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“Might” and “Right” in the Biblical Narrative

Abstract: The confrontation between “might” and “right” is one of the basic themes of the Bible. Indeed, the imperative of commitment to right and the belief in its vindication may be regarded as a major contribution of the Israelite civilization to the Western creed. An exploration of this theme in some biblical stories where it is not obvious—such as that of Joseph and the tale of the exodus from Egypt—will make this apparent. This major theme is further highlighted in other narratives where the issue is explicitly articulated. Yet the belief in the vindication of right is challenged in the Bible itself, as well as in post-biblical literature, in the face of Israelite/Jewish and universal human experience. An indirect response to such a challenge is implied in eschatological prophecy and in messianic beliefs, which envisage a perfect world of peace and justice.

I.

It has been customary to present the perennial issue of the conflict between “might” and “right” as having been introduced by Sophocles in his drama Antigone. There are some good reasons for this choice. The extant literature of Greek antiquity is limited and, although increasingly neglected, still enjoys largely deserved esteem among the few cognoscenti. Drama is particularly suitable for presenting fundamental issues in a sharp and clear manner, which indeed we often describe as “dramatic.” The confrontation between Creon, the authoritarian king of Thebes, the wielder of power, who claims the superiority of might, and Antigone, the powerless woman but steadfast believer in the superiority of right, evolves into a matter of life and death. The collision between these two strong-willed individuals, each sticking to his or her principles, leads to a tragedy that encompasses both sides of the dispute. While it leaves most readers with empathy for Antigone and censure for Creon, the resolution of the conflict is not necessarily obvious: Creon’s argument claiming
the state’s authority to determine the law, lest any individual attempt to decide what is right, cannot be easily dismissed.

Thus, the play can be read as a prologue to a Socratic dialogue and to a philosophical resolution of the conflict between two opposite opinions. Indeed, the drama remains an introduction to the exploration of the dilemma in any time, and thus relevant to date, for the dilemma has endured for centuries and millennia. Because the drama offers no decisive answer as to who determines the right but merely stresses the morally problematic nature of political authority, of might, it remains relevant.

Antigone berates the laws of the king, because they were ordained not by Zeus or by Justice (Dike), but by a mortal. In contrast, “the immutable unwritten laws (nomoi agraphoi) of Heaven” are eternal and sanctioned by higher authority. Yet, there is no clear suggestion in the play as to the nature of these eternal laws. Their substance is vague, and the reader is not informed why they should be binding. There is only an implied assumption that they are right.

The biblical narrative, on the other hand, does offer answers to this question. Instances of iniquity and the responses they elicit—or by which they ought to be confronted—are specified and elaborated. Cases as well as major guiding principles are introduced and commented upon. The subject may not be exhausted, but enough is said to offer the reader fairly clear indications of what is just and what is iniquitous, what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is wicked.

Indeed, this statement may be seen as rather obvious. Ahad Ha’am, in his famous essay on “Moses,” interprets this biblical figure as the expression of the national ideal of the Israelite people and civilization. This ideal, as he puts it, is not a military commander or a statesman or even a legislator, but a prophet, and Moses is the prototype of prophecy. The essence of this vocation is the prophet’s commitment to what is right, absolutely right. Thus the prophet becomes an uncompromising fighter for righteousness, for tsedek.

Yet what is self-evident to some may be questionable to others—notably as the critical reading of the biblical text and attempts at historical

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3 Ahad Ha’am uses the Hebrew word tsedek, which is often translated as “justice.” The English usage of “justice” is, however, often related to legal procedures, whereas the Hebrew tsedek focuses on what is morally right.
reconstruction of the narrative have considerably complicated the reading and interpretation of the Bible. When such developments over the last two hundred years are added to the variety of traditional ways of reading the sacred book, by Jews as well as Christians, it is often necessary to search for the simple meaning of the text underlying the occasionally controversial interpretation.

Indeed, the saturation of the Bible with divine commandments, laws, prophetic exhortations—all focused on the quest of right and decrying the rampage of might, a central theme of the Bible—suggests that there are biblical stories whose connection to this basic issue may have been overlooked. Focusing on these may be particularly instructive. This essay does not intend to discuss thoroughly, let alone exhaust, this major issue of the biblical narrative, which, as just mentioned, dominates major parts of the Bible and is recognized as one of the main contributions of the Israelite and Judaic civilization to the creeds and beliefs of the so-called Western world. Although we shall consider the well-known expressions of the moral creed in the Pentateuch and in the books of prophecy in a somewhat cursory manner, we shall dwell and elaborate on other biblical narratives, which deal with the origins of the Israelite people and which might be described as historical-mythical or actually historical, and point to the “might and right” struggle inherent in them.

Our interpretation may perhaps be less than obvious. Yet, if accepted, it will strengthen our assertion that the problem of the actual conflict of might and right, and not only its desirable resolution, was a substantial and prominent issue in the national consciousness from the early inception of the Israelite civilization. The selected instances will show the deep awareness of the monumental struggle of right and might, good and evil, in personal and collective conduct.

Moreover, the biblical belief in the divine commitment to righteousness and justice occasionally appears to have come under stress, in view of some disturbing evidence revealed in certain biblical texts. This, too, is a development that will be addressed, for the search for right and for the means to control might in the Israelite and subsequent Jewish civilization does not lead to a blind creed, but remains an incessant quest and even an existential commitment, which is compelled to confront reality whichever way it manifests itself.

II.

One prominent case of the confrontation of might and right is implied in the tale of the dialogue between Abraham and God occasioned by the divine resolve to destroy the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah
in Genesis 18:17–33. God’s decision to divulge his plan to Abraham is rooted in his expectation “that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him.”

