

Forming America: The Hebrew Bible and the Language of Liberty

The Hebrew Bible is an anthology that has been used in many ways for both personal and social guidance. It is a document of beauty and a source of exalted language. For the Founding Fathers of the United States of America, the Hebrew Bible was also a source of their underlying ideas and foundational beliefs. The founders believed in the God of the Hebrew Bible and used many of the great book's lessons and principles to model and mold a radically new form of government.

Specifically, the Founding Fathers drew from the Hebrew Bible political and cultural values: universal morality, justice, equality, liberty, free will and conscience—all essential to a just and lasting government. The founders were also united in the belief that *the practice* of religion encourages the morals and values, found in the Hebrew Bible, that were central to the creation of America.

The anthology that we call the Hebrew Bible is a very complex document. After the creation story, it becomes a family saga that develops into the history of the Israelite people, recounting their political leaders and structures, both those that were successful and those that failed. The Founding Fathers drew heavily upon these political lessons. Biblical stories and principles provided insight and guidance to the founders, as well as a framework of moral values. The major founding documents of the United States, the philosophy they embody, and their views on governance, can be traced to the Hebrew Bible.

It is of no importance if you believe that Moses received the laws from God or not, or if you believe that the Bible was divinely inspired, or if

you are an atheist, or whether or not you believe that the biblical stories, such as Adam and Eve, ever happened. What does matter is that the Hebrew Bible left an indelible imprint on American life—at our republic's beginning and over the past 200-plus years of our history. What the founders created has continued to the present day. What matters most is the wisdom drawn from this great Book. It is wisdom rooted in the idea that we are all created by the God of Israel who endowed us with natural and unalienable rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." How great this 3,000-year-old Hebrew Bible is.

Oscar S. Straus, the first Jew to be appointed to an American president's cabinet, was Secretary of Commerce and Labor under Theodore Roosevelt (1906-1909). Straus' book, *The Origin of the Republican Form of Government in the United States*, describes how the biblical Hebrew Commonwealth, its laws and teachings, were used as a model in creating the American republic. Calling the Hebrew Commonwealth the "first federal republic," Straus argued that it was precisely the early American settlers reading of the Hebrew Bible that pointed them toward creating our American democracy.

Beginning with the Pilgrims and continuing through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, America's roots are planted deeply in the Hebrew Bible. The Pilgrims saw America as their "Promised Land." The New World was their New Canaan. The Puritans in 1629 saw themselves as establishing a "New Israel." In fact, the earliest legislation of the colonies was based on the Hebrew Bible. At the First Assembly of New Haven in 1639, John Davenport declared the primacy of the Bible as the legal and moral foundation of the colony. "Scriptures do hold forth a perfect rule," he said.

Over half of the statutes in the New Haven Code of 1655 contained citations to the Hebrew Bible while only three percent referred to the New Testament. The Plymouth Colony and the Massachusetts Assembly followed suit, basing their law codes on the Mosaic Law.

In fact, the early settlers and founders regarded America as a "Second Israel," in Abraham Lincoln's words, the "Almost Chosen" People. This self-identification was so deep that Thomas Jefferson wanted the seal of the United States to depict the Israelite's exodus from Egypt at the splitting of the sea. Just as the Israelites left the bondage of Egypt for freedom, Americans left the shackles of Europe for freedom. Early American moral values emanated from the Bible, and they regarded liberty as possible only if understood as given by God. This is why the Liberty Bell's inscription is from the Hebrew Bible, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" (Leviticus 25:10) and why Thomas Jefferson wrote, "God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?" The Declaration of Independence asserts, "We are endowed *by our Creator* with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In both the Hebrew Bible and in America's founding documents, God is the source of liberty. If the state were the ultimate source of human liberty, then the state could take our liberties away. Because the Creator of the world is the source of our existential freedom and the rightful liberties that follow, no state, no human being, no government can legitimately do away with them. The founders acknowledged God as the guarantor of our fundamental human rights and the author of liberty.

The Founding Fathers had varying religious beliefs, but most did not believe in the divinity of Jesus, or the virginity of Mary, or the trinity. They

did believe in the God of the Hebrew Bible. They believed that He was Creator and Judge of all things. Benjamin Franklin wrote down in his creed that, "There is one God, who made all things. That He governs the world by his providence. That He ought to be worshiped by adoration, prayer, and thanksgiving...that the most acceptable service of God is doing good to man. That the soul is immortal. And that God will certainly reward virtue and punish vice, either here or hereafter." Significantly, the founders believed that the Hebrew Bible assisted them in building a successful republican form of government, one which provided for the greatest freedom for its citizens. As John Adams wrote, "The Bible is the best book in the world, it contains more philosophy than all the libraries I have seen."

