Natural law thinking in early modernity underwent a significant transformation: from a medieval scholastic understanding, with its teleological metaphysics, to a modern notion that empowers man and places covenant at the center of discussions of the legitimacy and scope of political authority. In the transition to the modern understanding, political theorists such as Grotius, Hobbes, Harrington, Locke, and others employed and interpreted Hebrew sources in different ways, and they were united by the Hebraic tradition serving as their reference point. This moment has been termed “political Hebraism.” And although a century later, the employment of Hebrew sources by political theorists was unheard of, the thought developed by seventeenth-century political Hebraists was by no means tangential. Indeed, the conceptions of law and politics developed then are still central to contemporary political life, and the ideas developed then resonate in political theory to this day.

The history of natural law theorizing is long, multifaceted, and complex. What follows is a discussion of the role and interpretation of Jewish sources, especially the Hebrew Bible, in some influential early modern political theory, in particular the reconstruction of natural law theorizing.

I will not attempt here to distill natural law thinking into just a small number of elements or types. Nor will I argue that there is a distinctively Jewish solution to the main problems of politics, or that any particular group of Christian Hebraists thought that there was. Nonetheless, there are some features of conceptual architecture in Jewish thought that, when
viewed through the prism of early modern Hebraism, highlight crucial issues in the transition to a recognizably modern natural law.¹

I will make the case here that political Hebraism was crucial in the move from a predominantly perfectionist conception of natural law to a national-covenant, individual-rights conception. Hebraic texts were also important resources in early modern attempts to come to grips with difficult issues concerning the relation of universal moral claims and nation-centered political particularism, or in the language of natural law theorists, between the laws of nature and the laws of nations. The ancient Hebrews served as a precedent and paradigm for a political conception of the nation.

I begin this study with the observation that the formation and governance of Israel in the Old Testament deeply engaged some major political theorists, in spite of the unanimity among Christian thinkers on the matter of Christianity’s theologically superseding Judaism. I then identify some respects in which this was so and discuss some possible ways in which political thought may have been influenced by this engagement of scholars. I will conclude with some reflections on the swift abandonment of political Hebraism in the eighteenth century.

I.

During the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, conceptions of natural law, liberty, rights, and nationhood were becoming recognizably modern, both theoretically and in practice, through ambitious reformulation. As a point of entry into these issues, we turn to the Thomistic conception of natural law as a paradigmatic example of the scholastic thinking so prominent through to the late Middle Ages. Aquinas wrote:

> [I]t is evident that all things partake in some way in the eternal law, insofar as, namely, from its being imprinted on them, they derive their respective inclinations to their proper acts and ends. Now among all others, the rational creature is subject to divine providence in a more excellent way, insofar as it itself partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. Therefore it has a share of the eternal reason, whereby it has a natural inclination

¹ There is plenty of scope for arguing over whether Jewish law can or should be properly interpreted as (including) natural law. This discussion will not enter into that issue. Its concern is the roles given by Hebraists to Jewish sources, particularly in regard to natural law and political obligation, and whether or not that use fits well with the most defensible conception of Judaism’s own view of those matters.
to its proper act and end; and this participation of the eternal law in
the rational creature is called the natural law.²

This is, we might say, a metaphysical conception of natural law. While
it is a conception of what is rational for an agent to do, it is a conception
of that because it is grounded in a teleological understanding of what it
is to be a rational substance. Natural law supplied fundamental prin-
ciples of practical reasoning, and the sound exercise of practical reasoning
is part of what is involved in the perfection, the complete realization, of
a rational agent’s nature. This is an element of an overall conception of
human sociability and the necessarily political life of human beings. And,
as Aquinas wrote: “the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is
good and what is evil, which is the function of the natural law, is nothing
else than an imprint on us of the divine light. It is therefore evident that
the natural law is nothing else than the rational creature’s participation
in the eternal law.”³ And “law denotes a kind of plan directing towards an
end.”⁴ “Synderesis is said to be the law of our intellect because it is a habit
containing the precepts of the natural law, which are the first principles of
human action.”⁵ Through knowledge and enactment of natural law, hu-
man beings actualize a crucial potentiality of their nature. This is part of
the overall project of completion and perfection through virtuous activ-
ity. In this and other strongly Aristotelian conceptions of politics, political
life is understood as natural, a requirement for the realization of human
nature and human excellence.

