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Scripture as Political Philosophy (with Yoram Hazony)

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Yoram Hazony is the president of the Herzl Institute in Jerusalem and serves as the chairman of the Edmund Burke Foundation. He is the author of 'The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture' (<https://amzn.to/3MuRyHO>), 'God and Politics in Esther' (<https://amzn.to/41gpHQ4>), 'The Virtue of Nationalism' (<https://amzn.to/3KNKvbW>), and, more recently, 'Conservatism: A Rediscovery' (<https://amzn.to/3z11fLF>). You can find out more about Yoram on his website: <https://www.yoramhazony.org/>.

He joins me for a discussion of the Bible as a political text.

Within the conversation, I also mention Joshua Berman's 'Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought' (<https://amzn.to/3KOqkLj>), Eric Nelson's 'The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought' (<https://amzn.to/43bWN5c>), Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes's, 'The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel' (<https://amzn.to/3UqA5CE>), and Yechiel Leiter's 'John Locke's Political Philosophy and the Hebrew Bible' (<https://amzn.to/3ZOPr4M>).

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Transcript

Hello and welcome. I am joined today by Yoram Hazony, who serves as the Chairman of

the Edmund Burke Foundation, which runs the National Conservatism Conferences. He's the author of the philosophy of Hebrew Scripture, of God and Politics in Esther, the Virtue of Nationalism, and, most recently, Conservatism, a Rediscovery.

Both his works on Scripture and his works on political philosophy are important and have been widely read and discussed. Now, I've profited from reading both of them myself. And there will be links to all of his books in the show notes.

Thank you so much for joining me. It's my pleasure, Alastair. Thank you very much for having me.

So, unfortunately, within contemporary academia and within society more generally, there seems to be a great gulf fixed between Scripture and political philosophy. So, the close communication and interaction between the scriptural and the political philosophical aspects of your work, I imagine, is somewhat less appreciated or explored than they ought to be. And I would love to hear about the ways in which your interest in both of these areas first originated and how they have been intertwined in the development of your thought.

I've been thinking about these things ever since graduate school. I did my doctorate in political theory at Rutgers University in the late 80s and early 90s. And I had not really studied much political philosophy as an undergraduate.

I did other things as an undergraduate. And when I began taking the initial survey courses of the political philosophy curriculum, which were pretty much the same then as they are now, they begin with Plato and Aristotle and then go through Cicero and then make a brief pit stop with Augustine and Aquinas before reaching what is supposed to be the really interesting stuff with Machiavelli and the Enlightenment thinkers. That story, the astonishing thing about that story for me when I first started reading all of these books seriously, was the disconnect between what I knew as a Jew who knew something about the Bible and the history of biblical reception, both among Jews and among Christians, the gap between that and what was being taught in the curriculum.

And I want to emphasize that nobody was doing this on purpose. This curriculum is standard. It's a standard curriculum that's taught virtually everywhere.

And it's taught almost the same without respect to whether the teaching it are themselves personally liberals or ultra conservatives, religious or not, Jews or Christians. It kind of is a standard curriculum. And one of its most dramatic aspects, at least for me, is the fact that the Bible is absent from it.

And this was troubling because, you know, in the first place, because when you read these thinkers, I mean, going all the way up even to if you know the Bible, then you very easily spot where they're reacting to the Bible, and often in a positive way. And yet the

courses are taught as entirely as though the Bible is not part of the discourse. The students don't learn the Bible, and then they're not told that the history is wrapped up in biblical political ideas.

So that was a long time ago. And since then, I've learned quite a bit about both about the Bible and the Jewish tradition. But I've also invested together with friends and colleagues over decades in better learning the Western tradition, and especially the Anglo-American branch, which is in some respects, you might say the most biblically aware branch of Western political ideas is the Anglo-American tradition.

And yet that tradition also is taught almost entirely as though there's no biblical or Christian or Jewish influence. So it seems to me that if you're going to be arguing for the importance of the scripture as a political text, there's almost two lines to that argument. You're arguing first that the scriptures can, should, and have been read as political texts historically.

And also that the scriptures, a second part would be that the scriptures have been an integral part of the political philosophical tradition. And if you go back and you read Hobbes, or if you read Locke, or if you're reading even further back, you can see the ways that they are interacting with and conversing with the scripture and that it forms an integral part of their conversational ecosystem as it were. My impression is that your work is part of a growing movement, one that you've very much spearheaded with various organizations as well, to address both of these fronts of the argument.

So I'm thinking, for instance, on the side of reading scripture, something like Joshua Berman's work, *Created Equal*, how the Bible broke with ancient political thought, or maybe Halbert Hall and Holmes on the beginning of politics and their study of the books of Samuel, or something like, on the other side, the political tradition, Eric Nelson's work, *The Hebrew Republic*, or Leiter's recent work on John Locke. And I would love to hear you say a bit more about the broader movement and the different aspects of the argument that he's making, and how you see your own work fitting into this larger movement and what you see that movement representing. Sure.