Significantly, this expectation combines “great and mighty” with “blessing.” And should the meaning of being “blessed bo”—translatable as blessed “in him,” “by him,” or, probably, “by it,” i.e., “by the nation”—be ambiguous, the elucidation is provided that “they keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment” (tsedaka umishpat). The two words, meaning “justice” (or “righteousness”) and “right judgment,” are used virtually synonymously and complement each other in order to stress the significance of the issue, as is customary in biblical Hebrew. What strikes us as crucial in these verses is the combination of might (“great and mighty nation”) with right (“to do justice and right judgment”). The combination of the two elements is essential for the establishment of the good society.

The resulting dialogue between God and Abraham sheds additional light on the relationship of might and right, which is not inherent in these principles. In other words, might does not guarantee right, and right is not necessarily endowed with might. Indeed, the linking of the two qualities remains a basic issue of human conduct and human experience. Abraham assumes that in God and in divine action might and right unite. He is deeply aware that this is not true of man.

As is well known, in the ensuing verses God informs Abraham of his intention to punish the sinful cities by total destruction. Yet Abraham is concerned that there may be, say, fifty righteous people in the cities, who would perish unjustly. God accepts the argument, and Abraham gradually brings down the number of the just for whose sake God would spare the cities to ten.

If this conversation between man and God is startling in itself—man reminding God of his possible oversight of innocent suffering in the punitive action—the point is brought to a pitch when Abraham openly expresses his concern about the righteousness of the Lord: “That be far from thee to do this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked…. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Hashofet kol haarets lo yaaseh mishpat?).

Significantly, while Abraham reminds God of his duty to link might with right, he is aware of his own failure to do so—not because of a moral

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4 Genesis 18:18. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Hebrew Bible are emendations by the author of the King James version.

5 Genesis 18:19.

flaw, but due to his limited power. Indeed, when making the moral argument, he is afraid that God may punish him for his daring chutspah. In trying to lower the number of the righteous for whose sake the cities would be spared, he humbly mentions that, though he dares argue with God, he, Abraham, is but “dust and ashes,” that is to say, he can exercise no real might, he is weak and mortal; yet the awareness of his weakness does not diminish his moral ardor or ethical zeal.

III.

The problem of might and right—both as a cosmic issue and as a human problem—is, at least implicitly, posed in its gigantic dimension. It is treated differently in some other tales. One such tale focuses on Joseph, Jacob’s favorite son—a fascinating story in itself.

The preferential treatment of Joseph by his father can be interpreted as placing the former in a position of might in the large family of Jacob. By the same token, such treatment incites envy and hatred of Joseph by his brothers. Thus, it could be said that the unjust preference of Jacob may be the cause of the enmity and its dire consequences. The hostility toward Joseph is enhanced by his dreams, which are interpreted as depicting his eventual domination over his brothers and even his parents. The dreams are obviously seen as conveying the secret wishes of the dreamer, a rather modern psychological approach. At the same time, they may be also regarded as predicting the future—for Jacob, while rebuking Joseph for his dream, “kept it in mind.”

These dreams, which centered on the eventual might of Joseph, led him into serious trouble, as the brothers, with the notable exceptions of Reuben and Judah, plotted to kill him. Eventually they sold him to a caravan of Ishmaelites traveling along the commercial route from Gilead to Egypt. Jacob was shown his son’s bloody coat, deliberately smeared with goat’s blood, and concluded that an evil beast had rent Joseph. The alleged ambition for might could have cost Joseph his life—which is a sober comment on human relations. However, as is well known, this is merely the beginning of the tale.

The next phase is Joseph in Egypt, where he was sold into slavery to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. Curiously, even in this lowly position, Joseph’s apparent intelligence, management skills, and personal charm caused him to be elevated to the overseer of the household. Thus he enjoyed a privileged standing, which carried power and benefits. He

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7 Genesis 18:27.
8 Genesis 37:11.
gained a position of relative might. Further, his charm and good looks made Potiphar’s wife desire the young man. His very appearance added another facet of might.

This kind of might raised the awareness of right in Joseph’s mind. Complying with the wishes of his master’s wife would have been a betrayal of trust. In the conflict between might and right Joseph’s decision was steadfast; he refused the advances of his mistress, saying, “Behold, my master… hath committed all that he hath in my hands; There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back anything from me but thee, as thou art his wife: how can I do this great evil and sin against God?”

Significantly, here we witness an internal conflict in Joseph’s mind between two basic forces—the allure of might and the judgment of right, the attraction of power and the well-being it offered and the imperative of conscience. Joseph, the growing man, or perhaps the mature man, made a clear and conscious decision. He subjected any consideration of personal gain and power to the judgment of morality. And, indeed, he paid the penalty of being falsely accused of what he avoided doing, and was thrown into jail.

Still, his charm and intelligence, a powerful tool of might, were soon appreciated by the keeper of the prison, and Joseph was entrusted with the administration of the institution. Eventually, his skill in interpreting dreams—applied first to two prisoners, and eventually to Pharaoh—set him free and led to his elevation to the position of the administrator of Egyptian food production and supply, second only to the king in the pyramid of authority over Egypt.

Joseph’s meteoric rise to power is succinctly but convincingly described in the biblical narrative. The clever interpretation of dreams—based on their predictive nature—conveys the intelligence and perhaps inspiration of Joseph. No less important is the brilliance of the young Hebrew, who followed up his prediction of an impending famine with unsolicited advice: “Now therefore let Pharaoh look out a man discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt.” An outline of an administrative structure and a seven-year plan of food collection and storage followed, which was eagerly accepted by the king, who then pointed to Joseph, the visionary and adviser, as the most suitable executor of the plan:

And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the spirit of God is?… Thou shalt be over my

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9 Genesis 39:8–9.
10 Genesis 41:33.
house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou…. See, I have set thee over all of the land of Egypt.\(^{13}\)

Intelligence, initiative, and charm combined to hand Joseph immense might.