For early modern political theorists, political life is rational, but not
natural in quite the same (more metaphysical) sense as that of the scho-
lastics. Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, and others sought to explicate the natural
tendencies and liberties that normatively ground and guide the construc-
tion and ordering of an artifact, which is the state. They did this through
their conceptions of natural law. Governance, legally constituted and insti-
tutionally regulated, is a basic need of human beings. That is not to say that
the state and the civil condition are natural in the teleological and perfec-
tionist sense.⁶ Indeed, a fundamental intellectual motivation behind early

² Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (hereinafter S.T.), I-II, q. 91, art. 2.
³ S.T., I-II, q. 91, art. 2.
⁴ S.T., I-II, q. 93, art. 3.
⁵ S.T., I-II, q. 94, art. 1.
⁶ We should take care not to overstate the contrast with medieval thought. For ex-
ample, in his Essays on the Law of Nature Locke writes: “For that which prescribes to
every thing the form and manner and measure of working, is just what law is. Aquinas
says that all that happens in things created is the subject-matter of the eternal law, and,
following Hippocrates, ‘each thing in small and in great fulfilleth the task which destiny
modern theorizing was the view that political order is primarily a matter of providing sustainable conditions for persons to pursue their ends without those ends being explicitly subsumed by a specific conception of human perfection. Their accounts of natural law were, so to speak, “naturalized,” and aimed more directly at answering questions about the grounds for political obedience and the proper form of a law-governed civil order. This was a project of reconciling the foundation and order of the state’s being not merely conventional with the fact that the state is an artifact.

Hobbes is an especially effective example of a natural law theorist departing from a more broadly Aristotelian conception of the grounds of norms:

A LAW OF NATURE, lex naturalis, is a precept or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved. For though they that speak of this subject, used to confound jus and lex, right and law: yet they ought to be distinguished; because RIGHT, consisteth in liberty to do, or to forbear: whereas LAW, determineth and bindeth to one of them: so that law, and right, differ as much, as obligation, and liberty; which in one and the same matter are inconsistent.7

It is certainly the case that there is a teleological element to be found in Hobbes’ conception, because its central concern is the way human beings can meet their most fundamental and persistent needs and concerns. But Hobbes’ concern with self-preservation is not in the idiom of proper operation:

But whatsoever is the object of any man’s appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth good: and the object of his hate and aversion, evil; and of his contempt, vile and inconsiderable. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person who useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the person of the man, where there is no commonwealth….8

hath set down,’ that is to say nothing, no matter how great, ever deviates from the law prescribed to it. This being so, it does not seem that man alone is independent of laws while every-thing else is bound." John Locke, Essays on the Law of Nature, ed. and trans. W. von Leyden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 117.

8 Ibid., ch. 6, pp. 48–49.
And:

[I]... is not against reason that a man doth all he can to preserve his own body and limbs, both from death and pain. And that which is not against reason, men call RIGHT, or jus, or blameless liberty of using our own natural power and ability. It is therefore a right of nature: that every man preserve his own life and limbs, with all the power he hath.⁹

Hence, in the state of nature every man “has a right to every thing; even to one another’s body.”¹⁰ The first and fundamental law of nature is “to seek peace, and follow it. The second, the sum of the right of nature; which is, by all means we can, to defend ourselves.”¹¹ Actualization of an intrinsic end is displaced by the concern with attaining a certain kind of state of affairs—a state of security—and this is derived from the tendency of the state of nature to be a state of war.

Locke’s conception of natural law and of the rational motives for entering into an agreement that constitutes a political arrangement was also based upon a view of how natural liberty needs to be constrained in order to put agents and the relations between them on a secure, stable basis through the establishment of a legitimate governing authority. Locke held that reason, or in other words natural law, is “that measure God has set to the actions of men for their mutual security...”¹² That may hardly seem a departure from the scholastic view as expressed by Aquinas:

Law is nothing else than an ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by him who has the care of the community.
Reply Obj. I. The natural law is promulgated by the very fact that God instilled it into man’s mind so as to be known by him naturally.¹³

However, Lockean natural law concerns property, exchange, and punishment rather than the actualization of an intrinsic end. Locke says of natural law that it “teaches all mankind who will but consult it that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life,

¹⁰ Hobbes, Leviathan, ch. 14, p. 103.
¹¹ Ibid., p. 104.
¹³ S.T., I-II, q. 90, art. 4.
health, liberty, or possessions” and that “every man has a right to punish the offender and be executioner of the law of nature.”

And if anyone in the state of nature may punish another for any evil he has done, everyone may do so; for in the state of perfect equality, where naturally there is no superiority or jurisdiction of one over another, what any man may do in prosecution of that law, everyone must needs have a right to do.

