able to take a long view in wise social planning in Egypt. As social-economic planner, Joseph advised the Pharaoh to storage resources in the

seven abundant years to prepare for the seven lean years that he envisioned coming after.

The fourth entry discusses the Biblical command to give to the poor. Giving to the poor is no more optional than paying a debt. Both are obligatory. The Jewish and later Christian emphasis on giving to the poor is distinguished from the Greek emphasis on financial contributions to civic and artistic projects, which were not directed toward the poor. The fifth essay describes the devastating effects of the assassination of Gedaliah ben Ahikam, governor of Judah, on the morale of that country. Gedaliah did not take precautions, though he was forewarned, and it took many decades for the Judean nation to recover its morale and to rebuild Jerusalem and its Temple. The sixth entry discusses the emphasis on gratitude in Scripture and how important this is in building morale in a society. How different this is from the behavior of the Egyptian pharaoh at the time of Moses. The final narrative in this section stresses the importance of appointing good advisors, a bad advisor of King Saul who was listened to, and a good advisor of Rehoboam who was not.

29. Population Control: Be Fruitful and Multiply

Certain ideas resurface from time to time among pundits of public policy in the United States. One of the most uninformed and erroneous is human population control. A recent ad in a popular magazine called for the people of the United States to reduce their population from the current 300 million plus to about 120 million over the next generation. The means would be simply drastically lowering the birth rate. Salvation by means of population reduction is not at all a new idea. In both his *Republic* and his *Laws*, Plato set up exact numbers for the perfect population of his utopias. Many modern people remain fearful that if the world's population increases, we will run out of food and fuel and will deplete the earth's material resources, plunging humankind back into some medieval or even Stone Age existence. Robert Malthus, the noted eighteenth-century English economist, convinced many of this view with his famous book *The Spectre of Famine*. Scripture's view is very different. In Genesis, the first words of God to the newly created people are "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth" (Gen. 1.25). It is both a command and a blessing; it is the highest form of human creativity to produce and raise offspring. Centuries later the prophet Isaiah (45.18) would add, "Not as a

wasteland did He create it [the earth]. To be inhabited did He form it." To fear to produce successors is to show a lack of confidence in God's love of humankind and obviously of one's self. It is also shortsighted. People devote great effort to doing something that they think will assure them of immortality, whether it is building a pyramid, winning a war, or scoring a touchdown. Yet such fame is not lasting. Shakespeare wrote in his first seventeen sonnets that what best carries on a person's essence is to raise a child.

> Who is he so fond will be the tomb
> Of his self-love to stop posterity?
> . . . Die single and thy image dies with thee . . . (Sonnet II)

Scripture portrays God as being happy that people can enjoy, thrive, and grow in His world. Population growth is wonderful.

Anyone who has traveled through the wide-open spaces of the American West knows how much physical room there is for human growth and expansion. History has proven Malthus's fears utterly baseless. The world's population is larger than ever. China and India each hold well over a billion people. Yet food is not lacking in the world, and a major problem is distributing it usefully where human cruelty or incompetence make distribution difficult. Constant growth of population helps feed economic growth. More people, more ideas. Nor can we be sure how well we can maintain our current population level, given the real threat of terrorists or rogue nations acquiring nuclear weapons.

The blessing/command of "Be fruitful and multiply" is the Bible's first law, both in chronology and perhaps in importance. Genesis tells a series of stories of the longing of the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for children and of the joy that came with their births. Adam and Eve too had to put their lives back together after their older son, Cain, murdered their second son, Abel, and they brought another son into the world, Seth, who would be ancestor to subsequent humanity.

Children are viewed as a joy, not only as the continuators of their parents' work, but as the bearers of the continuing divine mission. The ancient Greek and Roman laws permitted parents to expose unwanted children, that is, to simply leave them out to die of starvation and exposure. This was a common enough practice that it kept the population of Greece dangerously low. The Greeks were excellent soldiers, but they would be conquered by Macedonians and Romans, at least in part, be-

cause they had too few soldiers. The Spartan loss of four hundred warriors at the Battle of Leuctra, 370 BCE, against Thebes more or less finished them as a military power. In contrast, the large number of men of fighting age in the USSR during World War II decisively helped in their hard-fought victory against Hitler's Germany.

Again the comparison is relevant; contrast the Greek Laius fearing his son Oedipus will surpass him versus the Biblical accounts of both Lot's daughters and Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar, wanting to continue the family lineage.

Implications

Doomsday prophets try to predict things that are impossible to predict. They wonder how we can want to bring children into this terrible world. People worry about population control, yet a number of Biblical stories tell of people who bore children even in difficult circumstances, like Judah and Tamar, Lot and his daughters, and Jochebed and her husband, Amram. To bear children expresses one's belief and hope in the future of the world and of oneself. It offers a realistic and positive way of dealing with one's own mortality and immortality. God in the Garden of Eden story did not want His own to limit people's immortality, but when the man and woman disobeyed Him they became subject to death. Yet God had already blessed and commanded them to overcome their personal selfishness and to live forever in their descendants and students. Desire for children becomes the essence of their living. God so loved the people that although they would indeed die, He gave them eternity in another form.

30. The Fall of a State

Let us look at two instances of the fall of a state: (1) the Western Roman Empire, and (2) the Biblical Kingdom of Judah.

Many historians have tried to explain the fall of the mighty Roman Empire. The answer is not simple, but several factors draw attention.

(1) Military: In 378 CE, the Romans lost a disastrous battle to the Goths at Adrianople that was brought about largely by the petty jealousy and incompetence of Roman officials. The Goths, pressed by the ferocious Huns, sought safety by crossing the Danube into Roman territory. The Romans treated them terribly, denying them food that had been

promised and taking their children as slaves. When the Goths finally attacked the Romans, the Emperor Valens would not wait for reinforcements, hoping to gain all the credit for the victory by himself. In the battle Valens was killed and the Romans badly defeated. In 408, the Emperor Honorius murdered Stilicho, his best general and also his father-in-law, who had achieved several important victories against the Goths. Two years later, Alaric and his Goths sacked Rome, and from then it was all downhill.

(2) Greed and bad distribution of money: Rich people grew richer and hoarded money in fear of the growing unrest of the times, while the poor grew poorer. There were too many bureaucrats and tax collectors and too few farmers. The empire basically went bankrupt. The historian Ammianus Marcellinus wrote in the late fourth century that the empire was consumed in vice.

(3) Professor Arthur Boak argued that the empire was weakened by a loss of manpower. The population declined from its first-century peak till its collapse in the fifth.

(4) Appeasement or war: As Rome's fighting power diminished, it often followed mistaken policies. Sidonius Apollinaris, a bishop in fifth-century Gaul, wrote a bitter letter to a colleague, complaining that Gallic-Roman leaders had sought, over his objection, to appease the Burgundian and Gothic invaders by giving them land. Perhaps it seemed there was nothing else they could do, but Sidonius believed that the Romans should have continued to fight. Ultimately, the appeasement gained nothing, and the invaders took all of Gaul.

(5) Pagan and Christian writers of the fifth century blamed each other for the empire's fall, each arguing that his god was angry at the worshippers of the others: The prophet Jeremiah also lived in a difficult time of turbulence all over the Near East and of decline and poor leadership in Judah. The powerful Assyrian Empire fell, and armies of Egyptians, Medes, and Babylonians battled each other and swallowed up smaller nations. Judah's kings pursued their own policies, too often not respecting the word of God to His prophets. Jeremiah understood what was happening and saw the danger to his nation, but much to his frustration, no one listened to him.

According to the Talmud (Baba Batra, 15a), Jeremiah wrote his own book and also the Biblical Kings and Lamentations. Several times, Jeremiah mentions writing down his prophecies. Nevertheless, the Book of

Jeremiah does not follow chronological order. It is not a history textbook but a poetic, prophetic, autobiographical expression of the mission of a dedicated and insightful man who could not prevent the destruction of Judah and of Jerusalem and its Temple, but who did manage to record his important work and to describe a paradigm for later generations as to how to come through terrible challenges and to look to the future with faith.

Every Biblical prophet had his own distinct personality and abilities, and each lived with the challenges and demands of his own time. God called on Jeremiah, a priest of the village of Anatot, not far from Jerusalem, and told him that "When I had not yet formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jer. 1.5). Jeremiah was to be a prophet to the nations, and God reached out and touched his mouth to indicate that he would carry God's word in his mouth. Jeremiah would indeed serve as prophet and teacher beginning in the reign of the righteous King Josiah and through the time of his four successors—three sons and a grandson—on through the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and into the start of the Babylonian Exile.

In his first recorded vision, Jeremiah was shown a pot boiling over, facing the north. Jeremiah interpreted it correctly as trouble coming to Judah from the north, that is, Babylon. He would have to be strong because the people of Judah—its king, princes, and people would fight against him. From his next vision, Jeremiah reminded the Judeans that their ancestors had followed God into the Sinai Desert in trust and love, "I remember the loving kindness of your youth, the love of your wedding" (Jer. 2.2). Yet trouble had come on the Israelites when they forsook God.

Josiah came to the throne at age eight, ca. 640 BCE, following the disastrous fifty-five-year reign of his grandfather, Manasseh, who began as a worshipper of foreign gods and a persecutor of followers of Biblical faith. Manasseh was carried off as a prisoner by the Assyrians. When he returned to Jerusalem, he had repented and turned to God, but it was too late. Much innocent blood had flowed, and idolatrous cults were widespread and impossible to eradicate. Manasseh was succeeded by his son Amon, unfit to rule and murdered by his guards two years later at age twenty-four. Amon's son Josiah turned to God more fervently than any king before him. He began a major repair of the Temple, removing the symbols of idolatry and restoring the building worn by age and neglect. During the work, an ancient scroll was found hidden, the original copy of

the Pentateuch in Moses's hand. (The interpretation of this event has given rise to much controversy among modern scholars.) The scribe brought it before Josiah and read to him from the Book of Deuteronomy. The verses told of God's displeasure with people behaving badly, and Josiah took it to heart. He inquired of Huldah, the prophetess, who sat in a small room in the wall of the Temple courtyard. She responded bluntly. The idolatry and greed in Judah were too much to be corrected, and the kingdom would fall, although Josiah himself was a good man. Josiah initiated a thorough reform, cleaning out idolatrous cults, even those that had flourished for centuries, and revived a magnificent national celebration of the Passover.

As all this was taking place in Judah, international politics would interfere with a harsh hand. The Assyrian Empire collapsed; its capital Nineveh conquered in 612 BCE by a coalition of Medes, Persians, and Babylonians. Pharaoh Necho (The Lame) marched up from Egypt to see what he could grab. He sent a message asking King Josiah to allow the Egyptian army to pass through Judah. Josiah instead brought forth his army to oppose Necho as he marched near Megiddo. It does not appear that Josiah consulted the prophets of God or the wise sages as he was wont to do. At Megiddo, Necho ordered his archers to shoot Josiah down, which they did. The text is not clear as to whether this was during a battle or simply a murder.

No king of Judah had tried harder than Josiah, but too many people were devoted to their cults and idols and obeyed his reforms only superficially. Jeremiah lamented the fall of this devoted king.

Judah seemed on the road to fulfilling Huldah's unhappy prophecy. Josiah's son Jehoahaz came to the throne, but within three months, Pharaoh Necho replaced Jehoahaz with Necho's own choice, a younger son of Josiah named Eliakim. Necho registered his authority by renaming him Jehoiakim.

A nation can fall either from outside force or internal weakness. It needs to maintain its sense of higher purpose, keep its ideals always in close view, and be willing to work, to sacrifice, and sometimes even to give up lives so that its ideals might live on. Jeremiah was close to God, gifted with prophetic perception into the historical period in which he lived. He began to prophesy about 620. He could see what was coming because Judah, both people and kings, had strayed from the Bible's idea of Israel as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Judah would also

make poor judgments in foreign policy, despite Jeremiah's warnings, thinking that they could resist the growing power of Babylon instead of submitting and allying to it.

Jeremiah brought God's message to the people of Judah, but most did not want to listen, although they did not question the authenticity of Jeremiah's prophecy. They must give up their idols and accept Babylonian overlordship. The prophet assured them too that God was sending him to warn them because He still wanted to help them. But the people, misled by false prophets, spurned the true prophet's message and were ready to murder him. It was almost as though they believed that Jeremiah's warnings of the fall of Judah would, in some superstitious way, actually cause the fall to come about. The royal officers rejected the arguments of the priests and false prophets, who wanted to put Jeremiah to death. His supporters cited the example of the prophet Micah the Morashite, who prophesied a century before during the reign of King Hezekiah. That time, the people responded to the prophet's warning, they repented and averted the divine punishment. However, Jeremiah's opponents countered with the story of Uriahu whose recent prophecies disturbed the people as did Jeremiah's. Uriahu was forced to flee to Egypt, but King Jehoiakim had sent agents to bring Uriahu home where Jehoiakim had him put to death. Jeremiah might also have been murdered at this point had not Ahikam ben Shaphan stepped in to protect him (Jer. 26).

Constantly, through his career as a prophet, Jeremiah faced harassment, imprisonment, and threats to his life from enemies who rejected his messages—kings, citizens, residents of his hometown Anatot, and a number of false prophets. We know the names of some of these prophets (for example, Ahab ben Kolaiah or Hananiah ben Azur), but we may well wonder who they were and what motivated them. Were they fraudulent schemers who deliberately lied to the people? Did they actually think that they possessed messages or wisdom from God? Were they well intended or unscrupulous? Certainly the four kings who followed Josiah listened little to Jeremiah and seem to have lost their sense of direction, whether in regard to the morale of Judah or to its political and military safety.

Jeremiah is often thought of as a depressing prophet of doom—as per the English term "jeremiad" meaning prolonged lamentation or complaint. In truth, however, although he lived in hard times and dealt with constant threats and challenges, he was no pessimist. His prophecies recount the love of God for the Children of Israel in the Sinai in terms of the

love of a bride and groom. Israel is also seen as a precious child playing with his toys. God remembers his love whenever He speaks of him (Jer. 31.20).

The central meaning of the history of the Biblical Israelites was their faith in God. People must go on with their daily activities, and nations must play politics, make war and peace, and care for their people. Yet all this depends wholly on God. It is God who decides which nations will prosper and which will fail, which will win and which will lose. It was God who sent Jeremiah and other prophets and sages to teach people, both Israelites and others. Every nation, like every person, must stay focused on its strengths and weaknesses to enable it to use the unique abilities which God gave it and to take its role in God's plan for history. No nation fulfills itself merely by conquering new lands or accumulating wealth, although these too may be sometimes desirable.