The administration of the food production and grain storage for the anticipated lean years, and the eventual food distribution, preceded smoothly under Joseph’s carefully designed and executed plan. At one point, when the country was on the brink of famine, Joseph used the stored grain to buy the land from the farmers and make Pharaoh the exclusive owner of the entire land of Egypt. Eventually, the peasants had to sell themselves into slavery and technically become Pharaoh’s slaves in order to survive.\(^{12}\) This enabled Joseph to settle many people in the cities\(^{13}\) and make the rest the king’s tenants, who paid one-fifth of their crop to the state’s coffers.\(^{14}\)

Was this use of might just, or did it exploit the people’s hardship in order to aggrandize the power of the king? Was the forced urbanization a prudent socioeconomic policy or an arbitrary use of power to augment Pharaoh’s might? Was the forced sale of private land an act of robbery, or was it merely a disguised form of assuring reliable taxation for the state’s legitimate needs? Did Joseph turn into a worshipper of might—be it the king’s might—or was he pursuing a wise course for the land of Egypt? Conceivably, Joseph realized the limitations of his power and stopped short of pursuing a righteous policy that could not be achieved and could well have put an end to his beneficial influence.

The biblical story refrains from comment; that is left to the judgment of the reader. What remains pertinent is the question of whether these policies were right or merely document the much later dictum that power corrupts. Thus the narrative offers a theme for the reader’s reflective and active involvement in the story.

The most famous part of the story of Joseph is his interaction with his brothers, which takes us back to the sphere of personal, rather than public, relationships. We remember that as the famine in Egypt spread to the land of Canaan, Jacob was forced to send his sons to Egypt (which had accumulated a supply of grain in its granaries) to buy food. Joseph recognized his brothers, while they saw only an Egyptian potentate.

\(^{11}\) Genesis 41:38–41.  
\(^{12}\) Genesis 47:19.  
\(^{13}\) Genesis 47:21.  
\(^{14}\) Genesis 47:24, 26.
Remembering the cruel treatment he had suffered at the hands of most of his brothers, Joseph could not resist the temptation to punish them by playing a cat-and-mouse game with them. At the same time, he was deeply moved by fraternal emotions. The urge to use his might for controlled retribution contended with his sense of charity and compassion. Eventually, the latter gained the upper hand, and he revealed his identity to his frightened brothers, making the following most generous statement, which fully entitles him to the later appellation Yosef hatsadik, “Joseph the righteous”: “Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life.”

Jacob and his sons were invited to Egypt and settled in the land of Goshen, their collective move carefully and sagaciously planned by Joseph, using his intelligence and might to do right—indeed, to reach beyond right to charity and generosity.

IV.

If Joseph remains the paragon of righteousness despite his humanly understandable use of power for teaching his brethren a lesson, other stories in the Bible—stories whose authenticity cannot be reasonably doubted—exhibit a ruthless use of might and a callous disregard of right by individuals wielding royal power. The individuals are David and Ahab, and the stories are well known.

David, the successful king of Israel and Judah, resided in comfort and basked in glory in Jerusalem, while his army besieged Rabbah, the capital of Ammon. The king caught a glimpse of a beautiful woman washing herself and lusted after her. He identified her as Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, sent his people to fetch her, and, having satisfied his lust, sent her back home. The woman conceived and sent David a message to that effect.

What did the king do? He sent a message to Joab, the commander of the Israelite forces at Rabbah, with an order to send Uriah, one of the officers, to him. Uriah arrived in Jerusalem, reported to the king, and then—instead of going home, as David expected—slept at the gate of the royal house together with the king’s men. The ploy of David to make Uriah the presumed father of the prospective infant failed. When David asked Uriah why he hadn’t gone to his house, he received a clear explanation: “The ark and Israel and Judah abide in tabernacles; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are encamped in the open fields;
shall I then go into my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife?”  

Patriotism, loyalty to the commander and to his comrades in arms, would not permit Uriah to enjoy himself while they endured hardship. The sense of what is right exerted a powerful influence on Uriah.

David was a sagacious and persistent man. He did not easily surrender his design. Thus he detained Uriah another day and invited him to eat and drink—in fact, making him drunk and hoping that wine would prove more powerful than his sense of honor. Alas, Uriah returned to sleep outdoors. The ploy failed. Right appeared stronger than the might of a resourceful and cunning king.

Although mighty and ruthless, David was not a bloodthirsty killer. He did not kill wantonly. He killed only if that step was necessary for his well-being or for the state’s benefit, and he made no distinction between king and kingdom. His decision was clear: the scandal must be avoided at any cost; Uriah must be liquidated.

David wrote a letter to Joab, instructing him to put Uriah in front of an attacking contingent, which would be exposed to missiles hurled from the walls of the beleaguered city, and then suddenly withdraw, leaving Uriah alone. The trick succeeded, although some others of the attacking fighters perished, too. With the mission accomplished and Uriah dead, Bathsheba mourned her husband, and, after the customary term, David sent for her and made her his wife, and she bore a son. Might rode roughshod over right.

Or did it? Not from the perspective of recorded history, nor from the viewpoint of the ethos of Israel, nor from the vantage point of absolute morality. For David committed two capital sins: adultery and the murder of an innocent man. In addition, himself powerful and a husband to several wives, he stole a poor man’s only consort. And the victim was an exemplary man, loyal to king and country. To crown the villainy, the murder was committed in a cunning and underhanded manner. In the words of Nathan the prophet addressed to David, “Thou hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon.”