According to the law of nature, there is a right of retributive punishment, “so much as may serve for reparation and restraint; for these two are the only reasons why one man may lawfully do harm to another, which is what we call punishment.” The early modern theorists all held that a right of retribution is crucial to justice. Without that right, or in the absence of the threat of sanction, the rule of law is precarious. Whether in the state of nature or the civil state, justice requires punishment. The threat of it deters potential wrongdoers, and the imposition of it secures desert.

In the political order the right to retribution is limited by an agreement to respect the authority of a common judge, “to decide controversies… and punish offenders.” “Whenever, therefore, any number of men are so united into one society as to quit every one his executive power of the law of nature and to resign it to the public, there and there only is a political or civil society.” Locke distinguishes the political order on the basis of each individual’s decision to quit his natural power and resign it “up into the hands of the community in all cases that exclude him not from appealing to the law established by it.”

An account with similar basic elements is found in Grotius:

His Care of maintaining Society in a manner conformable to the Light of human Understanding, is the Fountain of Right, properly so called; to which belongs the Abstaining from that which is another’s, and the Restitution of what we have of another’s, or of the Profit we have made by it, the Obligation of fulfilling Promises, the

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14 Locke, Second Treatise, sec. 6, p. 5.
15 Ibid., sec. 8, p. 7.
16 Ibid., sec. 7, p. 6.
17 Ibid., sec. 8, p. 6.
18 Ibid., sec. 87, p. 49.
19 Ibid., sec. 89, p. 50.
20 Ibid., sec. 87, pp. 48–49.
Reparation of a Damage done through our own Default, and the Merit of Punishment among Men. 21

Grotius interpreted natural law mainly in terms of preservation of social peace. This is achieved in large part by establishing an authority that can punish, something agents will agree to as a limitation on their natural right, for the sake of peace:

But civil Society being instituted for the Preservation of Peace, there immediately arises a superior Right in the State over us and ours, so far as is necessary for that End. Therefore the State has a Power to prohibit the unlimited Use of the Right towards every other Person, for maintaining publick Peace and good Order, which doubtless it does, since otherwise it cannot obtain the End proposed; for if that promiscuous Right of Resistance should be allowed, there would be no longer a State, but a Multitude without Union… 22

In early modernity, then, the conception of what is natural in natural law was rethought and configured to address the needs of an altered political and intellectual landscape. The sense in which politics was said to be natural to men changed; it was natural in that it involved an agent’s own reason, granted by nature, judging the prudential considerations relevant to entering into a political order from a given state of nature. That is part of why the notion of covenant was crucial to early modern conceptions of law and what is normatively authoritative for politics. And covenant is an apt issue through which to see the role and relevance of Hebraism.

II.

For many seventeenth-century Protestant thinkers, the paradigm and origin of law, covenant, and nation was to be found in the Hebrew Bible. They drew different lessons from the paradigm, but they shared their regard for the case of the Hebrews as significant. While participants in a covenant are understood to participate through reason, rationality itself subscribes to a “law of God,” as Hobbes put it. 23 “The word of God, is then also to be taken for the dictates of reason and equity, when the same is said in the Scriptures to be written in man’s heart; as Psalm 36:31; Jeremiah 31:33;

22 Ibid., pp. 78–79.
Deuteronomy 30:11, 14, and many other like places.” And we saw that according to Locke, reason is the “common rule and measure God has given to all mankind.” It is “[w]ant of a common judge with authority” that puts us into a state of nature.

In the final line of Judges we read that “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” This was read in some quite different ways, with interpretations ranging from the meaning that judges, rather than a monarch, ruled effectively and preserved men’s liberties, to the meaning that because there was no monarch, politics became anarchical. Harrington and Hobbes used the passage in those strongly contrasting ways, but agreed that in the political order freedom is lawful, ordered liberty. There was a culturally shared exemplar in the Israelites’ receiving the Law from God, and living in accord with it, whether being ruled by judges or in a monarchy. This was rule by laws sanctioned by God. That historical covenant is a model of leaving the state of nature, coming under the authority of legislation, and the formation of a nation all in one. It is through covenant and not mere imposition that it has effective normative authority.