Well, much of the conversation can be about academics and what's going on in academia. There are also other aspects to it. Religious Jews have a parallel, an alternative higher education system, the system of the yeshivas, and that's kind of a separate conversation about what's happening there.

But there has been a flowering of biblical studies in Orthodox Jewish settings that are independent of, or largely independent of, what's taking place in academia. So in part, when you talk about people like Josh Berman, who was a college classmate of mine, and I had the honor of funding his book, *Created Equal*, when I was running an institute that was interested in these things already 20 years ago. So Josh Berman, or you mentioned Moshe Halbert Tal, we can name others.

What they're doing is they are attempting to translate, and with some success, a methods of Bible study that exists within Jewish tradition, within the rabbinic tradition. And in order to make that rabbinic biblical inheritance, to make it available to academia, quite a bit of work in translation needs to be done. Fortunately, by the time that people like Josh Berman and I were coming on the scene in the 1980s and 90s, there had already been the beginning of this movement that you're describing.

Daniel Elazar, Michael Walser, with his book on Exodus and Revolution, Aaron Woldofsky, which is, with his marvelous political study of the Joseph and his brother's stories. These were texts that already had been published when I began doing my doctorate, which meant that it was very easy for the department at Rutgers to decide that it was legitimate for me to write a dissertation on the political thought of the book of Jeremiah. And I did this, and Woldofsky was on my committee, and the department, which did not have many scholars who themselves thought that they were knowledgeable in the area, but they were very, very encouraging, was very supportive.

And so on the one hand, there was this beginning of the 1980s, this appearance of the possibility of sidestepping the strongly anti-biblical intellectual tradition of academia, sidestepping it and saying, look, but we can be open-minded. We study East Asian political theory, we study Indian political theory, why can't we study ancient Hebrew political theory? That is not, it has not quite panned out as I had hoped. The universities have many, many, many very good people still who, when they hear this discussed, they say, sure, that's a great idea.

Sure, let's go ahead and do that. But when they say, let's go ahead and do that, they don't mean I'm going to change the course of my academic career, because as you know, academic careers are easily derailed by somebody paying attention to the wrong text at the wrong time of his or her career. And that's even before you get into the question of today, much more than yesterday, the universities are, to say the least, skeptical about the Bible as a text that anybody should be studying.

So it hasn't turned out to be an influential movement in the sense that departments all over America and Europe have begun teaching the Bible as a part of the political theory tradition. I would say that there's still a good deal of openness in many places, but there's been no translation of, let's say, academic presses like Oxford and Cambridge have been enthusiastic about publishing these kinds of studies. But professors have not been enthusiastic about including them in the curriculum.

And that leads to all sorts of bigger questions. This obviously, at this point, you know, a generation later, this is not simply a matter of, well, people didn't, they weren't aware of these things, and you make them aware of it, and then they say, oh, okay, let's adjust the curriculum. It doesn't work that way, or at least it hasn't worked that way in this case, probably just generally doesn't work that way.

And at this point, I think that those of us who care deeply about the place of the Bible in Western intellectual life, and also in Western public life, in the things that people talk about and think about, those of us who care about it, I think, at this point, we have to draw some conclusions that there are obstacles to bringing this kind of scholarship into academia, which are actually much, much more larger and much more complex than what any of us had thought 30 years ago. You mentioned the challenge of getting these sorts of things into the curriculum. And it seems to me that part of the way you frame, for instance, the fact that we can say, all these other forms of thought are being treated seriously as political philosophical sources.

Why can't we treat scripture that way? Now, in one way, that's a helpful way to get your foot in the door. But it seems that if we're going to be really taking this seriously, the sorts of claims that are being made within this growing body of literature, it needs to be part of the canon. It's not just part of the more general, diverse world of political thought.

This is something that you need to have in the curriculum, if you're going to understand the main sources of the Western political tradition. And also, if you're going to understand the biblical text itself, you need to read it these sorts of ways, in addition to, and maybe sometimes in contrast to some of the ways that people are most familiar with reading the Bible as a canonical text. Yes, I think all of that is absolutely true.

And then the question of adding it to the canon, there's a number of different issues here. I mean, probably the most glaring issue is that the architects of the present study of political theory, political philosophy, many of the big names are people who are simply hostile to the idea that the Bible could be included in this way. And they said so explicitly.

I think it's most obvious when you're looking at Leo Strauss. I have a lengthy and detailed paper that I published a number of years ago called *The Bible and Leo Strauss*. People are interested in it, they can take a look.

But to simplify, Strauss' teaching and his construction of the Western canon is based on the assertion of a dichotomy between philosophy and scripture. And the claim is, which is repeated endlessly by at least some of his students, the claim is that when reading philosophy, one is supposed to be pressed to step outside of traditions, to open one's mind, to become skeptical, to test different ideas, and to pursue truth. We're all familiar with this claim, but Strauss, the other part of it is that Strauss asserts repeatedly in no uncertain terms that the Bible is not part of any tradition like that.