The grip of disaster closed tighter. Jehoiakim ruled badly for twelve years and was carried off to Babylon by the Emperor Nebuchadnezzar. He was succeeded by his son, Jechoniah, who surrendered himself to the Babylonians after a reign of three months. Jehoiakim soon died, Jechoniah lived as a prisoner for many years until he was released in honor by Evil-Merodach, a successor of Nebuchadnezzar.

Zedekiah, another son of Josiah, ruled as a Babylonian puppet, but disregarding Jeremiah's warnings, he rebelled. The Babylonian armies returned and after a siege, destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple in 587 BCE and carried off much of the populace under miserable conditions to Babylonia. Zedekiah was caught trying to escape the city, his sons were slaughtered, and his eyes were put out. Even then the disasters did not end. Gedaliah, a righteous man appointed by the Babylonians as gover nor, was murdered by Judean enemies. Factions of Judeans battled each other, and one group finally fled to Egypt carrying Jeremiah off with them against his will and against his advice.

The Kingdom of Judah had fallen, and its people and land and cities were devastated. Jeremiah composed an eloquent Lamentation. Yet Jeremiah, though grieving, was not beaten. The people had lost power, land, sovereignty, independence, and their Temple. The state was destroyed, but, more essential, the nation was not. Jeremiah proclaimed still the restoration of the nation's full glorious relation with God and the continuity of their mission to live according to God's teaching.

Implications

Is the United States today more like the Roman Empire or more like Judah? Is it simply an accumulation of power or is it a nation with a higher purpose that must survive? The United States has had both sorts of leaders—those who believe in its future and those who do not. Are there cycles in history and in the affairs of state? Do all states inevitably reach a time when they will fall? Is the United States on the downward slope of its historical cycle? Wise people have argued such questions for centuries. The rise and fall of any nation presents a detailed and complex story. Yet perhaps the most important single point is whether the nation remains true to its divinely appointed mission, to its unique abilities. Leaders too often try to be something that their nation is not and often in a most pessimistic way. Historian Martin Gilbert has argued that England's policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany in the 1930s was motivated at least partly by feelings of guilt over England's role in World War I, and second, by an intellectual lack of clarity. The greatest of leaders are typically those who understand the inner soul of a nation—what it can do and how to do it. Such a person was Abraham Lincoln or King David.

31. Joseph: Socioeconomic Provider

The Genesis account of the seven years of famine in Egypt sets a historical paradigm for dealing with hard economic times. In part, the key to the story is to understand the work of two men. One was Joseph, who foretold the famine and offered a plan to deal with it. The other was the pharaoh, who had the good judgment to recognize what the unknown Joseph could do and who took the chance of supporting him and his plan. Joseph had gone through many years of difficult experiences before, at age thirty, he finally stood before Pharaoh. Very bright and strikingly handsome, he had been favored as a youth by his father, Jacob, over his ten older brothers. His mother, Rachel, beautiful and wise, had died in giving birth to Joseph's brother Benjamin. As a teenager, Joseph told his brothers his dreams, in which they seemed to be bowing to him as their king, and the brothers became suspicious and angry at him. Scripture tells too that Joseph would talk to Jacob about his brothers, and perhaps the final hurt was the special coat that Jacob gave Joseph, which seemed to reinforce the insult of the young man's grandiose dreams. Fearing that

Joseph was trying to undermine them, the brothers sold him as a slave to a passing caravan which took him down to Egypt and sold him again to Potiphar, a high government official.

Joseph was very successful in his work for Potiphar, and the master soon entrusted Joseph with the management of all his affairs. But Joseph was beset by a new challenge. Potiphar's wife took a fancy to the young man and tried many times to seduce him. Joseph, however, resisted the temptation until, fearing exposure, the woman lied to Potiphar claiming that Joseph had gone after her, and Joseph was put in prison.

Some time later, Joseph accurately interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh's ministers who had been imprisoned. The baked goods minister was put to death, but the wine minister was released, and Joseph asked the wine minister to remember him and remove him from the jail. At this point the story of Joseph's political career began. He had much to learn. The first lesson was that political alliances are not especially reliable. A few days after Joseph interpreted the officers' dreams, the wine officer was restored to his position in Pharaoh's court. He did not, at first, tell the royal court about Joseph, and as days turned to weeks and weeks to months, he gradually ceased to think of Joseph at all. As so often in politics, whatever gratitude he felt did not move him to act. Joseph languished in the prison for another two years. He needed to learn that one cannot rely on politicians, for they will act only in their own perceived interests, and that in any case they lack real power. The minister knew that he was indebted to Joseph, but it proved more convenient not to expend the effort to bring Joseph out. Joseph needed to be impressed fully with the understanding that politics too is under the governance of God. When the time for Joseph's freedom finally came, he was ready.

Pharaoh dreamed two strange dreams. Seven robust healthy cows had risen up out of the Nile and were pasturing along its banks, when seven other cows rose up after them, wasted and poor in appearance. The miserable cows then devoured the healthy ones. Pharaoh awoke with a start but soon fell back to sleep and dreamed a second dream. Seven strong healthy stalks of grain grew up. Then seven other stalks, gaunt and blasted by the east wind, grew up after them. The thin stalks swallowed up the full healthy stalks. The dream seemed very vivid to Pharaoh, who awoke to find that they were indeed but dreams. Yet the dreams' images troubled Pharaoh for cows do not eat cows nor do grains eat grains. Pharaoh sought meaning in those strange portents, but neither he nor his many

advisors and magicians could interpret them sensibly. They offered him interpretations involving Pharaoh's personal life, "but none could interpret it to Pharaoh" (Gen. 41.8). They *could* interpret, but Pharaoh sensed that they were all wrong (Gen. Rabbah, 89.10).

At this point, the wine minister finally stepped forward. Seeing Pharaoh so distraught, and perhaps concerned about Pharaoh's health and in turn about his own position, the minister spoke up. "My sins I mention today"—both the sin of neglecting Joseph and the sin of not speaking up sooner to help Pharaoh. He went on to recount that Joseph in the jail had correctly interpreted both his dream and the baked goods minister's. Yet his description of Joseph was hardly glowing—"a Hebrew boy, a slave to the minister of the executioners," as though to suggest that Joseph was far beneath the aristocratic Egyptians of the court, not respectable and not educated or experienced in matters of knowledge or of magic which was so important to Egyptians. Yet he did interpret the dreams rightly (Gen. 41.12).

Pharaoh acted quickly, perhaps sensing that something unusual, almost miraculous, was happening. He called for Joseph, who was brought hurriedly from the dungeon. When God sets a process in operation, it happens at the exact moment it should. Joseph must have been surprised and excited at being hurried from the prison toward Pharaoh's palace, but he kept his sense of larger purpose and his wits about him. In any case, he could not know whether he would not be returned to jail after his appearance at court. Out of respect to the king, he stopped en route to shave and to change into suitable clothes (41.14). He then came before Pharaoh. Pharaoh told Joseph why he had been summoned—"I have heard of you that you can listen to a dream to interpret it." Joseph responded that such wisdom was not in him, but that God would send an answer to bring peace to Pharaoh.

The king then told Joseph the dream, albeit with a few small changes that either expressed his own feelings or were used to test if Joseph could see through them. Joseph began by telling Pharaoh that the interpretation of dreams was up to God not Joseph. Pharaoh seemed to sense already that Joseph was a young man of both wisdom and good character, and he began without further preliminaries to recount the dream. Joseph answered in the same manner as he began, knowing that he was telling the truth and probably realizing that Pharaoh sensed it, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one dream. What God is doing He has told to Pharaoh" (41.28).

Both dreams tell that seven years of plenty would come to Egypt only to be followed by famine so severe that the plenty would be forgotten, and all this would come soon. Joseph's response showed that, as Pharaoh had suspected, a king's dream was likely to be a matter of national import and not merely personal.

However, Joseph went on to offer unsolicited a plan to meet the needs of the time. Pharaoh recognized the wisdom in this young man who was just minutes out of prison, and he let Joseph go on talking. "Let Pharaoh see to a man understanding and wise and appoint him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh act and appoint overseers over the land and let him store a fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven years of plenty." That is, let them gather the produce year by year under Pharaoh's supervision into the cities. The food supply will be supervised so that the land would not be ruined during the famine.

Joseph's words pleased Pharaoh and his ministers, for they recognized that Joseph was an honest man imbued with a holy spirit and inspired wisdom. Referring back to Joseph's own description of the sort of man who could manage Egypt through its crisis, Pharaoh said, "There is no man as understanding and wise as you," and he appointed Joseph as minister over all Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself.

Settling quickly into his new position, Joseph went to work. He traveled on an inspection tour through the land to set up plans for measuring and storing food. Towns were readied to store the food produced in their areas (41.47–8). This would reduce transportation costs and perhaps protect against thievery, which can increase in hard times (Gen. 41.12). The extraordinary productivity of the seven good years could easily have tempted people to export produce at a good profit, but Joseph wanted the food kept in Egypt. The grain was stored in amounts almost beyond counting (41.49). It was necessary also to avoid speculation—a major problem in bringing on modern economic depressions. Joseph managed this by selling only at retail and allowing buyers enough only for their own families. Also the text says, "They gathered the grain," not sold it or traded with it, not even from town to town within Egypt. The grain could be sold only to the government, where it was kept under crown control in the local storehouses, not in large centralized storage houses. In this manner, people would be more aware of the grain and would feel more secure against future danger. They could feel confident too that their government was not speculating or enriching itself while people starved

(Hirsch, 41.35, 56–7). Joseph kept close personal watch over all the storing and selling and was actually at the granary in the capital, Memphis, when his brothers came from Canaan among the crowds of foreigners seeking to buy grain in Egypt. Joseph also taxed the people fairly, at twenty percent during the years of plenty. He felt that twenty percent of the large harvests carefully stored and distributed should be enough to maintain the people through the years of famine. It was equally important that the people be able to trust and respect the government as well as to accept that they had to keep the rules. Joseph certainly collected other food as well, perhaps paying for it at the low prices of the bountiful years. Nor did Joseph begin to supply food from the public stores until the "famine became strong," again to avoid hoarding, speculation, and squandering.

Joseph was honest not merely for show but on principle, "And Joseph brought all the money to Pharaoh" (47.18). Joseph lived as befitted an important minister; however, he was careful not to take special perks. Even when he sent wagons to bring his father, Jacob, and the family down to Egypt, he took the wagons from Pharaoh only with permission (48.17–19, 21).

How indeed did a young man with little experience in economics or government step right into a difficult situation and inspire the confidence of a great ruler and later of the whole Egyptian people? In essence, Joseph remained true to his mission and to himself. This is probably why he stopped on his way from the jail to the palace to shave and change his clothes. He listened and observed carefully the situation and what people said to him. It was exactly this that enabled him to react wisely to varying circumstances and different individuals. As Pharaoh saw in him, "You will *listen* to a dream to interpret it." Interpreting a dream or anything else that occurs may have more to do with knowing how to listen than with mere intellect. Joseph did not flaunt his brilliance. He stated instead his serious belief that "it is not up to me. God will answer Pharaoh" (41.16). When God wants to tell something through a dream, He does so not in riddles or by teasing. All the information is there ready to be understood.

It says much for Pharaoh too that he took his responsibilities as ruler so seriously. He at first pondered and worried over the meaning of the dreams, feeling that they held some portent for all Egypt. He was also quick to recognize and employ a man with special gifts who could help his nation. He showed no jealousy and did not seem to feel suspicious or

threatened in the face of Joseph's visible brilliance or his foreign origins or his former status as a slave and prisoner. This is perhaps because Pharaoh was able to perceive Joseph's spiritual qualities and his integrity. Pharaoh may have accepted the idea that Joseph stated often that all things including wisdom come from God. Joseph had learned that true trust can be placed only in God, not on allies, powerful ministers, or anyone else. Pharaoh may not have been a great economist, but he had the ability of a great manager to find and enlist to work with him capable people who did have the specialized abilities. Scholars of American history find this quality in George Washington, whose cabinet included the brilliant Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, or in Abraham Lincoln, who held together a cabinet of contentious but brilliant subordinates like Edwin M. Stanton and Salmon P. Chase.

As the famine went on, people paid for food with money, and after the money ran out, with their cattle. Then the people traded their land to Pharaoh for food. And Joseph moved village populations to other villages (47.21). People would still be with their families and neighbors. On their new lands, people would pay a fairly moderate twenty percent of their produce as taxes. They could support their families but not be able to speculate. The people were very happy with Joseph's fairness, and they even offered themselves as slaves to Pharaoh, "You have given us life. Let us find favor in my master's eyes, and we shall be slaves to Pharaoh" (41.25). However, Joseph did not want the people to be slaves. There was no purpose to such a move.

Egypt rode out the famine, and Joseph remained a respected minister of Pharaoh for many decades. He had saved Egypt from a terrible threat and had set up a just, reputable, and workable system by which the government could exercise fair and strong direction of the economy and by which the people could enjoy the fruits of their labors, safeguarded against greed, market manipulation, speculation, and corruption. The key elements were the faith, integrity, and foresight of the man who devised the system—Joseph.

Implications

Modern nations go through economic crashes and crises of confidence, typically prompted by greed, excessive speculation, and corruption in business and government. People lose faith in their leaders, their economic system, even the way of life on which the society is based. Govern-

ments have tried a variety of solutions to bring the nations out of depression. About 1500 BCE, the powerful nation of Egypt faced a severe famine. It was to their great benefit to find in a most unlikely manner a person who had the integrity and insight to lead them safely through their crisis.

It is difficult for most Americans to conceive of the impact of famine. In the ancient world, however, food shortages were constant and threatening. Flood, drought, war, or locusts could destroy a region's food supply. The ancients were not ignorant, and they developed considerable knowledge about the producing and preserving of food, but never by any means enough. One of the most fertile of ancient lands was Egypt, particularly in the delta where the Nile fed into small canals, both natural and man-made. When neighboring nations suffered food shortages, they would often turn to Egypt for support.

