

BOOK REVIEW

In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible

by MICHAEL WALZER

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012)

Reviewed by
Francis Nataf

Canadian political philosopher James Tully once attributed the greatness of both Quentin Skinner and Michel Foucault to their disregard of academic conventions. It was precisely by overcoming the boundaries between academic disciplines and seeking out their own manifestly interdisciplinary approaches that they generated important cross-fertilization in the fields that they touched.¹

The same can be said about Jewish scholarship. When comparative literature scholar Robert Alter began writing on Bible, many students of Torah felt blessed his efforts.² Accordingly, Alter's works have found their way onto the bookshelves of many more liberal Orthodox homes. Likewise, when political theorist Michael Walzer published *Exodus and Revolution* in the early 1980's, there was also much the Torah community could gain.

Like Alter, Walzer provided a sympathetic Jewish – if not Orthodox – cross-disciplinary reading of the Biblical text. But unlike Alter, and to our detriment, Walzer's study of the Exodus narrative as a source and paradigm for many of the revolutionary movements throughout Western history did not receive much attention in our circles.

In *Exodus and Revolution*, Walzer showed his talents as a reader, offering novel and sensitive interpretations. To give just one example, he noted the details in Moshe's life that made him the opposite of everything we read about Pharaoh.³ Unlike many outsiders to the Orthodox world, he also showed willingness to mine rabbinic exegesis: take, for example, his brilliant explication of what the rabbis meant when they interpreted the "free" food the Jews received in Egypt as being free of obligation.⁴

¹ James Tully, "The Pen is Mightier than the Sword," in James Tully and Quentin Skinner, *Meaning and Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 16.

² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), was Alter's first major foray into the field.

³ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 126.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 52–3.

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Those like myself who so enjoyed *Exodus* have had to wait a long time for an encore. During the three intervening decades, Walzer continued to contribute to Jewish thought as a primary editor of the Hartman Center's *Jewish Political Tradition* series. Aside from that, it is only the present book, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* that serves as a kind of sequel.⁵ It is a concise – slightly over two hundred pages – and readable set of essays on fundamental political topics as reflected in the Bible. Starting with issues that relate to the early books, such as covenants, law codes, and the monarchy, and continuing to topics found mostly in the later books such as exile and messianism, the book generally follows the order of the Hebrew Bible. In all the essays, Walzer reads as a political theorist and asks, “What can we learn from this book?” (p. ix). A running undercurrent – which also gives the book its title – is that not much can be learned due to the giant shadow that God casts over everything in the Bible. In spite of that, Walzer is able to discover many things worthy of our attention.

In God's Shadow is a more complicated work than *Exodus*, perhaps more profound and certainly more nuanced. No doubt, the change in tone and approach bears witness to decades of personal and scholarly involvement with Jewish texts. Nonetheless, it is a case where more knowledge doesn't necessarily make for a better work.

To be fair, Walzer does differentiate between the two, explaining that *Exodus* was more about how the Bible had been understood, whereas *In God's Shadow* was written trying to understand the Bible as it understands itself (p. xi). Still, one finds both mediated and unmediated understandings in both works. A more striking difference is to whom Walzer turns when he does seek a mediated understanding. In the first book, the rabbis and their traditional successors find pride of place. Nechama Leibowitz, for example, is cited on several occasions. In the new book, she is replaced by less traditional writers such as Moshe Weinfield and Israel Knohl.

On the one hand, Walzer recognizes that reading the Bible through the prism of multiple authorship (i.e., the documentary hypothesis) is not the way its authors, or at least its editors, wanted it to be read. On the other hand, Walzer feels that “we can't deny that the composition shows

⁵ Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). Further references to this book will be indicated directly in the text.

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its stitches and we can't avoid recognizing the different pieces" (p. xv).⁶ Thus, Walzer attempts a compromise, acknowledging the conclusions of contemporary academic study of the Bible while still trying to accept it as a work unified by a final editor or editors (p. xvi).

But the most serious problem in the book – and perhaps the most fundamental reason for its unevenness – is not directly related to the question of authorship. It is, rather, that Walzer overextends himself, trying to say something about every major section of the Bible. Some sections of the Bible have more obvious political content, and on those Walzer is truly insightful. Other sections have much less to do with politics, and trying to read them in a political light is a questionable exercise.

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The first chapter on the tension between the two types of Jewish covenants is particularly true to the Biblical text and yet rarely treated in much depth by traditional commentators. Walzer points out that the birth model of communal membership created with Avraham (whereby participants are born into the covenant) is never totally eclipsed by the adherence model established at Sinai (whereby membership is contingent on some level of mutual consent). He then shows how this results in a recurring tension around the issues of intermarriage and conversion and that the powerful message of the book of Ruth does not make it the final word. Here Walzer avoids the less nuanced treatment of others who are only able to see the proto-liberal elements of the Jewish political tradition⁷ and downplay the continued importance of decidedly non-liberal elements.