That the Bible is about loving obedience, as he says, you're simply supposed to believe without questioning. He adds that in terms of the theory of knowledge that the biblical texts assert that you can simply be handed a truth which you then have to accept on faith. And this entire picture that Strauss presents as justification for excluding biblical

texts as philosophical texts, that look, there may, there probably have been in history, people who thought the way that Strauss says they do about the Bible.

But that doesn't mean a, that the biblical, that the prophets and the scholars who wrote the Bible that they saw the issues that way. And B, it doesn't mean that the whole Western tradition saw things this way. You know, so it's not difficult if you're looking for it to recognize Western philosophers who considered the Bible to be philosophy, that they, the statement that the Bible is philosophy is one of the constant refrains that reappears in, you know, in the history of Christian thought and also in Jewish thought.

We can argue about the extent that it's true, but we do have to, I think at this point, hit head on the fact that an extremely influential school of thought within academia, which is especially influential among, you know, among more conservative people, it essentially gives a reasons for banishing the Bible as non-philosophical, as something as, you know, as kind of this other that can't be included, that can't be included in the canon. And, you know, I can name other groups, but the story is one way or another, it ends up being similar. It seems to me one of the challenges is maybe trying to recover a sense of scripture as having its own authorial voice within narrative sections.

And I think this is one of the things I found particularly helpful in your work on the philosophy of Hebrew scripture, the challenge of reading the text as something more than just a recounting of historical fact, but giving us some means of reflecting philosophically within the text itself. And I think there are plenty of people who use the biblical text as sort of fodder for political or literary or some sort of philosophical reflection. You can think about the many uses of scripture within postmodern readings, where people are taking it as some sort of inert text they can do clever things with and confect some sort of philosophical reading out of, but they're not actually attending to any voice that's integral to the text.

But yet it seems that many religious people struggle with the same thing. They're reading the biblical narrative and they don't see anything within it that presents a clear vantage point. They're reading the historical events, believing in their truth, but they're not able to recognize something beyond that.

And it seems to me that your work depends a lot upon the claims that you make about reading the Bible as something that has an authorial voice within its narrative and those sections particularly. And so when we're reading the Pentateuch or when we're reading the Books of Kings or whatever, we can discern something about what the author wants us to see. Can you say a bit more about how we read the Bible that way? What are some of the skills that we can develop by which we can do that? Absolutely.

So just as you said, one of the things that's difficult, why don't philosophy departments, for example, just simply recognize the biblical text as philosophy? And so one of the central issues is that there's kind of a standard way of doing philosophy which is

descended especially from Aristotle, even more than Plato. And it assumes that there's a big gap, even a contest or a struggle between philosophy which is based on advancing explicit propositions about things in the world and then arguing about them. And the narrative form or the poetic form, I mean the central things that we find certainly in Hebrew Bible, but I think also in Christian scripture, the central things that we find in Hebrew Bible are narratives, laws, and prophetic speeches which use metaphor in order to advance all sorts of claims about political and theological and moral and other subjects.

And all three of these types of material, narrative, metaphorical, and legal, appear to people who are too deeply in the Aristotelian tradition, that they appear as things that should not properly be seen as bearing philosophy. So look, this argument I think has already been analyzed and defeated many times because philosophers have no problem at all in picking up the pre-Socratics who are writing poetry or Plato whose philosophy is filled with stories and also even laws, or for that matter, Thucydides and Herodotus who are, despite being historians, are read for their philosophy and for their political teachings and what is it that the author is trying to advance. All of these things are done routinely in academia and part of the issue is teaching people to read the Bible in order to hear its teachings, in order to read narrative in order to hear its teachings, to read laws in order to understand the political ideas that are being advanced behind the legal system.

And especially I think with prophetic metaphor where Aristotle bequeaths to the Western tradition this claim that the truth value of metaphorical statements is false, that metaphorical statements are not literally true of anything. So if you say the moon is a ghostly galleon, you're saying something that maybe poetically is inspiring, but its truth value is false, it doesn't have any truth to it. And so to enter the world of biblical thought is to set that aside.

And I think people can do it if they want to do it. I don't think we're just lacking the tools in our civilization. I think people don't want to do it.

I think they're afraid or there's some other issues that prevent them. But we were talking before the program and we began discussing as an example, as a test example, the Mosaic law of the king in Deuteronomy. The entire book of Deuteronomy can be read and has been often read as a Hebraic constitution.

And I think was in the middle ages actually taken as a model for all sorts of thought about the constitution. But in particular, there are chapters in Deuteronomy that are focused on the limits on the king's power. And also questions, constitutional questions like, how do you recognize a prophet? And what's the role of the priests with regard to the king? And so there's a number of things here that echo throughout the history of Western political theory that you keep, I mean, you come across these passages over

and over again throughout the history of Christendom.

And so, for example, the king is, Moses says that the king is to write a Torah scroll according to the text that he receives from the priests. And he's supposed to carry this scroll of the law around with him all his days. So that he is symbolically, but hopefully actually under the yoke of the inherited legal tradition, rather than thinking that he's an absolute ruler.