In modern times, it is not so much famine that threatens as harsh economic slowdowns that were once termed *panics* and more recently *recessions* or *depressions*. Such problems have struck the United States often since its beginning, even when Alexander Hamilton was serving as secretary of the treasury. The Great Depression of the 1930s was the most notable. How can such depressions be warded off, and how, once started, can they be remedied? The stories of bank and business failures, of speculation, of excessive bonuses to executives who do not care even about their own businesses, and finally the need and suffering of the jobless and hungry repeat themselves, crying out for a solution, a stopper in a senseless cycle.

Joseph's sense for long-range planning was critical to this account, and it shows his strong sense of a life's purpose. It is this which enabled him to resist the advances of Potiphar's wife. Joseph held a strong sense of future and had no belief in fate. People are able to influence the future by what they do today, and they can learn from experience and the accumulated wisdom of God and people.

What does future mean here? Planning for the future creates a bridge from the present. We need not fear the future, but instead we can plan for it to make it better. Future is a continuation, not a hurtling toward primordial chaos, nor something unknown and frightening. When one builds a bridge, the future becomes present. Joseph created such a bridge by moving into the future with faith and a plan. Many people lack this feeling of continuity and even fear it. Future means something different in the He-

brew Bible than it did to the Greeks. One need not feel overwhelmed by time and can indeed master time. Time is not a devouring monster but simply part of God's scheme for history.

In a famous poem, A. E. Housman offers the image that a man of twenty years has only fifty years left till he reaches his classic seventieth year. "Since fifty springs are little room to see the cherries hung with bloom, about the woodland I will go to see the cherries hung with snow." He has only a set number of years to see the beauty of the cherry blossoms in the spring. Therefore, let him enjoy it while he may. Though the words are lovely, the thought is pessimistic. If man would only think of how little time he has, he would hurry to fill his time as best he can. Of course, it is more productive to schedule one's activities and his time, but Houseman's view is self-fulfilling pessimism. It is better to enjoy each moment wisely for the eternity that moment contains and not to worry unduly about one's remaining life span.

32. Care for the Poor

Professor Peter Brown of Princeton has argued that the spread of Christianity brought to the Greco-Roman world a revolutionary new approach to treatment of the poor, which Christians had learned from the Jews. Wealthy Greeks had prided themselves on gifts to their city, such as sponsoring theater performances or public buildings, or on donations to temples or banqueting fraternities. Such contributors would be honored with the appellation *euergetes*, "doer of good." It was always the city or community that benefited from these gifts and from the citizen's demonstration of civic spirit. There was, however, in all this, little sense of support to the poor. The Hebrew Bible, in contrast, mandates great concern for the poor and underprivileged, which then influenced early Christians, even after Christianity had become the dominant religion in the Roman Empire in the fourth century.

The Hebrew Bible presents detailed instructions on care for the poor. People must set aside part of their fields and their harvest for the poor to take freely. There are poor tithes. One must not delay paying a wage earner. Widows and orphans must be cared for. It is to be hoped that "there shall be no poor among you, but do not harden your heart or close your hand from your poor brother" (Deut. 15.7–8). You shall give to him and not think badly when you give to him because for this "your God will

bless you in all your doings and in all to which you send forth your hand" (Deut. 15.4, 11).

Talmud and Midrash based an entire area of law on the Bible's teachings regarding support for the poor. One must care first for those closest to him, for example, his family and townsmen. A poor person who is ready to marry should be supplied with a place to live and the basic furniture and implements. One should himself give and encourage others to give as well. In post-Biblical antiquity and probably earlier as well, regular daily and weekly collections helped support both local and visiting poor. Special rooms in synagogues were set aside to house the poor. The Talmud (BT Shabbat 151b) comments that the world turns, and the person whom you help today may be helping you or your children tomorrow.

Implications

Sources from the period of the Roman Empire indeed offer pictures of dreadful poverty—people whose rags hardly covered their bodies, people who would sleep outside in the winter next to a public bathhouse on cinders cast out from the bathhouse's fire, and much more like it. Yet as Professor Brown points out, the Greeks and Romans prided themselves and achieved acclaim by their magnificent gifts to the polis. What was missing in these people's souls? How could they give large sums of money to civic enterprises while ignoring the suffering of their fellow human beings?

What they were missing is the simple Biblical command to love thy neighbor as thyself. The Biblical idea of caring for the poor is more than a civic responsibility. It is a commandment to care for one's fellow human being, created uniquely in the same divine image as oneself. When one gives to the poor, one becomes richer.

33. Assassination: Gedaliah

The collapse of the mighty Assyrian Empire in 612 BCE opened a period of turbulence and war all through the Near East as Babylonians (Chaldeans), Egyptians, Persians, and others all vied for power. In 597, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem and installed Zedekiah as puppet king. Perhaps Judah could have lived well enough as a tributary to Nebuchadnezzar, but Zedekiah rebelled, disregarding the divine mes-

sage brought to him by the prophet Jeremiah. In 586, the rebellion was crushed, Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed with great bloodshed, and much of the populace was sent into exile, while many others escaped into hiding as best they could. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah ben Ahikam as governor. Gedaliah was a respectable, righteous man, of the party of the prophet Jeremiah, scion of an important though not royal family. His appointment restored hope of stability and even prosperity. Refugees began to come to Gedaliah's seat at Mizpeh, citizens, farmers, soldiers in hiding since the war ended, and leaders like Ishmael ben Netanya and Johanan and Jonatan, the sons of Kereah (Jer. 40.7). Gedaliah encouraged them to carry on their lives, while he would represent their interests before the Chaldeans.

The promise of stability and prosperity beckoned, and Judeans began to return home even from Moab, Ammon and Edom, and other places. Johanan ben Kereach and other army leaders emerged from hiding to join Gedaliah but brought a warning too. Ishmael ben Netanyah, of the royal family of Judah, had been sent by King Baalis of Ammon to murder Gedaliah. They warned Gedaliah, but he refused to listen. Johanan then approached Gedaliah privately, arguing that Gedaliah's death would be a severe blow to a nation beginning to recover from military defeat and devastation. "Let us go and smite Ishmael ben Netanyah, and no one will know. Why should he murder you, and all Judah who are gathered to you will be scattered and the remnant of Judah will be lost (40.13–15). Gedaliah refused, saying to Johanan that he was speaking falsely about Ishmael. Ishmael soon came to Mizpeh accompanied by some henchman, and at a Rosh Hashanah dinner, Ishmael indeed murdered Gedaliah along with many others—Judeans and Chaldean officers as well. Johanan gathered men, including former soldiers, and defeated Ishmael, who fled to the king of Ammon.

Fearing that the Chaldeans might seek a bloody revenge for the murder of Gedaliah, Johanan and his band rejected the advice of Jeremiah and fled to Egypt, where the Judeans continued to worship pagan gods and where many bad things came upon them (Jer. 41–44). The promise of peace and recovery after the devastation of Jerusalem and the mass exile was set back. Who was at fault? Ishmael was jealous and violent. He seems to have felt that as a member of the former royal family, he and not Gedaliah should have become governor of conquered Judah. The Talmud praises Gedaliah as a righteous man, yet faults him for rejecting the

warning of danger to himself. A seventeenth-century commentator (Maharsha) argues that Gedaliah was indeed right in not allowing Johanan to kill Ishmael, but he still need not have reacted so negatively, in essence accusing Johanan of lying. He ought to have least taken reasonable precautions (Maharsha on BT Nidah 61a).

The first-century historian Josephus (*Antiquities*, X, 9) recounts Gedaliah's story and adds some interesting details. Gedaliah, he says, was of a gentle and righteous disposition. Ishmael, who was wicked and crafty, had fled to King Baalis of Ammon during the siege of Jerusalem. Johanan and the others who came to Gedaliah in Mizpeh loved him exceedingly. Yet he would not heed their warning, because he had been kind to Ishmael before and was sure that no one would be so wicked and ungrateful to his benefactor. Even if the warning were true, it would be better for Gedaliah to be slain by Ishmael than for Gedaliah to destroy a man who simply might be entrusting himself to his care.

Josephus adds that Ishmael waited until Gedaliah had grown drowsy from wine at the holiday meal, and then rose up with his friends and slew Gedaliah and many more over the next few days. Johanan attacked Ishmael's men and killed most of them, but Ishmael himself escaped to Ammon. Judaism today still observes annually the Fast of Gedaliah on the day after Rosh Hashanah to commemorate the importance of the death of a righteous man.

The land of Israel would have to wait many decades until the Persians conquered the Chaldean Empire and allowed the Judean exiles (or their descendants) to return to Judah and to rebuild Jerusalem and its Temple. For several centuries, Judah remained a small province of the empires of the Persians, Ptolemies, and Seleucids, often harassed by antagonistic neighbors.

Implications

History has shown so often that the assassination of a good leader can damage a nation for years, and a nation must protect itself and its leaders as best it can. Think of the murders of four American presidents, particularly Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy. Think of the several almost assassinations of Presidents Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Harry Truman, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. World leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Anwar Sadat, and Yitzchak Rabin were also victims of assassins. Jeremiah 40 tells of a political assassination in ancient Judah, which came

during a sensitive time and whose effect is noted even 2,600 years later by an annual day of fasting. Why is political assassination so devastating to a nation's balance? After all, a leader is only one person. What is broken when a leader is killed? There is a loss of continuity, the breaking of a psychological pattern and the jolting of the sense of a future. Even if the nation is not in danger of war, it can leave people questioning and insecure. It is noteworthy that in the United States, people still have doubts about who really shot President John Kennedy, and people reported seeing John Wilkes Booth, Abraham Lincoln's assassin, alive many years after he was apparently killed by federal troops in a barn in Maryland, days after the assassination.

34. Ingrates and Egocentrics: Pharaoh

The first chapter of Genesis relates that God told the first two human beings to hold dominion over the world which He had created and to enjoy it and grow in it. There are people who feel no need to include others in any of the world's good things. Such a one recognizes no authority but his own, not even God's. He feels that all people and things are of value only insofar as they serve him. Such an egocentric as head of state can spell disaster. He is much the opposite of one who recognizes that God made a beautiful world and who is grateful to God and to other people for the benefits he enjoys and for the opportunity to make the world better. A paradigm of the ingrate is the pharaoh of the exodus story. "And a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Exod. 1.8). Perhaps the new pharaoh was a foreign conqueror or a usurper who had no awareness of the history of how Joseph saved Egypt from a terrible famine and reconstructed the Egyptian economy. Or he was a native ruler, who preferred to ignore Egypt's debt to Joseph.

Settled in the district of Goshen by Joseph, the family of Jacob had prospered and grown, accommodating itself to Egyptian ways. The Israelites had much to offer to Egypt, being intelligent, hardworking people with a strong moral code. Pharaoh, however, did not see it that way. He was worried about some vague problem arising that he never expresses very precisely. And perhaps he did not truly understand it himself. "And he said to his people, 'Behold the people of Israel are more and mightier than we. Let us take counsel lest the Israelites will increase and when war

will come, they will be added to our enemies and will go to war with us and go up from the land'" (Exod. 1.10).

Did Pharaoh want them in Egypt or did he not? Did he really believe that the Israelites outnumbered the native Egyptians? They most surely did not. There appears to be no logical reason to imagine that the Israelites were hostile to the Egyptians or that Egypt was experiencing anything other than gain from having so industrious a group living among them. Pharaoh was less concerned about a threat to Egypt than that something might challenge his own ego pretensions.

Pharaoh initiated the solution to his "Jewish problem" by assessing them heavy taxes and then forcing them into work details. He was not pursuing policies useful for his nation. It never occurred to him that the lives and possessions of others are sacred and that they exist for something besides his own use. Soon Pharaoh was able to bring the entire Israelite people into a condition of harsh slavery.

It is curious that the Book of Exodus never mentions the pharaoh's name, although several later pharaohs are named, for example, Shishak and Necho. Many scholars think that this pharaoh was Rameses II. Others identify him with Amenhotep II (1455–1422 BCE) or one of the Thutmoses (fifteenth century BCE).

Enslaving the people did not calm Pharaoh's concerns. He decided that their population was increasing too quickly, and he sought to block their growth. He tried to induce midwives to surreptitiously murder newborns. This was perhaps less shocking to the ancients than it would be to us today. Greeks were legally permitted to "expose" unwanted babies, and Phoenicians and Mesopotamians and others often sacrificed babies to their gods. Here was a powerful king of a cultured nation who had no respect for human life—or for much of anything else. When Moses came later to give God's message, "Let my people go," Pharaoh's response was that he did not know God—just as he did not know Joseph. He could not consider even easing the suffering of his slaves and instead added to their workload and accused them of being lazy. Strange as it may sound, Pharaoh may have been serious, actually believing that anyone who gave less than his absolute all for Pharaoh was a lazy good-for-nothing. How could anyone, he thought, have any point in life other than aggrandizing Pharaoh? Not that Pharaoh loved Egypt or its people. He aimed instead simply at forcing as many people as possible to serve him totally.

Implications

Gratitude is one of the most human of virtues and much praised in rabbinic interpretations of Scripture. In the first chapter of his classic *Meditations*, Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius expressed his gratitude in detail for what he gained or learned from a long list of relatives, teachers, and associates. All too many people, however, feel that "my own strength and power brought me all this success" (Deut. 8.17). They do not give proper credit to others, as though to do so would in some way diminish them. On the surface, Pharaoh expressed concern over the increase of the Israelite population. Yet he could not have rationally believed that the Israelites would come to outnumber the Egyptians. A close look at his words indicates that he may have been more worried that the Israelites, hardworking, intelligent, and ethical, could do more in Egypt than he could, thereby appearing to threaten his position. Psychologists often find in family counseling that to help one member of a family raises jealousy in the other members. A lack of self-esteem too could have prevented this pharaoh from being grateful, so unlike the earlier pharaoh who acknowledged Joseph's wisdom.

35. Choosing Good Advisors

How shall a president or king choose his closest advisors? Certainly an advisor should be wise and knowledgeable and must possess strong moral character. In American history, both Presidents Grant's and Harding's administrations were troubled by major scandals within the president's inner circle. President Nixon's closest advisors led him into the Watergate scandal, which caused his resignation under threat of impeachment, and his vice president, Spiro Agnew, was convicted of income tax fraud.

In contrast, the kings of Judah in Biblical times could turn for advice to prophets like Elijah or Isaiah, who would transmit to the king the word of God. However, the Bible recounts also the careers of advisors of Saul and David, some of whom caused great harm, and then of advisors of Solomon who were not listened to when they should have been.