A largely forgotten point is that other warriors uselessly perished on this occasion. The reader of the story may also fulminate about David’s cynical use of Uriah as the deliverer of his own death sentence to Joab, the king confident that the messenger would not open the letter. The ugly face of might in the service of evil has rarely been depicted so starkly.

Practically forgotten is Joab, the compliant participant in the murder of a valiant soldier. For Joab did not question, let alone challenge,

16 II Samuel 11:11.
17 II Samuel 12:9.
the clearly sinister command of the king. Joab appeared to be an obedient tool serving the royal might without considering what was right—in fact, condoning the outrage. Such blind obedience is neither condoned nor criticized by the biblical narrator. Again, it is left for the reader to ponder and judge.

The parallel case of Ahab, the king of the northern tribes of Israel some generations later, is rather less complex. It, too, involves a monarch who fancies what belongs to another man, namely the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. As it was close to the king’s palace, he wanted the piece of land for an herb garden. The king did not grab the property; he simply wanted to buy it, compensating the owner with another, better vineyard or paying its value in cash. Alas, Naboth refused the offer, for giving up the inheritance of his fathers would, in his judgment, have been contrary to the divine order.

Ahab returned to his house upset and refused to eat. When his Sidonite wife inquired about the reason for his bad mood, he explained the situation. Jezebel, who did not share the Israelite king’s respect for law and tradition and who was free of scruples in her dealings with the people, promised her royal husband that she would get Naboth’s vineyard for him. Her plan was crude and vicious, namely, to set up two false witnesses who would testify that Naboth had blasphemed God and king, which would lead to his conviction and subsequent execution. The conspiracy having been successfully accomplished, Jezebel said to Ahab, “Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give thee for money: for Naboth is not alive, for he has died.”

As Ahab came to take possession of the vineyard, Elijah confronted him and asked, “Hast thou murdered and also inherited?” Might is confronted by fulminating right, as Ahab and his consort are promised an ignominious death.

V.

While the preceding narratives exemplify the struggle between right and might primarily in the lives of individuals, such confrontation is presented in the Bible as manifested largely on the collective—social and political—level. One such case is found in the story of the relationship between the children of Israel and Egypt, as related in Exodus 1:1–15:21.

This story, essentially presented as a historical development, evolves from the happy ending of the family tale of Joseph and his brethren into

18 I Kings 21:15.
19 I Kings 21:19.
the collective emergence of tribes and the nation of the children of Israel (alias Jacob). The few have turned into many, and they all lead an idyllic existence amid the tolerant amity of Egypt and its rulers. But this happy state degenerated into a grave, endemic problem, which became in the narration of Exodus a confrontation of the innocent and the wicked, of the Israelites, implicitly assumed to have the right to peaceful existence, and the suspicious and intolerant Egyptians who were using their might to control and subdue the descendants of the once welcomed guests.

The change in the Egyptian attitude was founded on the transformation of the objective situation, namely, a significant increase in the number of the Israelites: “And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and waxed exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them.” This aroused Pharaoh’s concern that in case of a war the Israelites may join Egypt’s enemies in the fight and then leave the country.

The stance of Pharaoh is paradoxical. If he resented the presence of an ever-increasing national or ethnic minority, he should have welcomed its exodus from Egypt. Yet he wanted the Israelites to stay—evidently because they provided a useful workforce, apparently exploitable, and thus an economic asset. The ideal solution was to keep them in Egypt but control their natural increase. To achieve this objective, Pharaoh resorted to various means of population control, including the imposition of ever harder labor under the watchful supervision of Egyptian taskmasters. Because this strategy proved counterproductive, even the elimination of newborn male infants was resorted to. Clearly might was relied upon, including rational plans to solve the problem as the national majority government saw it. The alien minority was not regarded as entitled to its human rights: it was actually dehumanized and seen not merely as a threat to the ruling nation, but also as a useful herd of beasts of burden.

The king of Egypt was confronted by the oppressed minority, which at one juncture found its inspired leader, Moses. Significantly, he was presented as a man who grew up in the Egyptian circle of mighty rulers but was passionately committed to do right for his people and take them out of Egypt. He achieved his objective by a series of stratagems, described in familiar detail and culminating in the escape from Egypt, the pursuit by Pharaoh and his chariots, and the drowning of the pursuing army by the

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20 Exodus 1:7.
21 Exodus 1:10.
miraculous interference of the Lord of hosts. The ancient hymn of victory over the wicked and the delivery of the innocent concludes the story.\textsuperscript{22}

Thus, in the monumental confrontation of might (ruthless might represented by Egypt and its ruler) with right (the rightful claim of the oppressed), it was right that proved victorious. Right prevailed with divine assistance, but not without the commitment of a wise and resourceful leader, apparently at home in the corridors of power.

VI.

The escape from Egypt was a delivery from slavery and the beginning of a march to the ancestral land. This, however, was only a partial answer to the condition of the children of Israel. Another problem remained, namely, that of the people's creeds and values, the nature of its culture, its spiritual identity. The solution had to be provided by the people itself, although it was shown the way by its inspired leader.