So among the specific provisions that Moses says with respect to the king, these things are very famous, of course, is that the king is forbidden to have too many horses, to, in the Hebrew it says, to multiply in horses, in wives and in gold. And, of course, all of these things are directly related to the weight of the taxation that is imposed on the nation. And taxation in those days was not just monetary, it's the servitude, it's the *corvée*, the extraction of labor from the public.

And the biblical text is extremely concerned with this problem of, if you have a king, how do you prevent the king from becoming a tyrant, which is, it's defined in different ways, but the central concern is that he's taking the property and the wives and the sons, the daughters, the fathers of his people, and using them for himself in ways that don't benefit them. The very dramatic, you know, Mosaic expression is, *le bilti om levavo melechav*, so that his heart will not soar above his brothers, his heart won't rise above his brothers. Now, if you just study, you know, that piece of text, so you can come up with all sorts of, you know, guesses as to what exactly is the Mosaic constitution trying to say here.

But you don't really need to guess, because the subsequent books of the, if we read the first half of the Hebrew Bible, as I do, from Genesis through Kings, that's the first half of the Hebrew Bible. And if you read those nine books as a single narrative, which is the way they present themselves at any rate, then what you see is that this Deuteronomic text is in communication with subsequent texts in the Book of Judges and Samuel and Kings, and that this text is actually setting up a standard according to which you can then judge, were the judges in the Book of Judges righteous men according to this standard? Were the kings, according to the righteous kings? And it's more complicated than what I'm saying, but I think that what's beautiful about this communication between the Law of the King in Deuteronomy and the subsequent unfolding of the story, so that this, that the violations of the Law of the King end up being central to the division of the Israelite kingdom in the generation after Solomon, that the division is in a significant sense, it's being attributed to the violation, to the explicit violation of the Law of the King. And, you know, it's not, there's nothing magical about the way that it's described.

It's described, you know, in a political theory sense. Here's what happens if you violate the Law of the King. And so, Rehoboam, the next, the next king after Solomon, one of his sons, Rehoboam, is, the people come to him and they say, look, what your father's been

doing is oppressing us with the weight of his taxation and his forced labor.

You're oppressing us, you're suffocating us with the weight of the demands. And the text is very, very powerful in saying that, you know, the days of things like, you know, how many thousands of horses he had and how many thousands of wives he had. And, you know, then statements like, you know, in the days of Solomon, no one in the palace would drink from a silver cup because that was regarded as nothing.

They had to drink from a gold cup because only gold was valued. These are such powerful depictions of the violation of the Law of the King. And then Rehoboam says to the people who come to him, he says, look, roughly, I'm the king and I do what I want.

You know, this is a kind of like a, an absolutist view that says, that says, you know, I'm going to tax you more heavily than my father did. I'm going to make your burdens and your weight even greater. And this is described as the, you know, the cause of the rebellion, the civil war that ends the United Kingdom for all time.

And then is the beginning of the end of, it takes, you know, a few centuries, but it's the beginning of the end of Israel, Israel independence. And so if you take this, you know, as a, as a simple, as an easy, an easy example of the way in which the prophetic writings use narrative in order to advance claims about political theory, about the way that the political world works. If you, if you want there to be unity in among your people, then the king has to behave in the following way.

And if you, if you, the king doesn't behave in the following way, then there won't be unity and your kingdom is going to fall. It seems that the way that Kings brings that point across involves all these allusions back to the earlier books of the scriptures. So for instance, increasingly Solomon takes on characteristics of Pharaoh.

He has these great store cities, this great forced labor. And then you have people like Jeroboam who play a sort of inverse of the story of Israel. They going down into Egypt for refuge from the persecution of this tyrannical King.

And then eventually they come back to be thorns in the side. And then you have later on, of course, Jeroboam who acts like Aaron, he sets up golden calves at Dan and Bethel. And then you have his son's and Nadab and Abijah, which recall Nadab and Abihu and all these other sorts of details that can twig our memories and help us to think in terms of this larger overarching narrative.

And I think this is one of the areas where something of the brilliance of the biblical texts as a means of political reflection is really brought across. I think we see this from the very outset of the of the story. It is a story of rule.

It's a story of politics. It's a story of empires. It's the story of a nation.

And the call of Abraham, for instance, is very much against the backdrop of the tower and the city of Babel and the failure of that project of Nimrod and his kingdom. And then we move through the story and it's gradually a story of a family, but it's pregnant with all its future political import that this is a nation whose intranational relations are being explored within Genesis. And then we see, for instance, in the blessings of Jacob, their future political instantiation within the land is already present there.

And then in the exodus, God reveals himself against the backdrop of this great empire of Egypt and in conflict with them. And moving through the books that follow, you see Israel gradually being formed against around this new seed of the tabernacle. And then going into the books of Samuel, Judges, Samuel and Kings, you've got this outflowing of all these things that are introduced as themes in the earlier books.