The biblical model involves another feature common to a great deal of natural law theory, namely, the institutionalization of authority aimed at the interest of the parties to the covenant. Without law and a recognized enforcing authority, society tends toward disorder and insecurity. Locke argued that “avoiding the state of war... is one great reason of men’s putting themselves into society and quitting the state of nature.” Indeed, Locke’s reply to the objection that “there are no instances to be found in store of a company of men independent and equal one amongst another that met together and in this way began and set up a government” chiefly consists of a synopsis of key episodes in Judges 9–12 and I Samuel: “And thus, in Israel itself, the chief business of their judges and first kings seems to have been to be captains in war and leaders of their armies.” As a pressing order of national affairs the people organized governance aimed at security.

24 Ibid., ch. 36, p. 307.
25 Locke, Second Treatise, sec. 11, p. 8.
26 Ibid., sec. 19, p. 13.
29 Ibid., sec. 109, p. 62.
Hobbes had argued that “The end of obedience is protection,” and he opened the second part of *Leviathan*, “Of Commonwealth,” thusly:

> The final cause, end, or design of men, who naturally love liberty, and dominion over others, in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, in which we see them live in commonwealths, is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of war, which is necessarily consequent, as hath been shown (chapter 13), to the natural passions of men, when there is no visible power to keep them in awe, and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants, and observation of those laws of nature set down in the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters.

We can see, in this passage, the early modern transformation of the way in which the notion of final causes was employed. The idiom is there, but the conceptual content is now focused on the concern with security. The Noahide covenant, which required the establishment of courts and magistrates, and the Deuteronomic ordinance to “establish judges and magistrates in all your settlements,” serve as canonical sources and (putatively) historical precedents for taking steps to leave the state of nature. That was an “original position,” so to speak, for seventeenth-century political thought.

Harrington explicitly took the covenant at Sinai to be the model of law giving and of establishment of legitimate authority, both secular and ecclesiastical. Moreover, he saw in the Israelite example the basis for a republican form:

> …but if all and every one of the laws of Israel, being proposed by God, were no otherwise enacted than by covenant with the people, then that only which was resolved by the people of Israel was their law; and so the result of that commonwealth was in the people.

Like Hobbes, Harrington saw no distinction between the power of the state and ecclesiastical authority. “[I]n Israel the law ecclesiastical and civil was the same; therefore the Sanhedrim, having the power of one, had the power of both.” This is a far better arrangement than one in which

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31 Ibid., ch. 16, p. 129.
32 Deuteronomy 16:18.
34 Ibid., p. 39.
a religious authority (e.g., the papacy) denies “liberty of conscience unto princes and commonwealths” and “the magistrate, losing the power of religion, loseth the liberty of conscience which in that case hath nothing to protect it.”

“Now whether I have rightly transcribed these principles of a commonwealth out of nature, I shall appeal unto God and to the world. Unto God in the fabric of the commonwealth of Israel, and unto the world in the universal series of ancient prudence.”

Harrington appealed to both the theological significance and the historical and practical example of Israel’s becoming a nation in a certain land. As Adam Sutcliffe remarks, Harrington “recast the decline and loss of divine favor of the Jews as an essentially political narrative of the corruption of their republican institutions” rather than as a narrative showing the need for a single political sovereign:

The Jewish experience is thus firmly placed at the center not only of Harrington’s republican idealism but also of his understanding of the historical processes of change and decay. He attempts much more insistently than Hobbes to bridge the gulf between divine and human history, and to show how the sacred polity of ancient Israel can legitimately and realistically be used as a model in revolutionary seventeenth-century England.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theorists differed in their interpretations of the nature and locus of sovereignty, of the Hebrews’ insistence on a monarch, and of whether the rule of judges was indicative of well-ordered politics or an object lesson in the slide into insecurity and disorder. Still, they shared a heavy reliance upon biblical history to fashion and authorize their conceptions of law, nationhood, sovereignty, covenant, and life in the civil condition.

III.

As already indicated, different thinkers drew different lessons from the Old Testament. We find this in respect of the proper form of a commonwealth, the nature of political obligation, and the relationship between civil power and ecclesiastical power. For Hobbes, the experience of the Hebrews at Sinai was a lesson in the rightness of undivided sovereignty:

36 Ibid., p. 25.
38 Ibid.
Aaron being dead, and after him also Moses, the kingdom, as being a sacerdotal kingdom, descended by virtue of the covenant, to Aaron's son Eleazar the high-priest: and God declared him, next under himself, for sovereign, at the same time that he appointed Joshua for the General of their army.\(^{39}\)

And:

Therefore the civil and ecclesiastical power were both joined together in one and the same person, the high-priest; and ought to be so, in whosoever governeth by divine right, that is, by authority immediate from God.\(^{40}\)