The resolution of this problem is presented in the Bible in a dramatic way at the foot of Mount Sinai. Here, God, through the mediation of Moses, proposed an answer, and the people accepted it. The Lord's offer to the people was, “If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be unto me a priceless treasure of all the peoples… ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”\textsuperscript{23} The people's response was clear and loud, “All that the Lord hath spoken we will do.”\textsuperscript{24}

The quintessence of God's demand is contained in the Ten Commandments, outlined in Exodus 20:1–14, which offered guidance for moral conduct and right human relations. Following such an exemplary but feasible way of life would make Israel an example for other nations, thereby elevating it to “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The commitment can be subsumed as an obligation to pursue the path of righteousness and not the way of might. It was a commitment to build a civilization antithetical to that of Egypt at the time of the exodus. Yet it was not merely a historical decision. It reached beyond the vicissitudes of historical circumstances and events; it was a total commitment to adhere to right, to adhere to it with all one's might.

A design to establish an exemplary nation was put in place. It was followed by laws and injunctions concerning individual life and human relations, addressed to each and all, to family, tribe, and nation. In

\textsuperscript{22} Exodus 15:1–21.

\textsuperscript{23} Exodus 19:5–6.

\textsuperscript{24} Exodus 19:8.
substance much of it transcended the people of Israel and became a model for a just and compassionate society.

Yet the demand to be a light unto the nations may stumble on the impulse to be like other peoples. The injunction to lead may face the instinct to follow. The commitment to pursue the way of righteousness may give in to the easier conduct of following others on the well-trodden road of established practice.

Thus, the history of Israel itself may become a struggle between faith and betrayal, between virtue and vice, between right and might.

VII.

Naturally, such a struggle may focus on the role and function of government, the obvious seat of might, which by its very nature may become the source of abuse, as exemplified in the cases of David and Ahab. The abuse may be expressed not merely in sporadic excesses of power for the personal satisfaction of the monarch; it may affect or even characterize the office and proclaimed function of the ruler. This issue is reflected in the famous passage in I Samuel 8, which deals with the establishment of kingship in Israel.

As is well known, the period of the Judges witnessed merely intermittent military and political authority in Israel—the emergence of military and administrative leadership in response to national or tribal calamity at the hands of a foreign enemy. The so-called Judges were *ad hoc* responses to the recurring invasions and conquests by such enemies. The Judges were not perceived as a permanent political institution. It was God himself who, in the perception of the people, was the ruler of Israel. The laws of the Lord, apparently followed and applied by the elders of the tribe or the people, remained the supreme authority. In the words of Gideon—the Judge who delivered the nation from the hand of Midian and whom the people wanted to enthrone as a hereditary monarch—“I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you.”

Yet as the assaults on Israel (notably by the Philistines) persisted, the demand for an established and continuous military force and central authority gained widespread popular support, and the people demanded of the aging Samuel, the prophet-judge, to “make us a king to judge us like all the nations.” The narrative in I Samuel 8 reflects the qualms about the prospective change, as the question of political power and its pros and cons is highlighted.

25 Judges 8:23.

26 I Samuel 8:5.
One argument against entrusting might to a human being, and thus elevating him to a national institution, was that it amounted to relinquishing the rule of God—that is to say, the absolute right—as well as its practical implementation by the prophet-judge Samuel. In response to Samuel’s indignation, the Lord says that the people “have despised not only thee, but they have despised me from reigning over them.”27 Yet God—and consequently Samuel—accepted the people’s demand. It is tempting to conclude that the people’s will is deemed paramount in deciding the nature of the government they should have.

Still, the deficiencies of monarchy were elaborated and explained by Samuel to the people, deficiencies and dangers that result from entrusting absolute might to a mortal ruler. Some of these are not due to the abuse of power but constitute necessary means for the functioning of state and government. Thus, the appointment of men for the king’s chariots and horsemen may very well be a part of military readiness. Captains over thousands and over fifties are apparently necessary for military organization and perhaps for administration at large. Taxation is needed for maintaining the army and the administration.

Taking the daughters to be cooks and bakers, using the sons to run before the king’s chariots, taking people’s fields and vineyards and olive yards in order to give them to the king’s servants, on the other hand, may well constitute abuses of power. The arguments adduced here mix the justifiable burden and taxation with abuse of power by the king for his own enrichment and comfort. Such a mix-up may indicate that Samuel made no distinction between public need and private abuse—perhaps to indicate that kings make no such clear distinction: as Louis XIV proclaimed, L’etat c’est moi; serving the king is serving the state. Republics, however, insist on distinguishing between public and private interests—although not always successfully.

VIII.

The danger of the abuse of power by the king is counteracted by the familiar passage in Deuteronomy 17:14–20, which explicitly codifies the restrictions on and limitations of the king’s power. There, the subordination of might to right is broadly outlined and articulated with vigor. If the text falls short of being an exact constitutional document, the spirit of its injunctions cannot be put in doubt, nor its aim questioned. It is an endeavor to assure that the rule of the king accepts and submits to the

27 I Samuel 8:7. The Hebrew word maas is better translated as “despise” than as “reject,” as is the customary English version.
norms of God, that political authority bows before moral judgment, that right hovers over and controls might.

The injunctions concerning monarchy assert that the king must be a man whom “the Lord thy God shall choose;”\(^{28}\) possibly hinting at a choice by a prophet in the name of God, or at least indicating that the ultimate authority over Israel is God’s and that the king must realize he is subject to that authority. Further, the king must be “from among thy brethren… thou mayest not set a stranger over thee.”\(^{29}\) The context suggests that the expected devotion of the king to the people was likely to be assured by the national brotherly connection, which thus became elevated from mere ethnocentrism to the ethical level of brotherly love between the ruler and the ruled.

Next came the injunction to the king not to multiply horses unto himself, not to multiply wives, not to amass silver and gold. In other words, the king was cautioned not to aggrandize himself by symbols and trappings of power, by riches, by excess in any way, all of which would elevate him above his brethren and, we might say, drive a wedge between him and the people.