And so that intertextuality seems to be a very important part of recognizing the scriptures as a political text. Can you speak to some of the ways in which that intertextuality can maybe help in dealing with some of these later texts like Esther, which you've done extensive work on? Well, I think your examples are excellent examples. The story of Jacob and his sons, or Joseph and his brothers, is, look, those brothers, they are foreshadowing the 12 tribes of Israel.

And I think it may be that sometimes religious people, they're uneasy with this kind of thing because it makes it seem like you're saying that the events didn't truly happen. My tradition doesn't, the Jewish tradition that I learned doesn't normally have a problem with this. The rabbis say, which means that the acts of the fathers are a sign as to what's going to happen in later generations.

And it's part of a deeper view of history as having recurring problems that appear over and over again. But you don't need to take a stand on the religion departments in the universities are overwhelmingly focused on questions of historicity. And I think one of the things that's wonderful about a narrative reading, or as you say, an intertextual reading, is that the student is not at the outset required to take a position on historicity.

The goal is to understand that the 12 tribes are the building blocks of Israel, of Israel as a united nation. And whenever you see the strengthening and the rise of Israel, it's because of the coming together and unifying of these 12 tribes, which are, each one has its own characteristics. They're very different from one another.

There's no, today people talk about the homogenated nations. It's absurd. I mean, from the biblical perspective, it's just the opposite that each of these tribes has its own unique character and the hardship is to get the things to work together.

And then throughout the entire narrative, the same problems that are given to talk to us in embryo, in the story of Joseph and his brothers, or even earlier in the struggle between Jacob and Esau, or between Yitzchak and Ishmael, these stories of brothers, the

stories of brothers who can't live together, the stories of brothers who betray one another, who try to kill one another, who trade one another in for money, who like all of these evils reflect are, they reflect things that individual human brothers and sisters can do to one another, of course. But the analogy is between the relationship within the family and the relationship within the nation. And already in Moses leading the people in the desert, we already see, before they even enter Israel, the demands of the tribes that want to live on the other side of the Jordan, on the eastern side of Jordan.

So those tribes come to Moses and say, you know, we're cattle ranchers, this is perfect land for cattle ranching. Moses says, oh come on, we haven't even entered the land and you're already giving us a formula for breaking up the army and disuniting us. And they say, no, no, no, no, no, we will, if you give us this land on the other side of the Jordan, then we'll agree to be on the front lines, to be the scouts running ahead in the most dangerous position in the battle to conquer the land.

And so, you know, at the beginning it looks like there's a simple solution. And then later it turns out over and over again that the tribes on the other side of the Jordan, either that they don't feel like that they're being treated justly by the main body of the Israelites, or that the main body of the Israelites don't really consider them to be, you know, they're kind of strange, they're not really legitimate. If you trace just this one question through the, you know, through the book of Judges and into the book of Samuel, you'll see that this issue of how do we keep those tribes that feel themselves alienated, what can we do in order to bring them in, this is one of the central political issues that's troubling the prophetic narrators.

They are trying to understand how polities rise and how they fall, what keeps them united and what destroys their internal unity so that they can't fight anymore. And wow, I mean, you know, I don't mean to drag us into current politics, but it just seems like people today so much need politics that is based on a realistic understanding that nations are not internally homogenous, that the trouble of internal disunity among tribes that come to hate one another and betray one another, and what can and should be done in order to avoid that. I mean, this is a dead center, constant issue in biblical political thought that we very much need today, and it is not so easy to find when you look at, you know, Greek or Roman sources.

It seems you've discussed the different characteristics of different tribes and the ways that they have a certain sort of charisma, for instance, Levi has a particular zeal, or Judah has an ability to lead his brothers, or we can think of Joseph's tribes, Ephraim particularly, as this the shrewdness of political management, and you can see that coming out, of course, in characters like Mordecai or Daniel, who are presented against that mold. And it seems to me that Israel's unity, as it's presented between the tribes, is always one that has certain fault lines it's going to fracture on, between north and south, or between the transjordanian tribes and the tribes within the promised land proper. And

then there are key tribes that kind of keep the nation together in various ways.

Which way Benjamin goes is a really big question. Is Judah going to stand for Benjamin? The way in which Judah leads his brothers, or the question of the Levites, who are scattered and in their scattering bring the nation together. It seems that, oh Manasseh, who straddles the two sides of the Jordan, there are all these very distinct ways in which the unity and distinction of the tribes is maintained by different tribes in different ways, and also by certain practices.

So there are certain things that encourage diversity and difference between the tribes, and there are certain areas where that is not tolerated. There needs to be one single site of worship, for instance, and unified worship. Could you say something more about the different forms of unity for the nation in its intranational relations? I think you've said it very well.

There are all the fault lines that you described, and there are additional ones. An important one that would catch the eye of readers today is the tension between, on the one hand, Judah, Joseph, and Benjamin, the largest and strongest tribes together. They make a block of the leading tribes, as opposed to, which you can already see reflected obviously in the stories in Genesis, but in political reality, as it's described later in the narrative, the smaller tribes are also a class.