Doeg appears in one story in I Samuel 21 and 25. David had become a leading figure in King Saul's court and was married to Michal, the king's daughter. As time went on, Saul became increasingly fearful of David's rising popularity and his accomplishments. Finally, David had to hurried-

ly flee the royal court, fearful for his life. He stopped at Nob, a town of priests. Pretending that he was on a secret mission from Saul, David asked the priest, Ahimelech, to give him bread for he had left so hurriedly that he had been unable to equip himself properly. The priest answered that there was only the sacred shew bread of the Tabernacle, but since the situation was so pressing, David could take some. "And a man of the servants of Saul was there, tarrying before God, and his name was Doeg the Edomite, a leader of Saul's ministers" (21.8).

David then asked Ahimelech if a spear or sword was available, for he had not had time to take one along, and the priest gave David the very sword David had taken from Goliath years before. David then went on to flee to the Philistine city of Gath and thence to Moab. Saul heard of David's flight and upbraided his men, accusing them of supporting David against himself. Doeg responded that he had seen David with Ahimelech at Nob and that Ahimelech had provided David with provisions (not only bread) and with Goliath's sword. Doeg played on Saul's fears, twisting details of the story to implicate the priest, who in fact never knew that David was actually fleeing Saul. Doeg claimed too that David had come to Ahimelech personally and not to the Tabernacle, as though the two were plotting. Doeg claimed that David had inquired of God before taking the provisions, again implying that Ahimelech was part of a plot. Probably jealous of David, Doeg knew how to manipulate the king. Indeed the Midrash (*Shohar Tov* on Psalm 62) sees Doeg as brilliant as well as unscrupulous.

Saul was deeply angry with Ahimelech. Going to Nob, he ordered his men to kill all the priests there; however, no one would raise a hand against them. Doeg himself then carried out the massacre, slaying eighty-five priests together with their families and even their cattle (22.18–19). Only one man escaped, Abiathar, a son of Ahimelech.

We have already told the story of Jeroboam and Rehoboam, but let us now look at the same events from the standpoint of King Rehoboam and his advisors. King Solomon ended his glorious forty-year reign under a storm of opposition both inside and outside Israel. His son and successor, Rehoboam, handled his first major decision poorly and lost the allegiance of nine of Israel's twelve tribes. The people called upon the newly enthroned Rehoboam to meet them for serious talks in the town of Shechem in the territory of the tribe of Ephraim, not in the capital, Jerusalem. Jeroboam, a critic of Solomon and an Ephraimite, was acting as their

spokesman. Rehoboam, facing a threat to his rule, was going to his opponents' turf.

The people presented their demands: Solomon's yoke was too hard. "Now you lighten your father's hard work and his heavy yoke which he placed upon us, and we shall serve you" (I Kings 12.4). Rehoboam told them to return in three days for an answer, likely appearing to the people as vacillating and indecisive. He turned for advice to his father's counselors, men of experience and wisdom. They advised him to devote himself to serving the people and to speak to them kindly, and they would indeed stay loyal to him.

However, Rehoboam turned away from their sound suggestions and consulted the younger men, friends with whom he had grown up. He did not repeat to them the people's complaint about Solomon's yoke being hard. He simply asked his friends how they would respond to the people's request for a lighter burden. His friends' plan was more pleasing to Rehoboam. "Tell them that my little finger is thicker than my father's loins. And now, my father burdened you heavily, and I will add to your burdens. My father flogged you with rods, and I will flog you with thorns" (12.10–11).

This advice pleased Rehoboam, who also felt that to offer concessions would make him look weak. His response should suggest that he would be a stronger king than his father. To appease the people would lead them to feel that they could make even bigger demands. Rehoboam replied that he would be a greater king than Solomon and would whip the people like animals.

When the people returned after the three days, Rehoboam followed the tougher line his friends recommended. Scripture says that "the king did not listen to the people" (12.15), implying that they may have come in a more conciliatory mood. Rehoboam did leave out of his speech one line that his friends had given him, "My finger is heavier than my father's loins," which might have seemed denigrating to his father.

Perhaps Rehoboam was not a bad sort, but clearly he followed unwise advice which made him seem to his people antagonistic rather than capable. The people of Israel saw that the king would not listen to them, and they responded as many had during the revolt of Sheba ben Bichri against David half a century before, "What portion do we have in David, or heritage in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel" (12.16). All of this,

says Scripture, was part of God's plan to divide the Kingdom of Israel and give part of it to Jeroboam ben Nebat.

Rehoboam returned to Jerusalem ready to raise an army of 180,000 soldiers to regain his kingdom, but God sent the prophet Shemaiah to tell him not to go to war, and Rehoboam obeyed. Nevertheless, there was constant warfare between him and Jeroboam. Judah, Rehoboam's part of the newly divided kingdom, declined as idolatry and immorality spread like all the abominations of the earlier Canaanites before them, whom God had driven from the land (14.23–24).

Implications

Advisors can sometimes be not only incompetent and selfish but traitorous. Several members of President James Buchanan's cabinet just before the American Civil War were Southern sympathizers who actively sought to prepare the South for the war that seemed ready to begin. Secretary of War John Floyd became a general in the Confederate army.

Two more notorious cases were Benedict Arnold and Aaron Burr. A genuine war hero, Arnold was wounded in the attack on Quebec and again at Saratoga. However, he was always in need of money, enjoying high living and involving himself in business arrangements of dubious ethics. He resented, what seemed to him, a lack of recognition and even persecution from the Continental Congress and the government in Pennsylvania. Never careful about his associates, Arnold married Peggy Shippen, a young Philadelphia belle from a noted Loyalist family, and she pushed his resentment of the patriots and his associations with the British, with whom Arnold was soon exchanging messages. Washington and the other American leaders never suspected Arnold's treachery, which centered on turning over the important fortress of West Point and possibly kidnapping Washington himself.

In a second case, Aaron Burr came from a family of distinguished clergymen and was elected vice president under Thomas Jefferson. Yet he plotted against the United States and was tried for treason, involving plans to take over New Orleans, to separate the West from the rest of the United States, and to go to war with Spain.

FOREIGN POLICY

Our final section presents seven stories reflecting how faith in the future informs Biblical narratives about foreign policy. The first story describes a war fought between four Mesopotamian kings and five Canaanite kings, and it shows patterns of power politics familiar among rulers all through history. A tenth king, Melchizedek of Salem, was of a different mode, but the main figure in the story is Abraham. The second entry emphasizes the preference of the Israelite nation for peace when possible, yet the realization that war can be necessary. There are numerous wars in the Scripture including three that the Israelites were commanded by God to undertake: against the Amalekites, Midianites, and Canaanites. The third narrative acknowledges that the realities of international relations can demand alliances that are less than savory. Biblical narratives indicate that appeasement typically gained the Israelites little, and that they were better off sticking to their moral and spiritual identity. The fourth entry discusses the famous story of the twelve spies who go into the land of Canaan. Perhaps because they still thought like slaves from their experience of captivity in Egypt, ten of the spies underestimated their own strength in comparison to the Canaanites. Of all of them, only Joshua and Caleb seemed ready to be free men. Thus, the Israelites wandered forty more years in the desert.

The fifth entry in this section describes Moses's defining speech in the desert, which reaffirmed God's special relationship with Israel and the sense of purpose of the Israelite nation in its dealings with the world. The sixth entry describes the loyalty of the Israelites in keeping their treaty with the Hivites (Jebusites) of Gibeon even though the Hivites made the treaty under false premises, specifically by masking their identity. The leaders of Israel understood that the actions of the Hivites were motivated by fear rather than anything destructive to Israel, and they maintained the treaty. The final narrative tells of Joshua at Jericho and discusses the faith of the Israelites that led to the wall of Jericho tumbling down, and this is compared to the ruse by which the walls of Troy were entered in the Greek story.

36. The Bible's First War

From the dawn of history, it seems to have been the aim of rulers to enlarge themselves by invading and stealing or ravaging the lands and possessions of others. They steal others' wives and children, wealth and property, trying to aggrandize themselves and to make for themselves a lasting name and legacy in history. These seem to have been the objectives of the four Mesopotamian kings who invaded the Jordan Valley for no apparent legitimate cause, as recounted in Genesis 14. It seems to be still the modus operandi of many political leaders and the cause of many of the cruel and horrific acts of destruction in the last hundred years. This first war in the Bible was fought between four Mesopotamian kings and five Canaanite kings, and it shows patterns of power politics familiar among rulers all through history. A tenth king, Melchizedek of Salem, was of a different mode, and the main figure in the story is Abraham.

"And it was in the days of King Amraphel of Shinar . . ." (Gen. 14.1f.). Some modern scholars identify Amraphel with the famous Hammurabi of Babylon, and the other kings too have names that are not wholly unfamiliar. Arioch of Elasa is perhaps Erinka of Larsa. Chedorlaomer is perhaps Kudor Lagamar of Elam, and Tidal could be Tudghala, a northern ruler. The four kings defeated the Canaanite kings in a war that ended with a treaty signed in the Valley of Siddim, by which the five losers agreed to pay tribute to the four victors.

We see from so long ago the sort of historical account that emphasizes the stories not of people but of kings. In the small Jordan Valley, five kings ruled five towns. Perhaps they all liked nice titles. The Mesopotamian kings had come to fight not over any known complaint or grievance but apparently for their own glory and enrichment. When after twelve years, the five kings refused to continue paying tribute, the four returned and overran the Transjordan area, defeating a series of cities and peoples, finally defeating the five kings in the Valley of Siddim. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled and fell into nearby mortar pits, while remnants of their allies escaped to the mountains. The four kings plundered the defeated cities, taking valuables and many captives, including Lot, Abraham's nephew.

It seems the five kings had earlier preferred to pay the tribute as puppet rulers rather than fight for their independence, hoping they could preserve their personal honors and luxuries. Years later, when they finally

rebelled and the decisive battle came, the five did not seem to have put up much of a fight, fleeing instead and abandoning their cities to the invaders (Hirsch on Gen. 14).

A refugee brought news to Abraham of the war and of the capture of his nephew. Without delay, Abraham organized 318 men of his household and alerted his Amorite allies, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre, to join him. He pursued the Mesopotamian army and, surprising them by night, put them to flight, freeing Lot and the other captives as well as regaining the lost plunder. As Abraham returned with mission accomplished, he was approached by the king of Sodom, emerging from his hiding place. The king had done little in the war and ruled a city whose name is even today an indicator of ignominious behavior. It was Abraham who had fought the battle and rescued the people and the property of the five kings.

At this point Melchizedek, priest-king of Salem (later Jerusalem), arrives. This king had not been involved in the war, but he recognized Abraham's devotion to his divinely ordered life mission, and he brought food and drink for the victorious and weary army (14.19–20). He blessed Abraham, "Blessed be Abraham to the Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be God, Most High Who delivered your enemies into your hand." Melchizedek was apparently a monotheist of good character, who showed hospitality as well as recognition of Abraham's successful effort in the war and of the fact that God had designated Abraham as a blessing to the world. His God is ruler of heaven and earth and of blessing. Abraham responded by giving Melchizedek a tithe.

The king of Sodom was a clever politician, but of low character. He approached Abraham with neither a thank you nor an offer of food and drink as had Melchizedek. Instead, he sought to make the best bargain he could. Seeing Abraham's generosity, as well as Melchizedek's, he offered to let Abraham keep all the loot, but Abraham should return the people to the king. Of course, the four kings had taken the loot from the cities, and Abraham had taken it from them, so he owed nothing legally or morally to the king of Sodom. It all belonged already to Abraham by the fair fortunes of war.

Abraham perhaps surprised the king by refusing to keep the loot, to which he was clearly entitled, "I have lifted my hand (in an oath) to the Most High God, Possessor of heaven and earth. Not a thread, not a shoe-

lace! I will not take anything that is yours! You should not be able to say 'It was I who made Abraham rich.'"

From one perspective, the king was interested in his own agenda and would not tolerate Abraham being different. Abraham was imbued with the meaning of the mission that God had given him—to be a blessing to the world. For the king this was not tolerable, and he sought to douse Abraham's inner fire by ensnaring him with the plunder. The king could also pay off Abraham and return to his throne with minimal effect on himself (Teitelbaum, 2004). He could perhaps even pass himself off as a war hero, like Abraham, although in reality he had fled the four kings and had not even joined Abraham in the pursuit of the fleeing foe.

Abraham, however, prized his life's work more than the king's tainted offer, telling the king that he, Abraham, was committed to God's plan and that success in his work would come from God and not from the goods of Sodom. Abraham was very aware that what he had won was from God and not by his own power, and he would do nothing to make that less than clear.

Implications

Everyone encounters situations which test his character. People are often offered bribes or other inducements to compromise their most precious beliefs. Sometimes they are threatened with bodily or economic harm. At a certain point one must stand his ground to maintain self-respect. Yet Abraham's strength derived not simply from self-respect but from the strong sense of his life's meaning. Natan Sharansky surviving the Soviet gulag is a modern example. People with a transcendent meaning structure are less likely to be bought off and more likely to hold to their principles.

37. Peace in the Bible

Wars are often fought in the name of religion—crusades, jihads, the terrible European wars of 1618–1648. The Hebrew Bible recounts certain of the wars fought by the Israelites in obedience to divine command and thus also in some sense motivated by religion. However, there are significant differences. The Israelites were not commanded to eradicate all foreign nations or beliefs. Each nation is seen as having its own style and its own place in the divine plan for the world. Even idolaters need not be annihilated. When God sent forth Jonah to prophesy to the people of

Nineveh, the purpose was to teach them moral behavior, not to convert them forcibly to Biblical religion. Nor does one need to be an Israelite to be worthy of spiritual blessing or of closeness to God. Maimonides, in the *Mishnah Torah,* his twelfth-century magnum opus, presents a rabbinic view of war, based on Scripture and Talmudic interpretation.

A king of Israel should not go to war except for the required wars against Amalek and the Canaanites, or for self-defense. Other wars based on economic or political motives require the consent of the high court. Israelites should never make war without first offering peace. If the people will live by the universal Noahide Laws and will submit themselves to the Israelites, then they are to be left untroubled (MT Kings 6.1). The Israelites must be sure to abide by the terms of the treaty and not deceive their enemies. If the enemies refuse to accept peace, then the adult males are to be killed and the women and children are not to be harmed. Peace may be made even with the Amalekites and Canaanites. However, should these nations choose to fight, then they are to be annihilated. Before Joshua began the invasion of Canaan, says Maimonides drawing from the Talmud, he sent letters to the Canaanites offering them three possibilities: (1) they could depart the land unharmed, (2) they could stay in peace, or (3) they could fight.