After discussing the rights of the kings of Israel, Hobbes concludes, “from the first institution of God’s kingdom, to the captivity, the supremacy of religion was in the same hand with that of the civil sovereignty; and the priest’s office after the election of Saul, was not magisterial, but ministerial.”\(^{41}\)

And therefore so far forth as concerneth the Old Testament, we may conclude, that whosoever had the sovereignty of the commonwealth amongst the Jews, the same had also the supreme authority in matter of God’s external worship, and represented God’s person.\(^{42}\)

This is the case because

a law obliges not, nor is any law to any, but to them that acknowledge it to be that act of the sovereign; how could the people of Israel, that were forbidden to approach the mountain to hear what God said to Moses, be obliged to obedience to all those laws which Moses propounded to them?\(^{43}\)

In Hobbes’ view, even those laws of the Decalogue that are laws of nature, laws fully intelligible to reason, require a sovereign in order to be effective as laws. There must be an acknowledged authority that can punish violations, “[t]he MAINTENANCE of civil society depending on justice, and justice on the power of life and death, and other less rewards and punishments, residing in them that have the sovereignty of the commonwealth.”\(^{44}\)


\(^{40}\) Ibid., ch. 40, p. 347.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., ch. 40, p. 349.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., ch. 40, p. 351.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., ch. 42, p. 377.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., ch. 38, p. 325.
There are two points at issue here. The first is Hobbes’ view that the Old Testament is powerful evidence of the correctness of the view that obedience has a basis in the power of the sovereign and ultimately in God’s commandments. The second is Hobbes’ Erastianism, in support of which he made much of Moses as a civil authority propounding the Law as God’s commands backed by the power to punish. As Sutcliffe has argued, “The Israelite commonwealth thus stands as the original and perfect paradigmatic example of the Hobbesian commonwealth. As God’s ‘Lieutenant,’ Moses, under God, exercised sovereignty over the Hebrews, overseeing all matters just as Hobbes had argued in the first half of *Leviathan* that a sovereign should.”

Hobbes’ view of the importance of the power to punish is similar to Selden’s. Selden wrote: “The idea of a law carrying obligation irrespective of any punishment annexed to the violation of it… is no more comprehensible to the human mind than the idea of a father without a child.”

On this matter Hobbes wrote, “The right of nature, whereby God reigneth over men, and punisheth those that break his laws, is to be derived, not from his creating them, as if he required obedience as of gratitude for his benefits; but from his *irresistible* power.”

Also, for many Protestant thinkers it was crucial to prevent the emergence of an ecclesiastical authority that could rival or challenge civil authority. Religion was not being excluded from politics; ecclesiastical power was being brought under the authority of the state, whether the state was broadly permissive or narrowly controlling concerning religious doctrine and church powers. This was also a step away from metaphysics and in the direction of nonredemptive politics. The Law of Nature may be the law of God, but politics was distanced from the metaphysical realm, and spiritual matters were increasingly being treated as matters of either state policy or individual conscience. The example of the Hebrew nation could be (and was) treated as a model of institutionalized, comprehensive law, enforced by the state.

The giving of the Law and its function as a constitution was a paradigmatic solution of a *problem*, the problem of realizing universal principles of political order in and for separate, particular nations and national communities. Natural law could be understood to apply universally to national communities as particular nations. That was one key to why the

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45 Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, p. 50.
example of the Old Testament Hebrews could be both compelling and convenient as well as problematic.48

IV.

While Hebraism helped facilitate the development of recognizably modern politics at a crucial juncture, it was marginalized very soon after, and by the mid-eighteenth and certainly nineteenth centuries it was relegated to near oblivion. There are several reasons for this. One is the fact that biblical scholarship increasingly raised questions about the Bible's divine authorship and uniqueness. The notion that Scripture is a work of man, and can and should be studied as such, weakened if not abolished the grip of the idea that it recorded sacred history. There was also extensive and growing study of remote societies and cultures—remote in both place and time—and an increasingly naturalistic appreciation of culture. Among its other effects, this led many to regard Judaism as one premodern culture among many. Frank Manuel writes, “Ultimately, deistic Christianity, which had assimilated much of this polemical literature, dispensed entirely with the philological refinements of rabbinic exegesis and flatly denied the relevance and utility of Old Testament proof-texts.”49