There's a class of tribes that are dependent on these larger tribes, and so it's not only a matter of how to bring a tribe like Joseph that tends towards the ways of worldly power. Joseph in Egypt is kind of a model for the tribe of Joseph, for the descendants of Joseph. Joseph is somebody who is dreaming about ruling the world and the heaven, ruling all the other tribes, and then ruling the cosmos.

As a boy, he's dreaming these dreams, and that makes his brothers hate him, because they say, look, he's an Egyptian. He is this non-Jewish, non-Hebraic thing. He's not one of us.

He doesn't want to be a shepherd up on the hilltops, spurning vast power and wealth in order to get close to God. He wants to go down there and to turn us into an agrarian and agricultural society, which involves vast irrigation systems and ultimately a very, very heavy burden of the states to build these irrigation systems in this farming economy, and then to set up huge armies in order to defend that kind of economy from marauding from the outside. The brothers reasonably see him as somebody who is saying, look, there's always famine where we are.

We're always starving. Why do we have to depend on Egypt? Let's use the tools of Egypt in order to grow mighty, and then we won't be hungry anymore. That's an argument that, of course, in a certain sense, the Bible tilts away from away from Joseph and to his brothers, but it's a mistake.

I've seen this in some contemporary readers. It's a mistake to think that because Joseph is on the side of cities and wealth and power and even empire, the mistake to think that he's being read out of the Jewish people, this is not the way it goes. Do you want to see what when somebody's read out of the Jewish people, it's the tribe of Shimon that is considered to be so barbaric.

He's like the not literally the twin brother of Levi, but the two of them are partners from the very beginning that from the slaughter of the city of Shem, Levi and Shimon are partners in their extremely violent and aggressive way of dealing with problems. But as you said, eventually Levi is not given a piece of land. He's not given political power because he's too aggressive.

He's turned into the priesthood, whereas Shimon is considered to be unsalvageable. Levi is seen to be like a zealot for truth and for God, so he can make good priests. But Shimon is a tribe that really is read out of the story, and it's explained.

He is, his people are being punished for their traits and their behavior. They're too violent. And so Joseph is not like Shimon.

Joseph's sons are not read out of the story, and Joseph is not read out of the story. And so in order to understand what's being taught here, we have to see both what's the proper relationship between a Judah-like king and the extremely powerful Joseph-like political machinators, power mongers, economists, who, you know, the king needs in some way to ally himself with those or the kingdom will fail. But somehow he has to be in control and not let them be in control.

And then that alliance between Judah and Joseph, in turn, when it's working, it then has to be able to bring the lesser tribes along, even though they're not the richest and they're not the most powerful. If Judah and Joseph are not going to care about, let's say, the tribe of Dan, which is one of the tribes that's singled out as being persecuted and destroyed during the book of Judges, or the men of Gilad on the far side of the Jordan, who appear over and over again as being exposed to the most horrible persecution. And the question is, what are Joseph and Judah, what are those tribes going to do for those smaller tribes that can't defend themselves to bring them in? So this is, you know, it sounds like something that's too schematic and too theoretical, but when you read the stories, generation after generation of seeing how it develops, how the story develops, how the different tribes change in order to accommodate and resolve these problems, and how they fail, how the different kings fail to resolve them.

As soon as you ask that question, and you start reading the story in this way, you realize, I mean, you're in the hands of extremely perceptive, first of all, storytellers, but also theorists who are telling you about the different types, the different political types. They have a typology, different political types that recur through history, and how each of them has special, unique things that they have to contribute. If you can't find a way to

bring them in, you will not be able to maintain the polity.

It seems that there's an artistry and a subtlety that that allows, that within a typical rhetorical mode of philosophy, just is not operative. And so if you're reading through the story, you see all these Joseph characters, for instance, portrayed with variations, with a sort of musical development of a theme, and as a result, there are ways that you can see the same traits functioning positively or negatively. I mean, I think of this in David Dorbey's argument, the final chapter of the Book of Esther, that seems anticlimactic, it's about tax policy, but you have the shrewdness of Mordecai, who in helping to design a good tax policy, saves the kingdom from a sort of predatory sort of ruler, where you're having an emperor who's just going to destroy peoples in order to fill the coffers.

If you have a good tax policy, you're saved from that sort of thing. Or if you think about the character of Daniel and the wisdom that he employs, both to save his own people and be faithful in a situation where he would be persecuted, but also to help to guide the nation and the empire. And I'd be curious to hear your thoughts moving in that direction.

The story of Israel does not just stay within its own borders. If we go into the prophets, there are addresses to all these other nations round about. In something like Daniel or Esther, we have Jews within pagan courts and their faithfulness in those situations, but also the way in which they're guiding the nations.