Walzer's treatment of the more overtly political monarchy is also expectedly perceptive. He points out that the emergence of the classical prophets was necessitated by the establishment of an ultimately secular monarchy (p. 67). As a whole, the Biblical narratives certainly indicate that once a professional head of state comes forward, a certain level of competition arises between the demands of the state he personifies and the demands of God that supersede them. Though Walzer does not

⁶ See Sam Fleischacker's review in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, August, 25, 2012, for an interesting and coherent response to this claim.

⁷ See, for example, Daniel Elazar, *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1985) and Joshua Berman, *Created Equal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

mention it, this is dramatically illustrated by Saul, Israel's very first king. As opposed to the judges,⁸ each time he errs, it is neither God nor one of His angels who comes to rebuke him. Rather, the Divine voice is mediated by the prophet Samuel. This reaches even more tragic proportions after Samuel dies. Finding no other avenue, Saul feels the need to conjure Samuel back from the dead in order to know what God wants from him (I Sam 28:3–25). To one extent or another, this externalization of religious criticism would typify all subsequent kings of Israel. In the words of Walzer, “henceforth, God’s interests are represented by the prophet” (p. 67).

Walzer goes deeper here than the more commonplace discussions of whether or not the Bible approves of monarchy.⁹ Yet Walzer does weigh in on this as well, viewing the Bible as ultimately ambivalent. In the process, he makes a thought-provoking – though not necessarily convincing – argument that when there is much disagreement about a topic within Jewish tradition, it is a sign that the Bible did not care enough about it to give a clear verdict (p. 204).

A third area of insight is Walzer’s discussion of the anti-hierarchical motif in many Biblical texts, narrowing Korach’s mistake in proclaiming that all Jews are holy (*Num* 16:3) to one of timing rather than substance. He accordingly identifies several messianic prophecies (for example, Jer 31) as heralding a “realization at last of Korah’s premature vision” (p. 180). Since Korah’s claims are rarely mined for their revolutionary political content, Walzer contributes much in exploring this side of the equation.

And then there are sections of the book that are less successful. Take, for example, his treatment of competing law codes in the Torah as representing different group interests. (It is not necessary to note that traditional readers will take issue with the higher Biblical criticism from which these observations arise, since there are even more overarching problems here.) His main point is to show that the art of argumentation and productive

⁸ That the judges had such an inner voice comes through in the life of Israel’s model Judge, Gideon, who is in frequent conversation with God and/or His angels. Deborah too is described by the text as a prophetess (*Jud* 4:4) and Joshua and Samuel are also in direct communication with God. Although we don’t know much about the many minor judges between Joshua and Samuel, we do not read about a need for any of them to be rebuked by *prophets*, as would later be the case with the kings.

⁹ For an example of one of the better such discussions, see Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 140–60.

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disagreement has deep Biblical roots. Perhaps. But there are already other more obvious sources for this, such as the several challenges with which Moses is confronted in Numbers.¹⁰ Be that as it may, Walzer's discussion offers no profound new insights on the topic. At best, we are told that there is a certain democratic tendency that comes from the admissibility of conflicting Jewish texts. But anyone at all familiar with Talmudic texts will have already known this long before coming across this discussion.

Coincidentally or not, the less successful sections are usually also the ones in which Walzer dips most heavily into academic Biblical criticism. But not only is he less successful when he dissects the Bible into documents and academic theories, he is also less careful. For example, Walzer believes that there are two competing messianic visions; a monarchic one which looks forward to the restoration of the House of David, and a theocratic one which does not. Yet it is surprising that Walzer can hold such a view when he himself admits that his Biblical editors saw so little discrepancy between these two "positions" as to place them in adjacent verses (p. 174).

Likewise, his treatment of what is known as the Bible's wisdom literature seems to contain too much conjecture and not enough evidence. A case in point is his claim of prophetic opposition to the tone and themes of the wisdom writers (p. 150). Circumspect is the one thing the prophets were not – if they were truly opposed to these writings, one would certainly expect it to have been more glaring.

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Walzer is both an expert in the Western political tradition and an astute reader of the Bible from a Jewish perspective. This allows him to make instructive connections between Biblical stories and the political conceptions that underlie them, as well as to ask some important questions. For example, he inquires about the distinction between the activism of subversive prophets on domestic policy and their quiescence regarding foreign policy. Granted, the domestic policies criticized were considered immoral by the Torah, whereas the Torah has little to say about the international realm. But this only begs the question: Why does the Torah not give more guidance about how the Jewish commonwealth should relate to other countries?

¹⁰ See Chapter 6 of my *Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Numbers* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2014).

Yet the straddling of Western and Jewish tradition is apparently also the source of discomfort which ultimately brings Walzer to disappointment with the Bible. Indeed, he bemoans the fact that the prophets and not the politicians were in charge of the Bible's composition (p. 198). This is because, for Walzer, God's shadow doesn't allow much room for the "political questions" important to him. But could it not be that the Bible has a different vision regarding what the true political questions actually are? Could it not be that God's shadow doesn't obliterate politics as much as it transforms it?