These specific prescriptions, exhibiting the Bible’s great awareness of the significance of the social bond between the king and the people, are followed by concern for the principle of the right relationship between the political ruler and the divine law, between the wielder of political might and the ethically right: “And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this guidance in a book…. And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all his life, so that he learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of his guidance and these laws, to practice them.”\(^{30}\) The relationship between the king’s might and the moral right is here made absolutely clear. There is no place for a Creon who determines the law, or for princps legibus solutus, a ruler not bound by law, or for the legal notion that “The king can do no wrong.” The king, like anyone else, can do wrong, and thus, like everybody else, he must be subject to the law, the absolute divine law, which is tantamount to moral law.

Indeed, the king is not even primus inter pares. Being equal to his brethren, he is merely a functionary in a closely knit society of which he

\(^{28}\) Deuteronomy 17:15.

\(^{29}\) Deuteronomy 17:15.

\(^{30}\) The Hebrew Torah, usually translated as “Law” in English and as “Lehre” in German, actually may mean both. Yet, to emphasize its original sense, “guidance” or “weisung” comes closest to its intent. I follow Martin Buber’s German translation.

\(^{31}\) Deuteronomy 17:18–19.
is a member and must, like all the rest, follow the divine commandments, the way of righteousness. In the biblical phrasing, “That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not from the commandment to the right or to the left.”\(^{32}\)

IX.

These are the spirit and the letter of the divine law, and the people and the king have their rules of conduct presented to them in both succinct commandments and elaborate laws. What is right is made clear to the prospective “kingdom of priests and holy nation.” Nonetheless, the demand and the practice do not necessarily coincide. The people and their kings, as well as priests and judges, may turn to the left and to the right and fail to pursue the path of righteousness.

The original commitment may be noble, total, and exemplary. But difficult circumstances and human weakness, temptations, and flaws—both individual and collective—may result in straying from the right way. The kingdom of priests may fail to keep its solemn commitment.

Thus, the Lord does not rely on the people’s declared obligation to keep the covenant but secures it with the promise of reward and punishment. Proper individual conduct is supported by a strict penal code—scattered through the Pentateuch—that specifies the punishment for various transgressions. On the other hand, righteous conduct carries the promise of divine goodwill and reward. The detailed warnings and assurances are summed up in a succinct and poetic manner in the first Psalm:

> Blessed is the man who walketh not in the counsel of the wicked…. But his delight is in the guidance of the Lord…. And he shall be like a tree planted on streams of water…. and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. Not so the wicked, for they are like the chaff that the wind driveth away…. For the Lord approves the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked shall perish.

The collective conduct of the people is stressed even more: the national punishment and reward was depicted profusely in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27–28 and reiterated throughout the books of the prophets. There, the national calamities, actual and impending, were presented as the consequence of the sinful and evil conduct of the mighty, the rulers, and the people at large. The occasional prophecies of consolation—notably in Deutero-Isaiah—were linked to the expiation of collective sin and genuine return to the right conduct.

\(^{32}\) Deuteronomy 17:20.
Indeed, the biblical historiographer interprets early Israelite history by resorting to the principle of divine reward and punishment of the tribes of Israel. The formula is clearly stated in the book of Judges:

And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord.... And they forsook the Lord, God of their fathers, who brought them out of Egypt, and followed other gods.... And the anger of the Lord flared up against Israel... and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about.\textsuperscript{33}

Divine compassion brought periods of salvation, but recurrence of sin resulted in repeated punishment, inflicted by God through historical calamities.

This process essentially continued through the kingdoms of Judah and Israel and is summed up at the collapse of the kingdom of Israel:

For it was that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God.... And they walked in the statutes of the heathen.... And they left all the commandments of the Lord... and served Baal. And they caused their sons and daughters to be burned by fire.... Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight.”\textsuperscript{34}

The breach of faith, the flagrant abandonment of the path of righteousness, brought down the sinning society. The monumental historical event was enacted by God. Divine might was used in the name of right.

X.

The grand theodicy, the justification of God as the enactor of right through might, came under stress as it encountered questions and doubts. Has the Lord always meted out just punishment and reward to his chosen people, and to other peoples? Has he always dealt with individuals in an equitable way? Had the Abrahamic reminder “Shall not the Judge of all earth do right judgment?” been superfluous and improper? Or, perhaps, the Almighty, under the impact of his might, occasionally forgot the imperative of right.

If a hint of doubt was already expressed by Abraham, the biblical reader’s sympathetic concern is allayed by God’s sufferance of the questioning and by the sequel of the Sodom and Gomorrah story. For by removing

\textsuperscript{33} Judges 2:11–14.

\textsuperscript{34} II Kings 17:7–18.
Lot and his family—apparently the only innocent inhabitants—from the doomed cities, the Lord shows that he is just and compassionate.

Yet the question of just punishment and reward to human beings, according to their conduct, does not vanish. Thus, Jeremiah addresses God in a straightforward manner: “Although thou art righteous, O Lord, that I might argue with thee; yet I will talk with thee of thy judgments [I will contend with thee fiercely]: Why doth the way of the wicked prosper; why do the treacherous live in peace?”  

The same query is put even more vigorously by Habakkuk. “How long, O Lord, I shall have cried, and thou wilt not hear? I shout to thee of violence and thou wilt not deliver? Why hast thou shown me calamity and lookest at misery?... For the wicked surrounds [besieges] the righteous; therefore the outcome is a twisted judgment.”  

The conclusion of Job, one of many accusations addressed to God, is even starker in blaming the Almighty for iniquity: “he destroyeth the innocent and the wicked.” In other words, God is indifferent to moral distinction and has no concern for right judgment of human beings.