In the very beginning of Deuteronomy, you have Israel presented as an example of wisdom to the nations. And I think we see this in many parts of the scripture, particularly when we read the story of Abraham's calling against the backdrop of the story of Babel. This is a worldwide problem to which there's a very specific nation that's being brought as the solution that is going to then affect the whole world.

Could you speak a bit more to the way in which the story of Israel can provide lessons for the politics of other nations? Well, to begin with, you're absolutely right that the book of Genesis and what follows is unequivocal and explicit in saying that God, on the one hand, is going to make Abraham a great nation. I mean, that's the opening promises. Leave your land, go to the land that I'll show you.

I will make of you a great nation. And the flip side of the same verses is that you will become a blessing to all the nations of the earth. And so there is a... When you read the story, when you read the Hebrew Bible from Genesis straight to the end, you're right that the first half is about the rise and fall of the Israelite kingdom.

And then the second half has all of this different kinds of commenting on and responding to that narrative in ways that then can be also understood as teaching, directly teaching the context of other nations. But it's there from the beginning. What's the very beginning? The very beginning is the conflict between Cain and Abel, which is the conflict, which as the story goes, we'll see that the conflict between Cain, the farmer, the

agriculturalist, and Abel, the shepherd, those are the broadest archetypes, the ones that set up the deepest and most original problem, political problem that the Bible is trying to deal with, which is that the shepherds are poor people on the hilltops, but they're free.

They're free to pursue their God. It's very difficult for the large armies in the giant river valleys in the Nile and Euphrates to conquer these hill-dwelling shepherds. There are armies, they're chariots, don't go up there.

And the hatred between farmers and shepherds, which is murderous from the beginning, that's the setup, as you said, for the Babel story, where we get the ultimate nightmare of when the farmers are left to their own devices, what do they do? Well, they become so impressed with their own power that they build these vast cities and then they think they're God. And they decide that they're going to go up to heaven and take over heaven because they believe they're God. And so there's this disgust from the beginning, this disgust and mutual hatred between the farmers and the shepherds, which then continues to appear in the story.

And this is not about Jews. As academics like to say, this is a human universal, is this tension. I found in John Fortescue, the great common lawyer in Praise of the Laws of England, where there's a wonderful paragraph where he's describing that the English, because their nation is ultimately founded on shepherding and not on farming.

I don't even know to what extent this is true, but the inheritance of this understanding that not only Abel, but Abraham is a shepherd and Jacob is a shepherd who dreams of the ladder up to heaven. And Moses, in order to be able to lead Israel, he has to go out and become a shepherd. He can't just grow up in the Egyptian palace.

He has to go spend 40 years as a shepherd before he's ready to come and save the Israelites. And then it continues. David is a shepherd, whereas Saul is a farmer and so on.

This is a human universal, and it's a universal problem that the Torah is dealing with, that the Bible is dealing with. And even though the Jews are singled out by God as being a special people, that's clearly there, that God sees the Tower of Babel, he despairs of trying to be able to address humanity directly as a whole. And he says, all right, so I'm going to set up a special people and they're going to embody the shepherd ethic.

They're going to embody the resistance against having power take over everything and then make you think that you're God and turn you into a tyrannical world oppressor. Israel is supposed to embody the shepherd spirit, but on the other hand, Israel is of this earth. And as soon as there's 12 brothers, then Joseph begins to say, all right, fine, so we're shepherds.

But does that mean we have to be poor? Does that mean we have to lose all our wars?

Does that mean we have to starve to death? Does that mean we have to depend on the Egyptians for our food? And you start to see how this universal conflict, it can't stay between Israel and the nations. It's internal to every nation. It's internal to Israel as an archetype.

And then the question is, what can we do to make sure that the balance between the freedom loving, God loving people who are skeptical of worldly power and the power loving, the financiers and the conquerors of the nation, how can we make sure that in a nation that balance is properly maintained? And again, it's presented as the key to survival. You can't maintain a nation if you don't do that. I think reading through the biblical narrative, we just see in those different characters, which are not simply presented as good or bad, but with subtleties and strengths and weaknesses and tendencies, we have resources to address those sorts of problems within our polities that are often lacking within single political visions that would apply in every single context in the same way.

It's almost like a musical task of orchestrating these different types alongside each other, rather than just giving one type dominance over everyone else. And I find just reading the biblical narrative, you see so much of this coming up at different points, often just developing those fundamental themes. And in conclusion, would you be able to say, just give some thoughts about how we can read the Bible in this political way, and yet still hear it as a story about God.

It seems that the Bible doesn't have the problem reconciling these two things, but many modern readers might. Yeah, I began wondering about this question because of the book of Esther, as you mentioned at a certain point, I wrote a short book about the book of Esther in order to understand its relationship to God, because God doesn't appear in the book of Esther. And in some ways, it's easier for modern readers to begin reading the Bible by reading Esther, because in Esther, you see a world that looks like our world looks to most people today, a world of politics and intrigue and persecutions, and a world that's political in which God's name does not appear.