When the Israelites besiege a city, they shall not enclose it totally, but leave an area open for people to escape, so as to avoid unnecessary loss of life.

For the Scripture, war is not to be fought for its own sake, and military glory is far less praiseworthy than righteousness. Yet there are things worse than war. The Hebrew Bible tells many stories of destructive and bitter wars. Can all this bloodshed be reconciled with loftier beliefs in a virtuous, spiritual life? War is indeed a very real part of human history, one which seems never far away. It is too real and too close to be ignored. Scripture views different types of war in different ways.

Certainly, peace is idealized as better than war, and we long for a time when nation will not raise sword against nation and they shall study war no more. Yet wars remain an inevitable fact of human existence. To close one's eyes to a threat or to evil, as Western democracies so often have done, is the extreme of shortsightedness, like the proverbial ostrich with its head in the sand. Witness the democracies' lack of readiness for World War II.

On the other hand, while military virtues like courage and determination are praiseworthy, the Hebrew Bible does not see war as a means merely to gain glory or to create a historical legacy for oneself. Indeed God is referred to as "a man of war" (Exod. 15.3) when He destroyed the powerful Egyptian force at the Red Sea. Moses had told the Israelites that "God will fight for you and you will be quiet" (Exod. 14.14). The Bible tells of many later battles which the Israelites won by God's intervention. David's victory over Goliath (I Sam. 17) is a world classic. Women sang the praises of successful warriors like Saul and David. Second Samuel 23 and I Chronicles 11 list some of the great exploits of David's warriors, as every nation must honor those who fight its battles. Yet it is significant that the Talmud (MK 16b) depicts David's heroes as not only warriors but as scholars and righteous men, such as Adino the Eznite or Benaiah ben Yehoyada (Yehoiada). They are not seen as fanatics or mercenaries or as Viking berserkers, but as sensitive people of good character and intellect who take up their weapons when they must. This is not Achilles or Heracles, nor in Biblical terms is it Nimrod, the mighty hunter, nor Esau nor his Amalekite progeny who live by the sword (Gen. 36.12).

For Biblical people, war is not undertaken lightly. The Midrash (Pirqei d'Rabbi Eliezer 27) describes Abraham proceeding to war to rescue his nephew Lot from the five Mesopotamian kings (Gen. 14). He was deeply concerned first that he or his descendants would not act in ways worthy of God's favor, and second that there would be good people in the enemy army who would be killed. Abraham took no plunder from the enemies and no reward from the king of Sodom whose life he saved. God appeared to Abraham specially to reassure him that he had done the right thing by fighting and that he had not in any way forfeited God's love for him.

There are wars which go beyond the usual power struggles and rivalries of nations. On three occasions in the Pentateuch, God commanded the Israelites to fight wars whose purpose was not simply to gain advantages but to destroy an enemy. Each of these arose from a unique circumstance and aimed at a unique result. These wars were fought against people who threatened not only life and property but the basic principles of Biblical monotheism. These attacks were aimed at three nations—the Amalekites, Midianites, and Canaanites.

Most Biblical wars were not of this type. Abraham had attacked the Mesopotamian army that had overrun much of Canaan and carried away

his nephew Lot. Jacob was prepared to fight when his brother Esau approached him with four hundred armed men; this matter was, however, settled amicably. God Himself destroyed the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. The Israelites fought several wars with local peoples who threatened them as they approached their promised land of Canaan, most notably Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan. Yet these fights arose from political circumstances and not from great differences of ideologies or moralities.

The three wars we shall now explore were ideological and moral wars to which the Israelites were commanded by God.

1. AMALEKITES. Exodus 17 describes the battle between the Israelites and the Amalekites, and Deuteronomy 25 commands the Israelites to carry on the fight through the ages to the utter obliteration of Amalek and any remembrance of it. What made this war so vital for Israel is the fact that the Amalekites came and attacked them at a time when the Israelites were particularly vulnerable and when there seemed to be no rational reason for the attack. Amalek did not want land or pillage or women from the Israelites. Such a war would have been understandable if not kindly. Amalek seemed to want simply to fight (Exod. 17.8). There are nations or individuals who cannot abide or recognize the existence of goodness, who will not build or improve anything. For them there is only disorder and destruction. They can destroy without benefiting themselves, and they can destroy their own as easily as others'. Their societies are sociopathic and chaotic, ignoble in purpose, and destructive. They build nothing but can express gleeful excitement over senseless destruction. Amalek had nothing to gain from destroying Israel except the momentary surge of excitement that destruction offers. Perhaps Amalek sensed that Israel was on a spiritual journey, and they could not abide that idea. How can good nations react against wanton and purposeless but active evil? Certainly they need not simply acquiesce in their own destruction. If necessary, they must defend their lives and their way of life against or even attack those who would destroy great ideals.

"And Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim" (Exod. 17.8). Amalek seems to have gone out of its way to fight Israel. No clear purpose is stated. S. R. Hirsch, in his commentary, argues that Amalek's ideology was war. They fought for glory, to make themselves a name, or to gain renown by force of arms. There was no provocation or casus belli. The ideology of many ancient nations glorified warrior heroes like Hera-

cles and Achilles, and perhaps Amalek saw war in much the same way. If they understood anything at all about the newly freed Israelites, they were deeply troubled by what they learned, for here was a God and a nation with an ideology radically different from their own. Amalek both disdained and feared Israel because Israel did not glorify the sword but focused on the spiritual. Amalek could deal with nations that like itself lived by the sword.

Israel was perceived as a different sort of challenge, more frightening than the usual battle, for Amalek could sense its own ideological collapse. Israel becomes its main enemy, with whom there could be no conciliation and no meeting of minds. The unprovoked attack on this newly freed people contrasts deeply with the Israelites' own tradition of hospitality to wayfarers, which their ancestor Abraham had so firmly established. The Israelites were hardly yet recovered from a crisis moment in Rephidim, where they had complained of a shortage of water and wondered if God would really attend to their day-to-day needs. Of course, He did; and Moses brought water miraculously from a rock, but the episode had caused its strains so that the people would refer to Rephidim later as "Strife and Quarreling," and they fell into terrible self-doubt, "Is God among us or no?" (Exod. 17.7).

Deuteronomy 25.18 describes Amalek's attack in the term *asher karcha baderech*, "who attacked you on the way." Yet the word attacked (*karcha*) has several levels of meaning. Amalek was coldly cynical, and the faith and intimacy of the Israelites with God was alien to them. They wanted to show that Israel and its God were no different than any other nation. So they sought to "cool off" the inspiration of the miracles of the exodus and to show them that history is propelled by force or chance and not by God. The words "cooled" and "chance" both are valid translations of *karcha*. Amalek could show no interest in the inspired monotheist approach to life without weakening its own persona. So it "paid no attention" to any of this, and traveled far from their usual territory to attack the Israelites.

The ancient Midrash touches upon yet another implication of the word *karcha,* indicating that the Amalekites captured a number of Israelites and subjected them to violent homosexual assault, largely again with the purpose of degrading and staining the heights of spirituality which were opened to the Israelites. They also mutilated Israelites in a manner that

would mock their circumcision as though to say, what good does it do you to obey your God.

As Amalek began their attack, Moses called on Joshua, his closest disciple, to choose men to go to fight. It is unlikely that Joshua was an experienced warrior, but he was certainly a spiritual man of good character and principle, and he probably had some natural ability as a military leader. Years later he would successfully lead the Israelites in the first stages of their conquest of Canaan (Exod. 7.9). Moses would do his part too by going to the top of a hill to pray. The Israelite fighters would see him and be encouraged to fight, and the Israelites in the camp would feel encouraged to join Moses in prayer. Confidence and courage are essential in battle, and seeing Moses's hands raised in prayer would encourage the Israelites (Abravanel, 1962). Yet Moses could not keep his hands raised all the time, so his brother Aaron, and Hur, their nephew, came to support him.

The combination of fight and prayer was all part of the plan. The Amalek would have to be defeated militarily at their own game, but the Israelites must not forget their métier either—their God and the divinely ordained way of life.

"And Joshua weakened Amalek by the sword." The Israelites were unable to destroy Amalek in this battle. Yet a pattern was set in which there would be "war for God with Amalek in every generation." It was important to implant into Israelite history at this early moment the need to recognize evil and to fight against it, even if at a given moment that evil can only be weakened and not obliterated. This will be God's battle as well, "For I will surely wipe out the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens." The Israelites must never lose sight of their humaneness and respect for right even when they suffer Amalek's coarseness and cruelty.

This should all be written down and impressed upon Joshua and all subsequent leaders. It is not so much Amalek's warlike character itself that is dangerous but what it stands for—the glorification of violence and power and diminution of the good.

God commanded Israel to obliterate Amalek when the time comes. Several centuries later, King Saul would attack Amalek successfully but would fail to kill their king, Agag, and to destroy their possessions. For this, God would take Saul's kingdom away from him (I Sam. 15.23, 26). A great leader will not necessarily be a person of violence, but even a peace-loving leader must understand the proper uses for war. For as much

as we might close our eyes and wish otherwise, war is always very much with us.

2. MIDIANITES. God ordered Moses and the Israelites to carry out a war of "revenge" against the Midianites. Moses was a man of great compassion and humility, not a wild-eyed, cruel fanatic. Yet he clearly understood the need for appropriate toughness. When the Israelites, nearing the end of their wanderings in the Sinai, approached the land of Moab, the Moabites were terrified. This was understandable and normal even though mistaken, for the Israelites had no designs on Moab. That the Midianites joined Moab to strike the Israelites was not forgivable, for the Israelites posed no possible threat at all to Midian. Beyond that, the Midianites had joined in the plot to demoralize the Israelites by seducing them into the degraded worship of Baal Peor by sending their women, even of the highest rank, to lure Israelite men. This resulted in serious moral damage to the Israelites. Twenty-four thousand men died in a plague, and many years later Joshua would still speak of the lingering effects of the Baal Peor episode (Josh. 22.17).

God commanded the Israelites to be vigilant and not to minimize or disregard the danger of such an attack or the evil nature of the people who did it. Later God commanded the Israelites a second time to avenge the wrong done to them by Midian. Moses sent a relatively small force of only twelve thousand men, led by Phinehas, whose courage in slaying an Israelite prince and his paramour Cozbi, a Midianite princess, had induced God to end the plague.

Moses's orders to Phinehas were unspecific beyond simply—take revenge. The Israelite force, with divine help, did far more than they had probably anticipated. They sacked and razed the cities and slew all the males. Yet Moses was angry when they returned with female captives, and he ordered the soldiers to slay all the women who could have been with a man. Only those three years old and under were to be spared. The Midianites had attempted to embroil the Israelites in their Baal cult of ritual prostitution—a practice common in the ancient Near East but abhorrent to Biblical thinking. The cult and its adherents had posed a severe danger both moral and physical to people of a Biblical faith. God wanted the threat and the people who constituted the threat to be eradicated. The national moral trauma to Israel had already been severe. Only girls too young to have absorbed any idea of cultic prostitution could be spared

and raised by Israelites within the ambience of Biblical morality and monotheism.

3. CANAANITES. The wars against the Canaanites were of a third type. As the Israelites entered their promised land, they were fighting against people who were steeped in worship of many deities who demanded child sacrifice, temple prostitution, and bloody orgies. These people had not attacked the Israelites in the Sinai and were defending their cities. Yet God could not tolerate any trace of the Canaanite cults. Canaanites willing to leave Canaan, like the Girgashites, would not be harmed. Nor would the Jebusites, who made peace, although with deception. The rest of the population was to be annihilated—men, women, and children. Some, in special cases like Rahab in Jericho, joined the Israelites. The Talmud claims that Rahab later married Joshua. Yet, in general, the Canaanite lifestyle was to be obliterated so that, as Scripture specifies, "they shall not teach you to do like all their abominations" (Deut. 20.16). Associate yourselves with the righteous so that you may learn from them and not with the wicked and depraved.

Implications

The Israelites leaving Egypt were in the process of being formed into a nation, while the Amalekites who attacked them were a society of chaos, which had no real sense of self, but can only try to destroy others to show that they too have no legitimacy. The Biblical society gives form and clear individuality.

What bothered the Midianites too was that the Israelites seemed to them an alien force that could undermine their own roots. They could relate to the Israelites only by trying to hurt or conquer them, whether in war or by immorality. It thus became necessary for the Israelites to go to war to defend their own moral identity.

During the last century, the United States fought a number of wars, large and small, several among the most destructive in all of history. When are wars necessary? In the Bible's view, besides wars of self-defense, a nation must fight also to defend the basic principles which give that nation its special character and meaning. Abraham Lincoln expressed this so well in his Gettysburg Address, "Whether any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." Lincoln understood better than most from the very beginning how destructive the American Civil War could prove to be. Yet he felt that to allow the Union to fall apart would show

that America's noble effort to create a democracy could not succeed, and that a democratic government would surely "perish from the earth." Lincoln expressed his devotion to the eternal meaning of American democracy in several speeches during the tense period before his inauguration in March 1861. Perhaps the most deeply compassionate of American presidents, he yet was willing to lead his nation into a long and bloody civil war, knowing better than anyone else what destruction would come. This was because he believed that great principles can transcend even human lives. It was the great principle on which the United States was founded—"giving liberty not alone to the people of this country but hope to all future time . . . that all men should have an equal chance" (Catton, 1961, 260). He told a New Jersey man "that in a choice of evils, war may not always be the worst" (240).

Several months later, as the nation moved toward war, Lincoln arrested Southern sympathizers trying to recruit troops in Maryland and denied Chief Justice Roger Taney's order for habeas corpus. Governor Hicks would later explain before the Senate why Lincoln's harsh measure was necessary. "I think that arrests and arrests alone saved the State of Maryland not only from greater depredation than she suffered but from everlasting destruction" (357). Had Lincoln not known when it was right to be tough and even harsh, the United States would likely have been irrevocably split in two.