Such accusations of God, the source of moral authority, undermine the foundations of biblical belief and commitment and of the Israelite conception of God as the source of morality and the guarantor of a just order in the world. They threaten the core of Judaic civilization and its message to humanity. They open a gaping abyss of despair and resignation. In brief, they are unendurable.

Yet, they cannot be censored out of the biblical narrative. The rabbinical sages, who at one time had the authority to decide what to include in the Bible and what to exclude, were aware of the potentially destructive power of some books, or of passages which threatened the integrity of the belief, and still decided to include the questionable books and fragments. Evidently, they, or the majority among them, valued the honesty of the doubters above the supposed interest of the creed. The doubters, the honest skeptics, who raised embarrassing questions and uttered heretical doubts—not out of cynical ridicule but as cri de coeur—had to be given freedom of speech. The Bible set an example for subsequent generations when the argument with God about the suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of the wicked continued—not only in respect of the individual, but also with regard to the nation. The argument became even

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35 Jeremiah 12:1. The translation of the Hebrew verse presents some difficulties. The present rendering of the text is an attempt to approximate the probable meaning, with an alternative indicated in brackets.

36 Habakkuk 1:2–4.

37 Job 9:22.
fiercer as the kingdom of priests and the holy nation was singled out for repeated persecution and suffering, even though it had turned wholeheartedly to God and his teaching.

XI.

Such a situation called for a response, if not a clear answer, which can be discerned already in the biblical narrative and expanded through post-biblical generations. The response was not directly addressed to the queries and dilemmas. It could be described as an evasive reaction.

One possible answer is the presence of prophecy of consolation beside the prophecy of doom—often attributed to the same prophet. Indeed, in the sanctification of Jeremiah as a prophet, as described by him, God says to him, “See, I have this day appointed thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down and to annihilate and to destroy, to build and to plant.”38 The prediction of the fulminating prophecy of doom is much more effusive, but the promise of redemption is added nonetheless.

The prophecies of the people’s contrition and of the Lord’s forgiveness characterize the prophets of indignation and calamity, as any student of the Bible knows. This may well take the form of national redemption, depicted by the symbolic presentation of national resurrection in Ezekiel 37. The elated feeling of national delivery from exile by Cyrus and return to Zion blends history and vision, or embellishes history with ecstasy, in Deutero-Isaiah: “Comfort ye, comfort my people, saith your God. Console Jerusalem and call unto her, that the time of her punishment hath ended, that her sin hath been expiated, that she hath received a double punishment for all her transgressions.”39

Yet the effort to respond to the concerns about iniquity and the basic flaws in the order of the universe, and to the doubts about the just management of human affairs and Israel’s condition, could not be adequately answered by outbursts of enthusiastic pictures of redemption and consolation. A more comprehensive answer was needed to take care of the deep distrust of the world conduct and the sense of grievance of the suffering children of Israel. Such an answer was attempted in the so-called eschatological prophecy.

Eschatology means the vision of “the last days,” or “the end of days,” a phrase that is rather enigmatic, for ostensibly it assumes the stoppage

38 Jeremiah 1:10.

39 Isaiah 40:1–2. The translation of these verses has been considerably revised to convey the sense of the Hebrew text.
of time. Conceivably it may indicate a very distant future. Or, perhaps, it signifies a profound change in the nature of human existence. The mystifying concept may have been deliberately chosen to emphasize a new era and to leave its nature somewhat vague, so that it would not be closely linked to the past generation or to the present, which is the continuation of the past and has no notion or image of a different future. This may have been a necessary device to project a perfect and just world, without showing how it evolved from its problematic and iniquitous antecedents. This was not an answer perceived in historical terms, for it juxtaposed an outline of a perfect future with the detailed reality of a problematic and even flawed past.

Of the variety of eschatological prophecies in the Bible, two stand out. One appears in Isaiah 2:1–5, with a slightly different version in Micah 4:1–5. (Conceivably verses 6–7 could be read as a part of the prophecy, but the following comments will not follow such an assumption.) Focusing on the Micah version, and without exploring some subtle but minor differences, the text may be quoted for the reader’s convenience:

It shall be at the end of days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be firmly set at the top of the mountains and shall be elevated above other hills, and nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say, Come and let us ascend the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob, and he will teach us his ways, and we shall walk in his paths: for the guidance shall go forth out of Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among many nations and admonish mighty peoples afar off, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: a people shall not raise a sword against another people, neither shall they learn warfare any more. And they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and there shall be nobody to menace them: for the mouth of God hath spoken. For all the nations will walk each in the name of its god; and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for evermore.

Significantly, the eschatological vision is one of universal peace and not only a peace for God’s chosen people. For it is in the nature of a monotheistic religion that it has to address mankind and not only one nation. Yet, the divine abode, as it were, remains in Jerusalem, in the midst of the people of Israel, whom God has chosen for a special task—to be a light unto the nations. This does not contradict the universality of God and the eventual moral enlightenment of mankind. Quite the contrary, it confirms the role of Israel as the kingdom of priests and a holy nation with a universal role.
The cardinal difference between the last days and the historical experience is the establishment of universal and eternal peace, the result of understanding, of disarmament, and apparently of the institution of arbitration between nations as a way of resolving disputes. For “judge between” or “judge among” indicates arbitration in biblical Hebrew. The ideas have a modern ring, yet their origin is very old.

The main benefit of a disarmed, peaceful world is depicted as a virtually pedestrian idyll: people sitting under a vine or fig tree without the threat or menace of a calamity. Yet, such a seemingly trivial matter is a foundation of the good life. Living in fear undermines the peace of mind of individuals and the well-being of communities.