And yet, and because that speaks so well to people today, it's remarkable when you study the Esther text, and you start realizing how many places in the text are directly quoting other passages earlier in scripture, in which God is present. And so that, you know, this is a very, it's a fascinating question and an interesting story, but to make it very, very simple, the book of Esther proposes that when Esther decides that she's willing to risk her life to save her people, at the moment that she does that, she, you know, puts on the robe, the Hebrew is very strange there, it says that she *lep'sham el chut*, that she wore, that she put on the kingdom, that she dressed herself in kingship. And there's a number of other passages that are parallel to this, but the idea of dressing in kingship is not referring to the kingship of, you know, Ahashverosh, of Xerxes, it's referring to each of us in our worldly role as acting as God's servants, or as his viceroys,

or his representatives to advance his will when we act with justice in the political world.

So that's Esther, which actually in some ways even argues with some of the more theologically explicit books like Daniel, but both Daniel and Esther actually, they're commenting on the earlier Joseph story, which is where the question is, do you have to, in order to gain power in the world, do you have to serve Pharaoh? In other words, do you have to become an instrument of idolatrous power in order to gain power in the world? And these later biblical books, Nehemia is also a crucial book commenting on this, they're taking sides on the question of how right and how wrong was Joseph, or can we be like Joseph but rein it in for the sake of good? And the book of Esther claims that Joseph was right, that you can in fact maintain a godly politics while being immersed in a world of complete evil, where all around you there's terrible things happening. It's not just a matter of keeping kosher like Daniel does. Daniel's a very optimistic book in this way, that all you need to is keep the dietary laws and maintain your personal purity.

And when the Babylonians or the Persians decide to kill you, then you will, God will save you. They'll just come in and save you and there'll be a miracle and you're fine. So I'm sure that this does happen sometimes, but many times it doesn't happen.

And so what's fascinating is once you've seen that both Daniel and Esther are included in scripture, that the rabbis include both of these books as counterpoints, as opposite interpretations of reality, once you see that, then it's not so hard to go back and recognize that this marvelously subtle text is already raising these questions. I mean, just here's an obvious example. So Moses is raised in the palace of Pharaoh and he has an innate sense of justice.

The first thing we learn about him once he's an adult is he goes out to see what's happening with his brothers and he comes across an Egyptian who's beating a Hebrew slave and he kills him and buries him in the sand. And then the next scene, already things get much more complicated. You think, okay, that's simple.

The Egyptians are tyrants. The Hebrews are the oppressed. This is a Marxist text.

You should just destroy the oppressors. But then the next scene, the next verse, what happens is after that is he sees two Jews beating each other and he goes and tries to separate them. And you know, with this, like, you know, there's justice and righteousness.

What's wrong with you? Stop fighting with one another. Don't you see that you're the oppressed kind of thing? And one of them, and they say to him, what are you going to do? You're going to kill us like you killed the Egyptian? And wow, I mean, when you get to this moment, I mean, you should feel like you've been struck in the face the way that Moses must have felt. It's not enough to, you know, to see the good and think that you know how to, you know, you know, right and wrong in order to get things to happen

politically.

So Moses flees. And for 40 years, he's out there, you know, with the sheep and not until he has had the experience, you can even say that, you know, the quasi political experience of being responsible for, vast numbers of these animals. And not until he's done that, does he then have the insight to see that there's, you know, that there's something burning on the mountain.

The rabbis say that that bush was burning there for, you know, for 1000 years before Moses noticed it. When Moses goes up there, and God starts telling him, you're going to save the Israelites. Moses says, No, you don't know who I am.

I can't speak. I don't have these abilities. I mean, he's, he's making arguments, all of which are reasonable.

He said, he says, you know, who am I to go to Pharaoh. But the story doesn't allow us a simple, non theological, non theological political answer. There's a political answer.

The political answer is, the Hebrews do not get freed from slavery until there arises a man from the palace. And, you know, kind of like, like a Joseph type figure in a certain sense, until somebody arises who knows enough about the palace to be able to do politics. God does not save the Israelites.

Right? I mean, he, he could have interfered, you know, 200 years earlier, when their blood was flowing like water, but but God didn't interfere. God doesn't, doesn't help the Israelites until Moses arises. And that that is a very pointed message.

It's it, which appears repeatedly in biblical narratives, that God, God needs us to take the initiative. And we need God to give us strength, to give us direction, to give us an understanding of justice, and also to help us with the final push, because no human hand is actually strong enough to be able to achieve anything in politics, if God isn't in the end going to help you. That's not a simple message.

But, but it's, it's a true message. It's a crucial message that all of us, all of us still need today. And unfortunately, we can't get it if, you know, if we set aside scripture and say, well, you know, that that's not important, because, you know, we have philosophy, or we have political theory, or we have natural law, or whatever, you know, whatever reasons people have, we need scripture, we don't have any choice, we have to have it.

And, you know, God bless you for your efforts to try to bring it to people who are in need of it. I know that it's not always an easy job, but it's, it's the right thing to do. It's God's will.

Yoram Hazoni, thank you so much for joining me. My pleasure.