The Hebrew Bible's sacred history provides important ideas on morality, society, governance, and guidance for personal living. In teaching that all of humanity descended from one Adam and one Eve, the Bible proclaimed that all are free, equal, and brothers. The founders agreed that the God of the Hebrew Bible, the God of Creation, gave us our inalienable rights. He provided for the Founding Fathers perhaps the most important principle in this country's origins: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."

The Hebrew Bible expresses its ideas about freedom and liberty most markedly when Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt and slavery. The metaphors of bondage and oppression, exodus, liberation, and nationhood served the American revolutionaries in their fight against the British. For African-American slaves and abolitionists, the Book of Exodus demonstrated that slavery was against God's will and gave slaves hope of deliverance from their own bondage.

Samuel Langdon, President of Harvard (1774-1780) called the biblical government a "perfect republic." That is, the Hebrew Bible provided the perfect model for creating America: "The commonwealth of ancient Israel, from the days of the Exodus from Egypt until the anointing of Saul as first king of Israel, was a unique social and political system...America was profoundly influenced by this ancient Israelite model."

In the Hebrew Bible, no one was above the law. No human being was divine. Deuteronomy (17:18-20) established that the Hebrew king has moral rules imposed by God that he too must obey. The king should not be "lifted up above his brethren." (Deuteronomy 17:20) The biblical stories of all the Israelite kings, from Saul, David and Solomon to the rulers of the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judea, tell of disruptions in their own families and in their kingdoms. In these stories, we see the fundamental truths of the human soul, the failings of kings—and the lessons are universal. The United States was created in the shining light of the biblical Israelite nation.

The founders were able to create uniquely American political structures, to work together—and write together—compromising where necessary, because they held in common a set of principles and an education grounded in the Hebrew Bible. I do not deny the influence of the Greeks (democracy), the Romans (law), and the philosophers of the Enlightenment (the Age of Reason) on the Founding Fathers. They were well educated men and were in no way myopic in their quest for knowledge and wisdom. Yet, the Founding Fathers, in particular, Jefferson, Adams, Washington, Madison, Franklin, and Lincoln (although not a founder) were greatly influenced by the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Bible gave humanity the Ten Commandments, the greatest moral code ever devised. The Decalogue has had a greater impact on man's moral thinking than all other ethical formulations known to humanity. Ageless and sublime, these Commandments (found in Exodus 20:2-1 and Deuteronomy 5:6-18) epitomize both the essential creed of Judaism and the 'Natural Law' of all civilized men.

Dennis Prager points out in his book, *Still The Best Hope*: "the Hebrew Bible not only codified the essential moral rules for society, it announced that the Creator of the universe stands behind them, demands them and judges human's compliance with them; it gave humanity the great moral rule, 'Love your neighbor as yourself;' it taught the concept that all human beings are created equal because all human beings—of every race, ethnicity, nationality and both male and female—are created in God's image; it taught people not to trust the human heart, but to be guided by moral law even when the heart pulled in a different direction; this book launched humanity on the long road to abolishing slavery; it was Bible-believers who led the crusade against slavery; it taught that God abhors slavery; it legislated that one cannot return a slave to his owner and banned kidnapping for slaves in the Ten Commandments; stealing people, kidnapping, was the most widespread source of slavery, and 'Thou shall not steal' was first a ban on stealing humans and then on stealing property."

Because they began as seminaries with the Bible at the core of their curricula, Hebrew and Biblical studies were required at most American colleges at the time of the founding of the nation. And it was accepted by most educated men of the time that the study of the Bible and Hebrew was

necessary for a good education. One could not graduate from Harvard without knowing Hebrew up until the 1800's. At Yale, William and Mary, Rutgers, Princeton, Brown, King's College (Columbia), Johns Hopkins, Dartmouth, and the University of Pennsylvania, Hebrew was required in order to qualify for a master's degree. These colleges gave the option of delivering commencement speeches in Hebrew. Hebrew words and phrases were used on official emblems and seals. Yale's seal contains the biblical Hebrew phrase, Urim V'Tummim, a reference to the breastplate of the High Priest. Columbia's seal has the Hebrew name of God and of one of the angels. Dartmouth's seal contains the Hebrew words for "God Almighty." Along with the embrace and study of Hebrew came a better understanding of the Hebrew Bible and its values. Most of the founding fathers were educated in one of these institutions and it is safe to assume that they were, indeed, educated in the Hebrew Bible.

The American founders had an excellent model in the Hebrew Bible, though this is not commonly acknowledged today. Certainly the Hebrew Bible deserves a more prominent place in the history of this nation's founding than it has been accorded. An integral and indispensable source of both political and moral ideas, the Hebrew Bible provided the founders with a fertile venue for contemplating the language of liberty. It was—and remains—an integral part of the wealth and resources of our country.

