

Theopolitics Contra Political Theology: Martin Buber's Biblical Critique of Carl Schmitt

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This article recovers Martin Buber's important but neglected critique of Carl Schmitt's political theology. Because Buber is known primarily as an ethicist and scholar of Judaism, his attack on Schmitt has been largely overlooked. Yet as I reveal through a close reading of his Biblical commentaries, a concern about the dangers of political theology threads through decades of his work. Divine sovereignty, Buber argues, is absolute and inimitable; no human ruler can claim the legitimate power reserved to God. Buber's response is to uncover what he sees as Judaism's earliest political theory: a "theopolitics," where human beings, mutually subject to divine kingship, practice non-domination. But Buber, I show, did not seek to directly revive this religious vision. Instead, he sought to incorporate the spirit of theopolitics, as embodied by Israel's prophets, into modern society. The result is a new and significant perspective on liberal democracy and political theology.

"Underneath the new forms of living of the people-become-settled, which plants fig trees, lays out vineyards, builds towns, and learns to treasure the value of guaranteed security, there persists the old, nomadicizing resistance against the dependency of an autocratic man and his clan."

—Martin Buber, *Kingship of God* ([1936] 1967, 161)

"It says (Exodus 32:16): 'And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was God's writing, engraved on the tablets'; read not 'engraved' [harut] but 'freedom' [heirut]."

—*Pirkei Avot* [Ethics of the Fathers] (6.2)¹

Political theology—the study of how theological ideas intersect with politics, law, ethics, and economics—has taken on new urgency. For centuries, it was expected that the Enlightenment's secularizing processes would disenchant nature, rationalize society, and privatize the "sacred." Yet "public religions" (Casanova 1994) continue to sway world affairs. The Western model of pluralism, toleration, and human rights faces growing pressure from movements with mythological and religious undercurrents (Galston 2018; Müller 2016). States and extremist groups justify heinous acts of violence by recourse to theological doctrines and apocalyptic expectations (McQueen 2018). And within liberal

democracies, significant questions have arisen over the place of religious discourse in the public sphere (Audi 2011; Eberle 2002; March 2009; Rawls [1999] 2002; Smith 2010; Stout 2004; Weithman 2006) and the feasibility of building social solidarity on purely secular and rational foundations (Habermas [2005] 2008; Lesch 2018, forthcoming).

One way theorists have responded to these challenges is by turning to political theology's most prominent, and controversial, exponent: Carl Schmitt. "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state," Schmitt famously wrote, "are secularized theological concepts, not only because of their historical development...but also because of their systematic structure" ([1922] 2005, 36). From its inception, Schmitt's theory was highly influential both within and beyond the Weimar intellectual scene.² Thinkers as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Leo Strauss, Hans Blumenberg, Jacob Taubes, and Jacques Derrida engaged with his ideas. And today his thought remains influential for a host of social, legal, and normative theorists (Agamben [2003] 2005; Böckenförde 1976; de Vries 2002; Esposito [2013] 2015; Kahn 2012; Kalyvas 2008; Lefort 2006; Mouffe 2000; Posner and Vermeule 2010; Reinhard et al. 2005; Santner 2011). Yet basic questions about political theology remain unanswered. Is Schmitt right that apparently secular political ideas and institutions are deeply entwined with religion? If so, what is the nature of this entanglement? And even if we reject Schmitt's controversial political theory—a state overseen by a quasi-divine sovereign and bound together by a solidarity of us versus them—might there still be something troubling about his method of conceptualizing political ideas via theological ones?

In this article, I offer one way of answering these questions by recovering an important but overlooked critique from one of political theology's earliest opponents: Martin Buber. Buber is almost never read for his political theory, with most interpreters focusing instead on his ethics of "I" and "Thou" and pioneering work on

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¹ All Hebrew translations in this article, aside from Buber's, are my own.

² For studies of this influence, see Balakrishnan (2000), Dyzenhaus (1997), Kennedy (2004), McCormick (1997), Müller (2003), and Scheuerman (1999).