Moreover, Walzer discounts even the more universal political questions that actually *are* taken up by the Bible. He is troubled that though the story of David is clearly political, "none of the Biblical writers ever comment on it or try to draw [any] conclusions from it" (p. 186). These Biblical "omissions" are what lead Walzer to ultimately conclude that the Bible "has no political teaching" (p. 204).

This is a bit surprising, as if Walzer expects the Bible to speak in the same way as Locke, Hegel and Rousseau, whose political treatises he compares to the Bible (p. ix). One would have expected him to confront more fully, say, Yoram Hazony's recent assertion that the Bible has a different *method* of expressing itself about many of the same questions that concerned the philosophers.¹¹ In fact, Walzer's own cogent textual analyses here and in *Exodus* show that he actually *does* understand that the Bible doesn't communicate by straightforward argumentation. One is then left to wonder why he nonetheless reaches conclusions that seem to ignore this.

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Literary theorist Stanley Fish is known for powerfully arguing that which is patently true — that a *text* (like the Hebrew Bible, for example) necessarily comes with a *context*.¹² This context develops within an interpretive

¹¹ See Chapter 3 of *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*. Although Hazony makes several overstated arguments, this should not eclipse the significance of his point. See also Chapter 1 of Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953), which already in the middle of the last century discussed the different mode of expression that separates the Hebrew Bible from Western writings.

¹² See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Indeed, Nechama Leibowitz was predictably fascinated by his work; see Yael Unterman, *Nehama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2009), 470.

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community, which spells out the basic assumptions, ground rules, and accepted “facts” about the text. Context is not frozen, but neither can it be changed at will. And if one does not succeed in working within the context, an interpretive work will necessarily fail. This is because trying to interpret a text *across* traditions is a near absurdity. This is also the argument Alasdair MacIntyre makes in his classic *After Virtue*, that two people cannot even argue if they do not first agree on the definition of the terms (e.g., virtue).¹³

At the end of the day, *In God's Shadow* may show the limits of reading the Bible from a liberal perspective. After all, Walzer is a generous thinker, willing to admit the legitimacy of foreign traditions that defy – and even despise – Liberalism. Yet this itself comes from a moral pragmatism grounded in a secular brand of Liberalism.¹⁴ From such an angle, it is no wonder that the uncompromising call of the prophets appears unproductive. In other words, it is Walzer's very conception of politics that *rejects* the religious idealism that holds that “large-scale transformations and reversals are possible.”¹⁵

Not coincidentally, Walzer believes that it is the Biblical kings who make religious and political compromises – as opposed to the prophets who criticize them – who are taking the correct course of action (pp. 68, 96, 108). And while Walzer cites a precedent in the *Derashot* of Rabbenu Nissim of Gerondi, he also admits that Rabbenu Nissim is *not* saying that the kings were correct when they ignored the prophets' admonitions (p. 70). He is aware that this would be stepping out of the Jewish interpretive tradition, at least as understood at that time. The question is whether it can be said within that tradition today. While attempting to resolve such a major issue is beyond the scope of this article, *In God's Shadow's* success hangs largely upon it.

In his introduction to *The Jewish Political Tradition*, Walzer deals with this issue head on and draws very wide parameters for what can be included within Jewish tradition today. He makes his personal interest obvious by stating that “[*The Jewish Political Tradition*] project [is] an effort to deny that tradition ‘belongs’ exclusively to Orthodox Jews or

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

¹⁴ Though Walzer is clearly not Machiavellian, he does follow a secular reading of the Bible that he ascribes to Machiavelli (see pp. 59–60 in *Exodus*); one that is subsequently taken up by Hobbes, Spinoza, and others.

¹⁵ A phrase Walzer uses as an argument (and rejects) for the greater incorporation of religion into politics, in *Thinking Politically* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 154.

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even to religious Jews.”¹⁶ Accordingly, he tells us that the tradition’s critics – like Spinoza, for example – should be included, so long as they make use of the referential system of texts and ideas historically understood to be at its core.¹⁷ Yet this is far from obvious. Is mere reference to a canon enough to place one’s writing within a tradition? For that matter, when Spinoza refers back to the Bible, is it the Bible as it was read by Jews or the Bible as it was read by Christians?

Walzer is correct that the Orthodox community cannot claim a monopoly on tradition. Moreover, even a writer who stands outside of a tradition can approach that tradition’s works on its own terms without affirming its tenets more generally. In fact, Walzer himself does just that in *Exodus*. In the present book, however, the same cannot be said so unequivocally.

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In spite of its weaknesses, *In God’s Shadow* remains a great book by one of the most important political theorists of our day. Not only does it keep me wanting to read more of Walzer’s “Torah” (and his non-Torah), it also prompts me to welcome other intelligent and sensitive readers to contribute to the conversation as well. Some of his arguments might miss the mark, but we will nevertheless be the richer for the work. For this and many other reasons, I heartily subscribe to Walzer’s introductory remark that “we are all readers of the Bible if we want to be” (p. xvii).

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¹⁶ Ibid., 309.

¹⁷ *The Jewish Political Tradition*, Volume I (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), xxiii.