Last, the vision abruptly descends from the height of eschatological perfection to present-day reality and shrinks from universal dimension to national conduct. While other nations follow their own gods, we, Israel, shall follow in the path of our God forever. For the vision of perfection does not allow the chosen people, the holy nation, to wait passively for the bliss in the last days. They have to follow the right way here and now—and forever. At some future point the persistent adherence to the right path will bring moral perfection to all and forever after. Thus, the people of Israel become the link between history and post-history and effect the transition from the vicissitudes of human flaws and failures to the days of unending bliss.

The other eschatological prophecy we had in mind appears in Isaiah 11:1–9. There are two main points in which this vision differs from, and conceivably amplifies, the narrative from Micah. One is the elevation and extension of peace from human relations to a cosmic order: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them… and the lion shall eat straw like an ox.” Unless this is perceived as a parable of the peaceful humanity, the vision presents the transformation of the natural order in which ferocious animals turn vegetarian. Implicitly this is a criticism of the world as created by God, which does not display such amity among all the living creatures. Although there is no explanation of the iniquity in the animal kingdom and of the dominance of might in nature, the vision of Isaiah depicts a future world in which this reality will change in order to accord with the principles of justice and charity.

41 Isaiah 11:6–7.
If this vision moves the future bliss a big step beyond human peace, and thus into further removed regions of the improbable, the narrative introduces another factor which makes the realization of the perfect world look more plausible to human beings—namely, presenting a human agent as the enactor of the grand change. Whereas the former prophecy simply says, “It shall be at the end of days,” without mentioning how it will happen and who will enact the great transformation, the present narrative entrusts the miraculous change to a human being, albeit a man endowed with sterling virtues and virtually miraculous powers—all due to divine inspiration: “The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and insight, the spirit of prudence and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of God.”

Although the divine spirit, with all its attributes, shall rest on the human agent, he is still human. Indeed, beside his qualities, his identity is indicated, namely, that he is a descendant of the Israelite monarchy: “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” Such a connection of the future national, international, and perhaps even cosmic salvation to the royal dynasty of Jesse, the father of David, carries significant implications. Involving a human agent in the eschatological transformation makes it more comprehensible and, as it were, more tangible. Moreover, linking it to the Israelite, and later Judaic, monarchy, connects the virtually miraculous meta-historical event with the tangible historical past. The miraculous is brought down to earth and thus made more believable.

This, of course, is an early manifestation of the messianic belief. The Messiah, in Hebrew Mashiah, originally meant the Anointed (person), and referred to the king who was anointed with oil, as a symbol of sanctification and divine endorsement. Eventually, notably after the destruction of the kingdom of Judah, and later with the tribulations inflicted by the Romans, the eradication of the anointed monarch magnified the vision of the future Anointed from a good and successful monarch to a glorious deliverer of the nation and even of humanity. The idea was borrowed and magnified by Christianity, where Christos (the Greek word for the Anointed One) became the central tenet of belief, as the scion of the house of David became the son of God.

While the messianic beliefs of the Jews did not reach such dimensions, they developed in post-biblical literature and remained a vibrant element in the Judaic religion, as well as in popular culture. This included a diversity of mystical creeds, some of them calculations of the Messiah’s

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42 Isaiah 11:2.

43 Isaiah 11:1.
arrival. It also resulted in the appearance of false Messiahs, who may have believed in their mission or simply been impostors.

The modern nationalist movement of the Jews, Zionism, has occasionally been tinged with messianism, even when it dissociated itself from religion. The rebuilding of the ancient homeland, the ingathering of exiles, the reestablishment of independence and of a sovereign state—the actual rebirth of the people in the old-new land—can be seen, and often has been viewed, as an eschatological manifestation. Fortunately, it has been spared the appearance of an outstanding charismatic individual, a Messiah, who might have become an object of adulation, which involves some political dangers.

While biblical eschatology focuses on national redemption, one encounters in Judaism a concern for individuals, who have been the victims of ruthless might. In the Pseudoepigrapha—specifically in the Fourth Book of Ezra—a resurrection of the dead is envisaged and their judgment by God. The wicked will be condemned, while the righteous will be assured eternal bliss. Such assurance of a final rule of right continued through the Talmud and later rabbinic literature, offering a consolation to the suffering righteous. It may not have convinced all, but it has been a solace to some.

XII.

Still, the question remains, Have the eschatological visions and messianic beliefs responded adequately to the ancient and persistent question about the justice and compassion of God in control of historical events and in his involvement in the lot of individuals? Is right assured to have the upper hand over might? Have the doubts, raised in the Bible and later on, been dispelled?

There can be little doubt that the apocalyptic answers will not satisfy people who have endured the horrors of the twentieth century and who may have difficulty finding solace in the emerging new millennium. Whatever the speculations, facts refuse to be swept away.

The problem may be cynically disparaged by the skeptics, who gave up the search for an answer a long time ago. It remains painful—perhaps even more painful—for the believers.

Significantly, such qualms do not destroy the commitment to Judaism as a living civilization. Even the notion of Jews as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, as teachers of and example for humanity at large, is not entirely discarded.

This does not mean that the monumental task—the eschatological vision of a perfect, peaceful, and just world—can be easily realized, or
even realized at all. Yet it must be striven for. The injunction of the Bible in Deuteronomy 16:20, addressed to judges, “Justice, justice thou wilt pursue” is extended to all the people in all walks of life. The duty is democratically expanded.

Significantly, the exhortation makes no claim that justice, or righteousness, will be attained. Yet it must be pursued with ardor and vigor. The eschatological fulfillment may be beyond the horizon, but the drive toward it must be sustained.

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