Since the essence of all religions was the same as that of a purified, detheologized, and deritualized Christianity, one could be a comfortable Christian deist, believe in an underlying primitive monotheism, and dismiss the hordes of pagan gods as creations of weakness, ignorance, or power-lusting kings and priests who played on popular credulity.50

Increasingly, Judaism was viewed as having fared little better than paganism. This reversed the widely held perspective of the previous century, according to which Hebrew roots, even if outgrown, were nonetheless an ancestrally essential origin of Christian Europe's cultural self-conception. There was also an important shift in philosophical theorizing that had an impact on the standing of the Hebrew Bible as a religious, moral, and political source. Kant is a particularly good example of this. For him the

48 On the issue of the tension between scientific rationalism and bibliocentric theology in Hobbes' thought, Sutcliffe writes, “Nowhere is this fracture in Hobbes' thought more starkly highlighted than by his exceptional treatment of the Jewish covenant, which he treats as politically paradigmatic and foundational, but in its sacred uniqueness also external to the normal flow of human history.” Sutcliffe, Judaism and Enlightenment, p. 51.


50 Ibid., p. 180.
history of Israel was no longer a paradigm of values and ideals that could have universal significance; it was an exemplar of particularism—in other words, of smallness, irrelevance, and a narrowness of moral vision. The Jewish faith was, in its original form, a collection of mere statutory laws upon which was established a political organization; for whatever moral additions were then or later appended to it in no way whatever belonged to Judaism as such. Judaism is really not a religion at all but merely a union of a number of people who, since they belonged to a particular stock, formed themselves into a commonwealth under purely political laws, and not into a church; nay, it was intended to be merely an earthly state so that, were it possibly to be dismembered through adverse circumstances, there would still remain to it (as part of its very essence) the political faith in its eventual reestablishment (with the advent of the Messiah).  

Kant interpreted the essence of Christian faith to be something both holy and rational, answering to a requirement of practical reason. He explicitly rejected both the essentially historical and particularist dimensions of Judaism and any teleological metaphysics of morals. The only sacred reality is that of pure practical reason. Kant refers to a passage in Luke, “For, behold, the kingdom of God is within you,” and says of it, “Here a kingdom of God is represented not according to a particular covenant (that is, not messianic) but moral (knowable through unassisted reason).” This is a conception of agency according to which no help is given nor is any received. The only covenant is constructed by reason, where all of the resources for this too, are in human agency. The only grace is rationalistic grace.

Kant depicts a union of persons in a common moral world. We are united in it through universally binding rational principles. However, this is not an order achieved by a covenantal project of leaving a state of nature or giving up a right of nature. It is more strictly a notional order, one in which each person is already fully a participant just by virtue of being rational. Of course, reason had a fundamental role for state-of-nature theorists too. Still, there is this difference between the seventeenth-century thinkers and Kant: for the former, there is still resonance of an authority with a normative


53 Kant, *Religion within the Limits*, p. 127.
ground independent of each agent, even when it is through reason that the appeal is made. Reason does not only construct something, it answers to something. Christian Hebraists held on to the significance of the paradigmatic covenant as a historical episode, not an entirely humanly constructed ideal. That is part of what gave it normative authority. It is also what made them ambivalent about the use of Jewish sources.

Kant’s rationalistic triumphalism was one strategy by which theology could be removed from morality except for the commitment to Christianity as the religion of reason. In the work of eighteenth-century British moralists as well as thinkers (such as Butler and Reid), historical elements of theism and Scripture largely ceased to figure. Much of the load was to be carried by the presupposition of Christianity as the religion of reason and by key features of a common human sensibility, without much distinctively Christian theology built in. Moral principles were not explicated as constructions of pure practical reason, but neither was the history reported in Scripture ascribed any role. It was no longer a paradigmatic precedent.

Wedged in between late medieval theorizing and Enlightenment theorizing there was a rich period of Christian political Hebraism. It might seem a short-lived and peculiar episode. It was indeed short-lived, but it was not merely tangential. The way in which it was wedged into the history of political thought gave it enormous leverage with issues that are still with us. Politics involves normative considerations that are highly general, though political life is lived in the context of the particularities of national life. That is not an issue only for Jews. Hebraism realistically took into account both the universal and the particularist features of political life and the friction at their interface. In their project of reformulating natural law, political Hebraists saw this issue and its enormous significance. They also saw that normatively sound political order is both necessary for human beings to live well, and fragile and less than fully redemptive. It is necessary but vulnerable. The ways in which it is may be some of the deepest wisdom from the Jewish sources, wisdom neither irrelevant nor anachronistic.