Hasidic life and thought.³ And he only rarely discusses Schmitt directly. Yet as I reveal through a close reading of Buber's commentaries on Jewish scripture, a concern about the dangers of political theology threads through decades of his published work. At the same time, Buber does not merely impress his own agenda onto Biblical texts; he draws from them what he believes to be Judaism's earliest and most authentic political theory. And what he finds is the conceptual antithesis of political theology: a "theopolitics," where human beings, mutually subject to God's kingship, achieve a form of non-domination.⁴

By revealing the politics implicit in Buber's scriptural hermeneutics, this article adds a new perspective to debates on political theology, Weimar political thought, Jewish political theory, and the politics of the Hebrew Bible.⁵ Moreover, Buber offers insights into a number of pressing issues at the intersection of religion and politics, including the use of theological ideas to justify political violence, dilemmas of territorial sovereignty, the invocation of political theology to criticize liberalism, and the possibility of reconciling individual non-domination and collective solidarity without an enemy "other." Indeed Buber believes that theopolitics should speak to all people, at all times—and perhaps to liberal-democratic citizens most of all. Against all attempts to prioritize the "political," he asserts the ethical-religious unity of all spheres of human action. And against the drive to secularize the foundations of human society, he affirms the trans-historical value of theopolitics. He offers a vantage from which to challenge not only Schmitt's politics, but certain uses of political theology in contemporary political theory more broadly.

At the same time, Buber was not a reactionary; he does not argue for directly reviving theopolitics today. In principle, he denies that any merely human power can claim normative political authority. In practice, he

cautions against revolution and teaches the necessity of following the state's laws. Rather than advocating a straightforward return to divine kingship, Buber holds that we should transform our existing societies by incorporating the *spirit* of theopolitics, as embodied by ancient Israel's prophets, into modern ethics, politics, and society.

Buber was not a systematic thinker, and he does not outline his theopolitics in a single place. Consequently, there has been a tendency to see multiplicity rather than unity in his writings. Many divorce his scriptural commentaries from his works of philosophy; others mistake his theopolitics for a form of hierocracy, anarchism, or political theology. Yet as Dan Avnon has observed, Biblical exegesis is the "heart of Buber's philosophy" (1998, 47, cf. Amir 1988).⁶ Thus rather than confining my analysis to one subset of Buber's texts, I assess his philosophical writings and Biblical commentaries together. Buber composed, researched, or planned many of these commentaries just as Schmitt was rising to prominence in the 1920s and 30s.⁷ Buber's 1936 *Kingship of God*, which I will argue is the centerpiece of his critique of political theology, was originally intended to be the first in a three-volume series called *The Biblical Faith*. Though he never completed the work as planned, his subsequent books *Torat Ha-Nevi'im* (retitled in English as *The Prophetic Faith*) and *Moses*, which appeared, respectively, in 1944 and 1946, grew directly out of his earlier research and concerns.⁸ And as an aspiring Jewish academic in Weimar Germany, he witnessed firsthand the ascent of a Nazi movement that Schmitt enthusiastically endorsed.⁹

I begin by examining Buber's philosophical critique of Schmitt, focusing in particular on an essay that he composed in the late 1930s. I then uncover Buber's theopolitical alternative through an extended analysis

³ For important exceptions to the non-political reading of Buber, see Avnon (1993, 1998), Mendes-Flohr (1989, 2006, 2008), Novak (1985), Schwartz (2006), Schwarzschild (1990), Susser (1977, 1979, 1981), and Weltsch (1967). For biographical information on Buber, see Akiba (1985) and Maor (2016).

⁴ It is thus surprising that Buber has been largely overlooked in recent discussions of political theology. See for example the collections by de Vries and Sullivan (2006), Schmidt and Schonfeld (2009), and Kessler (2013). For important exceptions, see Kaplan (2013), Lebovic (2008), Mendes-Flohr (2008), and Schmidt (2009). More recently, Yoav Schaefer (2017) has persuasively proposed that Buber's *Kingship of God* is indebted to his friend Gustav Landauer's anarchism. Even so, I cannot agree that Buber "Sought to dress his political thought in a theological garb, thereby justifying his preexisting political commitments on religious and textual grounds" (243). On this point see Dan Avnon's essential book (1998), which demonstrates the Hebrew Bible's normative centrality in shaping Buber's thought.

⁵ For recent work on Weimar political thought, see Caldwell and Scheuerman (2000), Gordon and McCormick (2013), Greenberg (2014), and Kaplan and Kosher (2012). For English-language contributions to Jewish political theory and the politics of the Hebrew Bible, see Berman (2008), Cooper (2015, 2016), Elazar (1997), Gans (2016), Halbertal and Holmes (2017), Hammill (2012), Lesch (2014), Lorberbaum (2002), Melamed (2011), Nelson (2010), Novak (2005), Smith (1997), Walzer (2012), and Walzer, Lorberbaum, and Zohar (2000–2018).

⁶ Among Buber's great scholarly accomplishments was a joint translation, with Franz Rosenzweig, of the Hebrew Bible into German. Tellingly, he writes that among his intentions as a translator was to oppose those who would grant "religious sanction to all the violence of the state" and show that God "demand[s] the shaping of society on the basis of belief" ([1938] 1994, 217).