The Biblical Israelites too would fight against many enemies. Several of them particularly endangered the very essence of Israel and its faith. So God commanded that these should be wars of utter destruction to remove the threat to the fulfillment of His purposes for the world.

38. Appeasement: King Ahaz of Judah

One may occasionally need to mollify or assuage the feeling of a close friend or family member, but appeasing evil usually accomplishes nothing except further empowering the evildoer. Yet appeasement is a persistent fact of history from its beginnings until today.

Scripture tells the story of King Ahaz of Judah. An ancient signet seal has been found inscribed with the name Jehoahaz, Son of the King, very likely the seal of Ahaz as a young prince. His name is found also in Assyrian documents of the eighth century as Yauhazi Yaudaya, (Ahaz the Judean). Ahaz was one of Judah's least successful kings, who preferred to

appease rather than to rule well. An appeaser often has an innate need to appease and to abase himself before others. Ahaz "did not do what was right in the eyes of God," and went so far as to offer his son to the fire cults "in the abominations of the nations whom God had driven out from before the Children of Israel" (II Kings 16.2–3). He turned to the worship of many foreign gods. Judah, falling from its own faith, became weak and was invaded by its neighbors, Kings Rezin of Aram and Pekah ben Remaliah of Israel. They sliced off large pieces of Judah's territory and killed or captured many of her people.

Ahaz's response was as though to leap from the frying pan into the fire. In self-debasing tones, he begged Tiglath-Pileser, the rapacious and aggressive ruler of Assyria, to help him. "I am your servant and your son. Come up and save me from the power of the King of Aram and the power of the King of Israel who have risen against me." Ahaz took the gold and silver from the Temple and his own palace "and sent them to the king of Assyria as a bribe" (II Kings 16.7–8). It is noteworthy that the terms *servant* and *son* are often used by Scripture to describe the Israelites' relationship to God. It is, for example, a high praise of Moses to call him "servant of God" (Josh. 1.1). The Assyrians needed no urging but conquered Aram and slew King Rezin. Ahaz happily went to Aram to do obeisance to Tiglath-Pileser. While in Damascus, he was so impressed with its altar to Baal, that he sent the design to Jerusalem and installed an altar just like it in the Temple near God's copper altar, which now assumed secondary status. Ahaz's appeasement of the Assyrian king gained him little, for during the reigns of Ahaz's son and grandson, the Assyrians invaded Judah too, finally making it for a time a tributary state.

Isaiah 7 adds another story about Ahaz. God told the prophet to go with his little son, Shear-Yashuv, to meet the king at the Washers' Field and to tell him "Rest easy and quiet. Do not fear nor feel faint hearted from the two smoke tails, the anger of Rezin of Aram and ben Remaliahu" (Isa. 7.5). Both Aram and Israel would be destroyed. If Ahaz hesitated to believe this encouraging prophecy, then "ask a sign from the Lord your God. Ask for something of the deepest depths or high in the skies." Ahaz replied that "I will not ask, and I will not test God" (Isa. 7.11–12), as though he had no interest in God's help and perhaps that he did not believe God would or could help him.

A person who does not believe the right things often believes the wrong things. Verse 9 is difficult to interpret, but Isaiah appears to say to

Ahaz, "If you do not believe, it is because you have no faith" (Metsudot); or—because you yourself cannot be believed (Rashi). Ahaz could not trust the God of Israel but would put his faith instead in a cruel Assyrian conqueror and in replicating the altar of a conquered city. His appeasement of the Assyrians expressed his own feeling of being weak. Perhaps, too, he felt more comfortable not having to take action on his own behalf, or to look at the future threat he was raising against himself. He preferred to wallow in his own weakness and poor judgment.

Implications

The twentieth century offered new and more disastrous levels of appeasement. The notorious Munich Conference of 1938 saw Prime Ministers Neville Chamberlain of England and Edouard Daladier of France seek to appease Adolf Hitler by handing him the Sudeten region of Czechoslovakia. The triumphant dictator then went on to swallow the rest of Czechoslovakia as well and soon after to invade Poland, precipitating World War II. International politics occasionally demands alliances that are less than savory. However, a treaty should not give the store away. This Ahaz sought to do. Realpolitik did not require him to give up so much, almost the autonomy itself of Judah to the Assyrians. What pushes the appeaser? Often, he identifies with the tyrant and is a self-hater who needs to debase himself. No treaty should degrade a nation's sense of purpose or its national character.

39. Failure of National Confidence: The Spies

It is told that the composer Sergei Rachmaninoff's First Piano Concerto was initially not well received by critics, plunging the young composer into a severe loss of self-confidence. For several years, he was unable to compose. Finally, helped by a journey to Italy with the great operatic basso, Fyodor Chaliapin, Rachmaninoff was restored and produced his beloved Second Piano Concerto in C.

The Children of Israel seemed to suffer a severe loss of confidence as a result of the report of the twelve spies. Numbers 12–14 tells the story, and Moses gives another perspective in recounting the story forty years later, as recorded in Deuteronomy 1, to the new generation poised to enter the Promised Land.

The Israelites had left Egypt a few months before and had come to Kadesh Barnea, approaching the mountain of the Amorites. "See, the Lord your God has given the land before you. Go up, take possession of it as the Lord God of your fathers has spoken to you. Do not fear; do not be dismayed" (Deut. 1.21). The people then came to Moses telling him to send men to scout the land, particularly the roads they would use and the cities they would encounter. The intent was ostensibly to find military information that might help plan their invasion of Canaan. Moses knew that the battles would be won by God, but that the people too would need to act on their own behalf. Besides, to refuse to send the spies might lead the people to suspect that something was being hidden from them. Moses chose twelve men, one from each tribe. Ordinarily only one or two spies would be sent on such a mission, but Moses felt that a larger group would help support each other on their best behavior. Also, each tribe would feel that its interests were well represented and that nothing was being hidden from them.

Although human judgment of others can be imperfect, the spies were known figures, respected in their tribes. Moses instructed them as to what to look for. He knew that Canaan was a good land and that God had promised it to Abraham and his descendants, and he fully expected the spies to report in that context. Yet, as wise as Moses was, all his careful preparations could hardly have foreseen the dreadful demoralization and failure of the spies and their mission. Commentaries debate what happened next. Did the spies intend from the start to undermine God's plan? Or did something along the way misguide or traumatize them?

The twelve spies traveled the length and breath of the land. The text notes their visit to Hebron, where they saw Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the offspring of Anak, and adds the comment that Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt. They also took some large luscious grapes, pomegranates, and figs from the Valley of Eshkol, not far from Hebron. They returned safely to the Israelite encampment after forty days. Their report was shocking and was apparently designed to shock. They did not come to report to Moses first privately but "to Moses and to Aaron and to all the people" (Num. 13.26). They first showed the magnificent fruits and then said, "We came to the land to which you sent us, and it is indeed flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. *However*, the people are strong who dwell in the land, and the cities are heavily fortified, and also the offspring of the Anakites we saw there. Amalek inhabits the south-

land, and the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the mountains and the Canaanites live at the sea and near to the Jordan" (Num. 13.27–29).

The report showed graphically that the spies had no confidence that the Israelites could conquer the land. They were a people who had only recently emerged from generations of slavery and were surviving in a desert by God's protection. The miraculous Pillars of Cloud and Fire sheltered them, and the miraculous manna sustained them. They had experienced the wondrous crossing of the Red Sea and the giving of the Ten Commandments from God Himself at Mt. Sinai. Now they were called upon to invade Canaan, settle there, and begin a new life under their new law. They felt vulnerable. It seems that the spies' stop in Hebron was particularly traumatic. First, it was the burial place, Machpelah, of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their wives. The Midrash tells that one spy, Caleb, separated himself from what he saw festering among the others and went to pray at Machpelah. Second, ten of the spies appear to have been terrified at seeing the warlike descendants of Anak and were impressed too by the fortifications of Hebron, all of which they probably grossly exaggerated. Seeing the Anakites and the strong cities seems to have deeply frightened them. They forgot that God was all-powerful and would support their conquest of the land He had promised, just as He had destroyed Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea. The spies' report given to the people at large panicked them as it was designed to. Caleb kept his perspective and sought to calm the people, "We shall certainly go up and inherit it, for we are able" (Num. 13.30). The ten spies argued against him, "We can not go against the people for it is stronger than we" (Num. 13.31). Their language turned harsher to the point of overt lying. It is a land that devours its inhabitants, they said, and all its people are big and tall. The spies described their encounter with the Anakites referring to them as Nefilim and sons of Nefilim, the antediluvian giants mentioned in Genesis 6. Finally, "And we were in their eyes like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes" (Num. 13.33).

The people were overwhelmed, feeling that the spies were their brothers and in the same boat as they were and that they would not deceive them. They complained against Moses and Aaron, wishing that they themselves had died in Egypt or in the desert rather than be killed by the Canaanites and their families enslaved. They spoke of returning to Egypt. Joshua and Caleb, alone among the spies, sought to calm the panic but failed. "If God is pleased with us, He will bring us to this land and will

give us a land flowing with milk and honey" (14.10). However, the people, deep in panic, threatened to stone them. The Divine Glory then appeared above the Tabernacle, and Moses prayed to God not to destroy the people.

What had happened? In recounting the story in Deuteronomy years later, Moses added several points. "You did not want to go up" (Deut. 1.26). The people were not yet deeply committed to returning to the land where their patriarchs had lived and which God had promised them. They were accustomed to Egypt, as bad as life there had been, and they still thought of themselves as part of Egyptian life. Change was difficult, even if it would be for the better, "And you grumbled to one another in your tents and you said, 'In God's hatred of us, He brought us out of the Land of Egypt to give us into the hand of the Amorites to annihilate us'" (Deut. 1.27). The report about the Anakim had terrified them. "Yet in this matter, you had no confidence in the Lord, your God" (1.32).

The spies had a dreadfully poor self-image, comparing themselves to grasshoppers, as well as an exaggerated idea of the power of the Canaanites. Indeed, the people felt that God hated them, and they lacked faith in Him. What this amounted to was that they were angry and resentful toward God, who was leading them to do great things and did not want them to remain powerless, passive slaves whose only strength was in whimpering and self-pity.

This generation would never bring itself to trust God adequately. God now decreed that they would remain in the desert forty years until all the adults among them were gone. The younger generation, who had not inured themselves to Egyptian slavery, would go on to settle in the land.

The news of God's decree swung the pendulum far in the other direction. The people told Moses that they had sinned and would immediately go to conquer the land as God wanted. But as they had overreacted once, they were now overreacting again. Moses told them that God did not want them to go and that if they did go, they would not be successful. The people, nevertheless, tried to enter Canaan directly. They were defeated with many casualties by the Amalekites and Canaanites. Of all the men of that time, only Joshua and Caleb would live forty years to enter the land. Joshua would succeed Moses, his teacher, as leader, and Caleb would take possession of Hebron, where the trouble had developed and which he himself later conquered.

God's anger was not long term, and He still loved the people of Israel. The very next chapter in Numbers begins with God speaking to Moses, "Speak to the Children of Israel and you shall say to them, 'when you come to the land of your settlement which I give you, and you shall bring an offering . . .'" (Num. 15.2). God had not changed His intention to bring them to settle in their Promised Land, and here was some important information regarding offerings they would bring to Him then.

Implications

The ten spies at first exaggerated the strength of the Canaanites and minimized their own. Then the Israelites decided to go off and conquer Canaan immediately, even against God's command. Overestimating and underestimating can be two sides of the same coin, for in both cases here the people did not follow instructions. The ten spies may have lacked a deep authentic sense of self. They were not sure about being what they were, and they did not really want to be anything else. They fled from their calling but did not want to lose it either. When the prophet Jonah would later flee his God-given mission, God would work with him, but the Israelites at this point in the desert were hard to work with. When the spies returned, God knew that they were not ready to go straightaway into Canaan, so He planned to keep them for forty years in the Sinai until they were ready. However, they did not want this either and tried to go straight to Canaan, with sad results. It is important to know when one is or is not ready to move ahead.

40. Moses's Defining Speech

There were moments in the Bible which demanded definition and strengthening of the sense of being of the Israelites. The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses's last instructions to his people as he neared the end of his life, and as they were poised to cross the River Jordan into Canaan, the land God had promised them. Large parts of the book teach the people matters involving division of the new land, setting up of leaders and courts, moral and ethical practices, and religious observances. However, Moses also knew how important it was that an accurate record be left of his people's historical experience, and that they should know well and deeply their historical mission. Much of this is outlined in Deuteronomy 32, in the form of a poetic lecture.

The Bible describes Moses as "heavy of mouth and heavy of speech," probably a stutterer, and certainly not a riveting orator. (The ancient Israelites indeed never prized oratory and sophistry, as the Greeks and others did.) Yet Moses was devoted to teaching and caring for his people. He had led them through many great events and challenges for over forty years, and in this moment between past and future, he defined their task, their goals, their identity, and their relationship with God. He began by calling heaven and earth to witness the truth of what he was about to say, as the history plays out not only by earthly cause and effect but by the interaction of heavenly and earthly.

> Listen heavens, and I shall speak
> Let the earth hear the words of my mouth. (32.1)

Moses explained the importance of the Israelites' history and the need for each person to be constantly aware of it. That knowledge would serve as an important link that holds the generations together and maintains their connection with their origins and their future, and between generations.

> Remember the days of old
> Understand the years of each generation
> Ask your father, and he will tell you
> Your elders and they will say to you. (32.7)

Seek insight into the process of God's history

> When the Most High gave nations
> their heritages. When He separated the sons of man
> The portion of God is His people. (32.8–9)

Let each nation strive to develop its unique character and abilities. Israel developed its way of life away from its land and brought it to the land. The people determine the meaning of the land. They are not subject to the land.

> Jacob is the portion of His inheritance. (32.9)

The people shall center their lives around the relationship with God and not in building "civilization" or its arts or its fame and glory. The Israelites grew as a nation separated in the desert where people are alone with God.

> God alone guided them. (32.12)

Moses explains the long-term patterns of world history. He refers to God repeatedly as *tsur*, rock, emphasizing God's steadiness and reliability in a world history which can seem without purpose or pattern. Deuteronomy 32.4–5 refers to God as *tsur*, and faithful and righteous, never unfair. Destruction is His children's fault, not His. People do not understand this and are ungrateful. Let the people look back at history from its beginnings and at its process through the generations. Understand what both God and they have done, for God has centered all history around the people of Israel. He found them in the desert, encompassed them, gave them wisdom, and guarded (*yitzranhu*, a word similar to *tsur*) them like the apple of His eye (32.10).

God Himself guided them (32.12). He led them on the earth's highest places and sustained them with great care. But it is part of the pattern of history that as Israel (*Yeshurun*) prospered, they also rebelled and spurned the *tsur* who sustained them (32.15). They at times lost track of God's plan for history and drifted away from His love. The people are called *nabal*, meaning more or less the opposite of *tsur*—unreliable, ungrateful, unwise. They fell into the worship of false demons and gods, whom they had not even known earlier (32.18–20). God was disgusted and hid Himself from them. They were a generation that reversed itself and showed no steadiness of purpose. Forgetting their historical purposes, the people would become subject to all sorts of destructive attacks, whether from nature or from enemies, for this too is part of God's plan. Yet He would not let them be destroyed, lest their enemies think that they themselves, not God, had brought this to pass.

God knows all this and will wait only for the suitable moment to take up the cause of His people and to bring them comfort (32.36). He will ask them where the gods are whom they foolishly trusted. Yet "now see that it is I, I am He and no other. God is with me. I will slay and give life. I have crushed and I will heal" (32.38–39). In due time, God will settle accounts with the nations (38.41–42). He will fully restore the place of His people. It is essential to their continuing to live in the new land across the Jordan. Contrast the bliss of a godly world to a demon-haunted world. Faith supports a person or a nation through the dark moments. If a person would close his eyes to life and light, he would sink into a darkness in which he would be painfully conscious of his unhappiness.

The people proved fickle, sometimes forgetting God even while still in the wilderness. Then "I will hide my face from them; I will make them

jealous with a non-nation" (32.20). Israel will need to be scattered among the nations in order to realize how futile is the search for meaning and happiness without God.

> But see that it is I. I am He and no god is with me. (32.39)

To Moses, historical facts are important and must be remembered accurately. However, most important is to be aware that God has a plan for history. God is the rock, reliable, strong, faithful, eternal, loving. He has a special relationship with this people who came from great ancestors but who can also be fickle and shortsighted. It is essential for them to maintain a steady awareness of their past and of the importance of their role in history's continuing and of their relationship with God. Times will come when this awareness slips and they fall away from the pattern God planned for them. Yet in the end, He will reconcile His people to His land.

God brought the Israelites into a land that was already developed. Their challenge would be not primarily to conquer nature but to develop the life of faith. What the land is to some peoples, God is to Israel, and Israel brings its own life into the land, and their mission is to develop themselves as Israel. Their security will be based not on power but on God. Belief in one God raises one above all real or imaginary fears. A person or nation close to God can proceed even through darkness and death in undisturbed calm (Hirsch).

The lesson of history is that people must learn the futility of seeking happiness away from God. History itself will punish those who reject God's purpose in history. Israel will face much antagonism from those who cannot tolerate that Israelites are devoted to God, but the Israelites must never relent in their devotion to God's purpose for history (Ramban).

Implications

Here are the visions of two men, Moses and Abraham Lincoln (expressed in his Gettysburg Address), who could rise above the pressures of the present, seeing both past and future but yet without losing focus on what needed to be done and said at that moment. Each understood the meaning of his nation's mission and the need to move forward. Each could articulate that vision in language poetic and striking, yet simple. Each did so in

climactic moments of his nation's history—Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg and Moses near the River Jordan.

There are moments in a person's life when he must define himself and look more closely into who he is and where he is going. Nations too can face such moments of self-definition and renewal of purpose. It is a great benefit when in such a moment a wise person presents this insight to his nation. In his Gettysburg speech, of only 272 words, Abraham Lincoln began by reminding his listeners of the promise of the United States' birth and of "our fathers," dedicated to liberty and equality. He gave recognition to the importance of the Battle of Gettysburg and those who there had given their lives. Lincoln then turned toward the future. It is not only the site that must be dedicated. More, the living must dedicate themselves to the unfinished work. The nation can then proceed, under God, on its historic mission and to a new birth of freedom so that the government "of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth." With these few words, President Lincoln eloquently called upon the American people to remember and to rededicate themselves to their historic mission. The president's eloquence and brevity have left a profound impact on the history and soul of the American people.

41. Loyalty, Keeping One's Word, and the Gibeonite Treaty

A local auto repair shop has been in business for over sixty years. The owner likes to repeat his father's dictum from years ago of taking care of old customers first. It can be easy for a politician too to forget old loyalties in the face of what may seem more glowing prospects elsewhere. The Israelites of Joshua's time were faced with a difficult choice. They had agreed to a treaty with a Canaanite people who had lied to them. Should the Israelites keep their end of a bad bargain? In this case, they kept their word in a way that was both honorable beyond necessity and ultimately beneficial to themselves as well. There are times when a course of action should be followed even when there is no legal or moral necessity and no significant profit.

Joshua led the people of Israel across the Jordan River, which God had miraculously split for them. They destroyed Jericho in a spectacular divine intervention, and afterward Ai with a clever stratagem. As the kings of Canaan gathered their forces to fight the Israelites, the Hivites of Gibeon took counsel. Cowed by the news of the miraculous fall of Jericho

and the destruction by stratagem of Ai, they decided to make peace by trickery with the invaders. They sent delegates wearing worn clothes and shoes and carrying old food, claiming to come from far away to seek a treaty with Israel. The Israelites were suspicious that Gibeonites actually lived nearby, so the messengers turned to Joshua alone, claiming that their people had heard of the miracles that the God of the Israelites had performed in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and in defeating the powerful Amorites who lived across the Jordan. They did not mention Jericho or Ai. They showed their worn clothes and food to indicate how far they had traveled from their homeland, never actually identifying what land it was.

The Israelites agreed to the treaty only to learn several days later that their earlier suspicions had been correct, that the city of Gibeon was nearby and that the people were Hivites, one of the seven Canaanite nations. The Talmud tells that God had commanded the Israelites to conquer the land and its peoples. Before entering the land, Joshua had offered them three choices: (1) They could fight. (2) They could leave Canaan. (3) They could stay on in a tributary status. The Gibeonites could have offered peace to the Israelites and accepted the tributary status without the subterfuge, but the stories of Jericho and Ai had frightened them, and they felt it necessary to be secretive. When Joshua asked them who they were, they did not answer, saying only that they came from far away and that they had been impressed by the power of God. They pretended to know nothing of the crossing of the Jordan or of Jericho and Ai, because they were far away. Joshua probably remained somewhat suspicious, making the treaty only for sparing their lives and nothing more.

Several days later, the Israelites learned of the deception and were angry. Clearly an agreement entered into on false pretenses had no force, and they wanted to destroy Gibeon. Legally and morally, the people were right. However, the Israelite leaders dissuaded them. To break a treaty was a serious matter, even a treaty based on deception, for it might appear that a nation claiming to live by God's law did not keep its word. The Gibeonites had behaved foolishly, gaining by deception what they could have gained frankly and openly. Joshua referred to them as accursed. Yet the Gibeonites did seem willing to accept monotheism and the Noahide Law, and they had acted in fear of annihilation.

Not only did the Israelites uphold the treaty, but they soon had occasion to come to the aid of Gibeon. A large Canaanite army attacked the

city to punish it for its "collusion" with the Israelite invaders. Joshua brought his forces to the defense of Gibeon and destroyed the Canaanites in a major battle in which God miraculously prolonged the daylight so that the Israelites could complete the pursuit of the fugitives, "and the sun stood in the midst of the heaven and did not hasten to set the whole day" (Josh. 10.13).

Abravanel points out that some Israelites argued that the Gibeonites had waited late to make their move, or were perhaps reluctant to agree to give up their idolatry. When the Israelites were initially suspicious of the Gibeonites, the latter turned to Joshua, flattering him, "We are your slaves" (Josh. 9.8). Therefore the Israelites were not really bound by the treaty. Nevertheless, the Gibeonites had done no harm to the Israelites, and it would be more suitable to treat them with kindness than with anger.

The Gibeonites did not convert to the Israelite faith, but they remained attached to it and served as workers ("hewers of wood and drawers of water") in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple of Jerusalem. They went into exile with the Judeans to Babylonia in 587 BCE, and many returned some decades later with Ezra to serve in the Second Temple.

Implications

One may purchase a car assured that it is in good condition and then find that the transmission is failing. Surely, this would be reckoned a false sale, and the buyer would get his money back. The Gibeonites tricked the Israelites into signing a treaty with them. Why then did the Israelites adhere to the treaty? There are times in national affairs when it is wiser to overlook certain flaws. The Gibeonites were frightened after hearing of the conquest of Jericho, and they were desperate to avoid the same fate for themselves. They could have achieved peace with the Israelites without the deception, but in their great fear they did deceive. Still, the Israelites lost nothing by continuing the treaty, and there was one less Canaanite nation for them to fight. The Gibeonites had not tried to wantonly attack the Israelites, as the Amalekites had. Nor did they seek to degrade Israelite morality as had the Midianites. The Israelites maintained the treaty, which formed the basis of a long and rather successful relationship.

42: Joshua at Jericho: The Battle Is in His Hands

Historian Victor Davis Hansen's book *The Soul of Battle* discusses in parallel the military careers of three highly successful generals, Epaminondas of fourth-century Thebes, William Tecumseh Sherman, and George Patton. The consistent theme Hansen finds is that success and victory are closely involved with the army's morale and sense of purpose and also that an army needs to keep its enemy on the defensive, though usually by strategic moves rather than direct frontal assault.

Biblical accounts of the wars of the ancient Israelites strongly emphasize the spiritual element of war. Soldiers who were fearful were urged to go home. Deuteronomy tells that a priest would announce that any soldier who had recently contracted a new marriage or built a new house or planted a vineyard should go home. This was aimed at allowing, in effect, an honorable discharge to the men who were unsure and fearful. The miraculous capture of Jericho provided a model for all the rest of the Israelites' conquest of Canaan.

Shortly after the passing of Moses, Joshua led the Israelites across the River Jordan into the land that God had promised them. An angel with a drawn sword in his hand appeared to Joshua and told him that he had come as the general of God's heavenly host and that Joshua was standing on holy ground and should remove his shoes. This was by way of informing Joshua that the coming war of conquest was primarily a spiritual war. The removal of the shoes would symbolize the shunning of dependence on the physical, for the conquest of Jericho would be clearly miraculous, and also that the conquest of the new land would be entirely in God's hand.

The Israelites camped before Jericho, although apparently they did not surround it. For six days the soldiers, accompanied by the Ark of the Covenant and by seven priests carrying seven rams' horns, walked in complete silence around the circumference of the city. On the seventh day, they circumambulated Jericho seven times. Then both priests and people blew on the horns to signal both the battle and the victory. Commentators have seen the use of the number seven as possibly indicating the power of God displayed in the seven days of creation. Miraculously, "the walls came tumbling down," and the Israelites easily overran the city. Joshua had strictly warned that no booty should be taken. First, this victory was won totally by divine word. Also, the conquest of Jericho was

to be dedicated to God, something like firstfruits or tithes. The Israelites would thus recognize their first conquest as dedicated to God, who had helped them. Joshua commanded too that the city should never be rebuilt, but that the site should be left untouched as an everlasting monument of God's spectacular intervention on Israel's behalf.

Archaeologists have sought more tangible explanations for the conquest of Jericho. Perhaps the walls fell by some seismic catastrophe, for example, an earthquake. Or the Israelites would not settle on that spot because it was seen as unhealthy. A parasite that lived in snails was found in nearby water supplies and it can cause schistosomiasis (symptoms include depression and low fertility); this might have weakened the population. In fact, there is little evidence to support these speculations, and one can best read the Biblical account of the conquest of Jericho on its own merits.

Implications

The collapse of Jericho's walls was a spectacular miracle which helped set the tone for Israel's conquest of Canaan. One effect of the miracle was that it expressed God's love and, in a sense, His validation of His people.

Many people cannot accept being loved, though love is in a sense the greatest miracle. The Israelites had reached a stage where they were ready to handle a miracle and love. One must feel worthy of being loved. These Israelites were no longer the spies of forty years earlier, who said that they felt they were like grasshoppers compared to the Canaanites. Clearly, David did not feel like a grasshopper when he faced the giant Goliath. Forty years earlier, the nation was not ready for Jericho. Now they were. A nation must learn to accept good things, even in matters seemingly beyond their power. Jericho was God's gift to His people. They could accept it gratefully.

In the Biblical God, one can trust. When Zeus gave his people a gift, for example, Pandora, people had better beware. Even the fall of Troy was accomplished by trickery, the Greeks besieging the city seeming to flee and leaving a gigantic "gift horse," which the inhabitants of Troy took within their city walls. Subsequently, Greek warriors emerged out of the horse, razed Troy, and slaughtered its populace.

III

The Uniqueness of the Hebrew Bible

CONCLUSION

What may we conclude from all this? Most simply, that the Hebrew Bible reflects a view of society and politics that differs markedly from the view emerging among their neighbors, even from societies as advanced as Greece and Rome. Something in the Biblical approach contained a sense of purpose and meaning that extended to the political realm, and had the capacity then and now to reinvigorate a person's relation to the world around him. This does not mean that Biblical kings were always just and that people were always enthralled with them. This was most definitely not the case, and the Bible does not hesitate to present examples where even the greatest leaders were found wanting, like King Saul, King David at times, and Solomon after him, let alone many lesser kings. And many times the people themselves lacked courage and vision. The story of the Twelve Spies provides ample evidence of this (Num. 12–14).

Yet there seems to be something about the Biblical view of society and of the human beings that make up that society that shines through all the travails. This spirit informs a positive view of political life. Let us approach this by a contrast. Ancient Greeks focused on creating artistic beauty—on forming the perfect statue, the perfect body, the perfect building (the Parthenon came close), the perfect society, the perfect government. Pygmalion, in the myth, unable to find the perfect woman to love, made and embraced a statue of one. Plato, disillusioned by the polis in which he lived, dreamed of the perfect utopian city of his *Republic*.

For the Bible, art, health, beauty, culture, wealth, and politics are certainly desirable but not merely for their own sakes. Their true value is

to enable people to better serve God and thereby to experience His world most fully. "The *polis* was the civilizing force for the Greeks as the Law was for the Jews," wrote historian Finley Hooper in his book *Greek Realities* (1967). The daily give and take of classical Athens in its *ecclesia* (assembly) and *agora* (marketplace) was of the essence and ideal of polis living. In fifth-century Athens, all citizens were members of the ecclesia, and direct participation in government by all citizens was admired. The soul of Biblical Israel was its unique God-centered mission and its participation in fulfilling God's teaching. The family too was significant in providing a crucible for healthy personal development.

While in the Greek polis politics was the stuff of life, in Israel, life was the Torah, and politics was a mere activity and a means to other ends. Indeed it seems that in some ways the Greek philosophical concern with the good life was totally disconnected from, if not in opposition to, the mythological stories. Not so for Israel, where there was always an intimate relationship between literature (*aggadah*) and law (*halacha*). In this sense, the Jewish conception of law and politics seemed to emerge from an eternal, dynamic Torah and actual life experiences rather than abstract pronouncements.

Let us turn to the Romans. Like the Jews, the Romans valued law. And some scholars have argued the seeming similarities between the Hebrew Pentateuch, the XII Tables of Rome, and the much earlier Babylonian Hammurabi Code. However, Professor Boaz Cohen in his two-volume study, *Jewish and Roman Law*, points to the differences between Jewish and Roman law. "The Romans were the only people of antiquity who disentangled completely their civil law from all their religious precepts in historical times" (1966, 19).

Cohen suggests that this approach stemmed from the Roman theory about the origin of their law (29). Romans believed that divine inspiration was confined to ritual prescriptions, knows as *fas*, whereas the changeable rules regulating socioeconomic interaction between individuals, termed *lex*, were regarded as human institutions. The Jews, in contrast, entertained no such distinction. Ritual laws and sociopolitical laws regulating interaction between people both were seen as given by God to the Israelites at Sinai. Again, we point to the intricate connection in Judaism between *aggadah* and *halacha.*

Cohen makes a second distinction (65). "Ethics" is derived from the Greek *ethos* just as its synonym "morals" is traced from the Latin *mores.*

Both these terms seem to denote no more than a ratification of "what is," in terms of custom, habit, manners, and disposition. Law also seems to derive from custom and thus has much in common with this notion of morals as mores rather than as any force for improvement of the world. The Biblical sense of law is different. It derives not from custom or mores but instead is perceived as reflecting God's love for the human beings He has created. Law then serves to shape man into something better and to improve the world, rather than simply to ratify custom on the one hand or to control man on the other. Cohen points out that there is no distinct term for ethics in the Pentateuch and the Talmud because the goals of law and ethics (and indeed politics) coalesce. Is it too far-fetched to say that they denote a statement of "what can be"? Yet "what can be" does not degenerate into the "what must be" endemic of totalitarian, and often utopian, ideologies.

The distinction between the world beginning in *chaos* versus *tohu vovohu* of Genesis 1.2 emerges again in the above analysis. Is the function of law and politics to control and stifle the human beings and push them into what they *must* be, or is it to help shape them to fulfill what they *can* be? Again, this is the difference between utopian political schemes which try to force the human into a single shape as opposed to a more humane approach which recognizes each person as unique. The first approach is exemplified in the previously mentioned Greek legend of Procrustes. Procrustes had a house beside a road where he offered hospitality to travelers. He would put the traveler in a bed and then either smash the person's legs to lengthen him or lop off his extremities to shorten him so that he would fit the bed perfectly (*Apollodorus* 3:16.4; Plutarch, *Lives*, Theseus; Graves, *The Greek Myths: 1*, 96k). The Biblical approach is exemplified in the statement that the human being (both man and woman) is uniquely created in God's own image (Gen. 1.27).

Perhaps this is the light that shines through the Biblical narratives on political life: that each person is worth something. Remember the profound lines in the American Declaration of Independence discussed previously.

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Although some object to mention of the Creator in this pronouncement as subjugating the human being, it actually does the opposite. It frees the human being from the dictates of tyrants and places his rights not in the hands of a particular government which, as history has taught us, can become quite controlling. Rather, the rights of a human being are given and guaranteed by the Creator, who transcends all governments. This is heady stuff indeed and perhaps represents the very essence of a Biblical approach to political life. Governments are not the ultimate political organ, but God Himself, and governments exist at His will. Thus, the human being does not need to accept a corrupt government nor does he need to expect or demand from governments what no government is able to do.

A case in point in this respect is an April 13, 2013, editorial promotion on cable TV station MSNBC by political scientist and weekend anchor Dr. Melissa Harris-Perry. She argues that America must grow beyond the idea that children belong to their parents, but rather they belong to whole communities. This editorial takes a giant step toward Plato's Republic where children will not know who their parents are and parents will not know who their children are (Plato, *The Republic*, 459–461, 464). Plato goes on to say that mating among the inferior class will occur as seldom as possible, and as much as possible, children from these unions will be secretly disposed of.

The Biblical world does certainly reject the infant exposure and the *patria potestas* of the classical world, and it most definitely does *not* view the child as belonging to the state. In contrast to both these positions, the Hebrew Scriptures view a child as a gift from God in the sense that it protects the child from *both* parental *and* societal exploitation and mistreatment and provides the child with a constructive purpose for living. A paradigmatic Biblical story in this regard is that of Hannah bringing her son Samuel, for whose birth she had prayed ("I have asked him of the Lord," I Sam. 1.20), to Eli at Shiloh upon his weaning to serve in the sanctuary ("Therefore I also have lent him to the Lord," I Sam. 1.28).

To be fair, Dr. Harris-Perry insists she has been misinterpreted and even suggests that the misinterpretation is purposeful. Nevertheless, her statement lends itself to misinterpretation, if it is that, and one must worry whether it represents simply a rehashing of Plato's attack on the nuclear family. This, wittingly or unwittingly, lends itself to an attack on the rights, freedom, and even the life meaning of individual persons common to many totalitarian systems.

In summary, we have suggested in this book that the Biblical view is unique in three important aspects in comparison to a view emerging from ancient Greece and Rome: (1) an encouragement of differentiation and individuality rather than an insistence on uniformity and conformity; (2) a focus on human, organic morality versus abstract equilibrium; and (3) a sense of hope versus fear regarding the future.

First, the Biblical view encourages individual growth rather than demanding uniformity and conformity. This is because a belief in a Creator creates a bond which keeps society together, allowing divisions among elements. Indeed the Book of Genesis can serve as a political primer allowing differentiations: day from night; earth from water from sky; mammals from birds from fish; man from woman; the six days of the week from the Sabbath. The Platonic view elevates *being* over *becoming* in the sense of preferring the abstract Idea of something rather than the actual, singular thing in itself. We have contrasted a Biblical view with a Greco-Roman view in seven narratives describing the social order and seven more describing government and leadership

Second, the Biblical view of society and politics is based on an organic sense of morality rather than on a fixation with an abstract philosophical equilibrium. Justice involves punishing a crime and even allowing redemption, not just squaring an accountant's ledger. This Biblical view of addressing a wrong is contrasted with a Greek view of removing a pollutant. The Biblical view is contrasted with a Greco-Roman view also in seven narratives describing domestic relationships, and seven more describing societal relations.

Third, a Biblical sense of faith in the future is contrasted with a sense of fear of the future. We stress the Biblical concern with preserving and fostering the continuity of a family and of a society. This is true even when such continuity is occasioned by an action which ordinarily would not be condoned, such as incest. This is contrasted with a fear of being surpassed or abandoned by a future generation. This contrast appears in our seven narratives involving morale and mission, and seven more involving foreign policy.

We have presented forty-two stories which can be applied by political practitioners and laymen alike to better understand people's discontent with modern politics. This book draws upon ancient wisdom to suggest how modern political life can be reinvigorated. We certainly need inspiration.

APPENDIX A

Chronology for the Biblical Era

The following chart includes the dates on the Western calendar and in parentheses the Jewish calendar, which begins with creation as the year 1. The two systems of dating are very much in disagreement.

DATE (BCE) / BIBLICAL FIGURE OR WORLD EVENT

2800 Nimrod, Tower of Babel. Great Pyramid.
1800 (1948–2123) Abraham. Hammurabi rules Babylonia.
1600 (2108–2255) Jacob. Kassite conquest of Mesopotamia.
1500 (2216) Joseph. Mycenae leading Greek city.
1270 (2448) Moses, exodus from Egypt. Trojan War in Asia Minor.
1270–1230 (2448–2488) Israelites in Sinai wilderness. Jethro Rameses II rules Egypt.
1230 (2488) Israelites under Joshua enter Canaan. Sea peoples destroy Hittite Empire.
1200–1070 (2694–2830) Era of Judges: Gideon, 2694; Jotham, 2734; Jephta, 2779. Dorians conquer Greece.
1070–1030 Eli (2830); Hophni, Phinehas, Samuel (2870).
1030–1020 (2881) Saul rules Israel.
1020–980 (2892–2932) David rules Israel; establishes Jerusalem as capital.

980–940 (2935–2975) King Solomon builds the Temple.
940 (2975) Kingdom divides in two: Pharaoh Sheshonk raids Judah; Rehoboam rules Judah; Jeroboam rules Israel.
830 (3075) Prophet Elijah; Ahab rules Israel. Phoenicians found Carthage.
790–738 (3115–3167) King Uzziahu of Judah. Homer writes *Iliad*; Hesiod writes *Theogony*; Rome founded, 753 (traditional date).
725–715 (3183–3199) King Ahaz of Judah.
715–690 (3199–3228) King Hezekiah in Judah. Sennacherib rules Assyrian Empire.
641–609 (3285–3316) King Josiah of Judah. Draco sets law code for Athens.
586 (3339) Jerusalem destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Solon reforms Athenian law.
586 (3340) Gedaliah governor of Judah. Rome ruled by Etruscans.
620–580 (3330) Jeremiah prophesies.
539 (3360) Cyrus conquers Babylon; founds Persian Empire.
450 (3399) Esther queen in Persia. Golden age of Athens; Cincinnatus; Coriolanus.
450–433 (3399–3416) Nehemiah builds up Persian province of Judah.

APPENDIX B

Glossary

Aaron—Brother and close associate of Moses.

Adrianople—The Romans lost a major battle to the Goths in 378 at Adrianople. It was the first defeat on Roman soil in many centuries and marked an important point in the decline of the Roman Empire.

Assyrians—Powerful and warlike Middle Eastern empire of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. Its capital city was Nineveh.

Babylonians—Successors to the Assyrian Empire. Their emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, conquered and destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple in 587 BCE.

Babylonian Talmud—The magnum opus of Jewish law and lore published ca. 425 CE.

Chaldeans—See Babylonians.

Cicero—Well-known Roman statesman and orator, 106–43 BCE. Prolific writer of philosophical essays and personal letters.

Geshur—Small kingdom near ancient Israel. Its location is uncertain, possibly in upper Transjordan or near the Philistine lands to the south.

Hiram of Tyre—King of important Phoenician trade city, tenth century BCE. Closely associated with Kings David and Solomon.

Holy Roman Empire—Centered in Germany, it was viewed as a medieval Christian successor to the ancient Roman Empire. Its

founding is associated with Charlemagne, and it remained in existence until Napoleon Bonaparte conquered central Europe.

Josephus—Jewish general and historian of the first century CE.

Levite—Member of the Israelite tribe of Levi whose special task was service in the Tabernacle and later the Jerusalem Temple.

Marius, Gaius—Roman general and political leader, ca. 155–86 BCE. Fought in brutal civil war against Sulla.

Megiddo—Ancient city in northern Israel. In the prophetic literature, Megiddo will be the site of history's final battle, Armageddon.

Midrash—A genre of literary works interpreting the books of the Hebrew Bible. Written in the late Roman and early medieval periods.

Mishna—An important digest of Jewish law composed by Rabbi Judah the Prince and his associates about 200 CE.

Mishna Torah—A compendium of Jewish law written by Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides) in the late twelfth century.

Mycenaean era—ca. 1600–1200 BCE. Period of Achaean domination of Greece during which the most important town was Mycenae. Famed as the period of the Trojan War.

Pentateuch—The so-called five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

Philistines—Warlike people who inhabited the coastal area around Gaza, Gath, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron. The giant Goliath was a Philistine warrior. They fought the Israelites often until King David decisively defeated them.

Polis—Greek term for city. The polis had a special meaning for the ancient Greeks far beyond our usual concept of a city today.

Rabbi—A term used in ancient times to mean a scholar and teacher of the Bible and Talmud.

Rabbinic responsa—A genre of literature consisting of the responses of learned rabbinic scholars to questions on Jewish law and thought.

Ramban—Moses ben Nachman (Nachmanides), 1194–1270 CE. Leading Spanish rabbi and scholar. Author of an important commentary on the Pentateuch and of an account of his "disputation" with churchmen.

Rashi—Rabbinic scholar in Troyes, 1035–1104 CE. Probably the greatest of medieval commentators on both the Hebrew Bible and Talmud.

Sulla, Lucius Cornelius—138–78 BCE. Roman general and leading rival of Marius during the civil wars. Later dictator of Rome.

Synagogue—A house of worship for Jews. The earliest known synagogues were in Egypt in the third century BCE, although the institution may be much earlier. Archaeologists have found many synagogues from the Roman period both in Israel and in the diaspora.

Tabernacle—(Hebrew, *mishkan*) portable center of worship constructed by the Israelites during their forty years in the Sinai and used until its destruction by the Philistines several hundred years later. The Jerusalem Temple succeeded it.

Tanhuma—Or Midrash Tanhuma. An important midrashic work of the late Roman times.

Temple of Jerusalem—Center of Israelite worship. The first Temple was built by King Solomon ca. 970 BCE and was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian emperor in 587 BCE. The Second Temple was built ca. 520 BCE and was destroyed by Titus and the Romans in 70 CE.

Torah—(1) a general term for all Jewish religious teaching, (2) the Pentateuch, (3) the scroll of the Pentateuch, (4) the Old Testament or written law, (5) the oral law, of which the Talmud is the central work.

Triumvirate—The first Triumvirate, Crassus, Pompey, and Caesar, dominated Rome around the year 60 BCE. The second Triumvirate, Octavian, Marc Antony, and Lepidus, ruled the Roman Empire after the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE.

Tyre—A major Phoenician city and trade center.

Yohanan ben Zaccai—A leading rabbi of the late first century CE. Escaped the Roman siege of Jerusalem and founded the important learning center at Yavneh.

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