⁷ For analyses of how Buber's thought fits into broader Jewish debates over religion and nationalism, see Batnitsky (2011), Gordon (2003, 2007), Hazony (2000), Jacobson (2003), Löwy ([1988] 1992), Luz ([1998] 2003), Pianko (2010), and Rabinbach (1997). For studies that situate Buber into the Weimar and early Israeli philosophical milieu, see Gordon (2013) and Rosenhagen (2012).

⁸ In recognition of Buber's original intention to "treat Old Testament problems in that exact order of succession in which the text presents them" ([1936] 1967, 13), my analysis in this article follows the Biblical chronology rather than the publication dates of Buber's writings.

⁹ Schmitt never cites Buber, and it is not conclusively known whether he read him. Nonetheless, it is known that Schmitt closely read a review of Buber's *Kingship of God* (Schmitt and Feuchtwanger 2007, 377–82). There is also circumstantial evidence for Schmitt's connection to Buber via Leo Strauss. In 1932, Strauss penned a critical set of "Notes" on Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* ([1932] 2007). Six years later, Schmitt responded by criticizing Strauss' reading of Spinoza and referring to him as "the Jewish scholar Leo Strauss" ([1938] 2008, 10). Notably, this rhetorically mirrors Buber's reference to Schmitt in "The Question to the Single One" as a "Catholic exponent of Constitutional Law" ([1936] 1957, 73), suggesting that Schmitt may have subsumed Buber into his derogatory image of the "Jewish scholar."

of his scriptural commentaries. Theopolitics, Buber argues, arose as a way to transplant pre-state Israel's "nomadic ethos"—its total rejection of human power—into settled life: When all people are mutually dependent on divine rule, none are dependent on merely human rule. But while theopolitics was successful for a time, it was also inherently unstable, leading to the advent of kings and the secularization of political life. This gave rise to the prophets, figures who voice the spirit of theopolitics while acknowledging the infeasibility of its direct realization. It is a version of this prophetic stance, I conclude, that Buber believes we should adopt today. By draining our social relations of domination, we come to act *as if* we live under divine rule in practice. And whatever our intellectual stance on theism, this, for Buber, is ultimately the point.

AGAINST POLITICAL THEOLOGY, FOR "RELIGIOUS" POLITICS

Schmitt's (1922) *Political Theology* centers around an analogy between God and the human sovereign: Just as a voluntarist deity sustains the universe's natural laws through miracles, so too a human sovereign sustains the state's juridical laws through inscrutable acts of will.¹⁰ Thus against liberal theorists like John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and his German contemporary Hans Kelsen, Schmitt insists that liberal jurisprudence cannot be a closed system whose edicts have intrinsic normativity and correspond to a timeless reason ([1922] 2005, 14).¹¹ Moreover, as Schmitt would argue ten years later in *The Concept of the Political*, once any rational and normative grounds for legal order have been eliminated, a people's unifying bond can be neither rational nor normative. It must be willed. Schmitt refers to this way of constructing in-group solidarity as "the political," a way of relating to others that divides the world into "friends" and "enemies" ([1932] 2007, 26). Thus in contrast to liberalism's "art of separation" (Walzer 1984), in which different spheres of society—the religious, aesthetic, economic, legal, cultural, and scientific—retain a degree of autonomy, Schmitt's "total state" subordinates all realms of human existence to politics ([1932] 2007, 24–5, 38, 72). And in this way, "the political" provides him with what the sociologist David Martin has called a "secular metaphysic": It reproduces for political solidarity the moral absolutism of religious faith (1978, 90).

Buber responds to Schmitt by rejecting the analogical thinking underlying political theology, first through a philosophical critique, and then more substantially through a new reading of the Hebrew Bible. The "political," Buber insists in his 1936 essay "The Question to the Single One," appears not in moments of violence

between friends and enemies but in the concrete organization of societies. It has no existential meaning. Yet Buber neither rejects nor quarantines politics. Instead, he seeks out a new, morally defensible concept of the political, one bound up in an orientation toward the world that he calls "religious" ([1936] 1957).

Buber takes Schmitt seriously not only as a philosophical but theological opponent, arguing that Schmitt's "political" can only be understood in light of a religious institution: the "trial by combat" or "duel" ([1936] 1957, 73).¹² In a duel, the outcome—who lives or dies—is understood to reflect divine will; in effect, the disputants make God into their judge. It is precisely this logic, Buber argues, that is at work in Schmitt. Though Schmitt uses the language of secular political theory, his secret intent is to scale up the "trial by combat" from interpersonal struggles to those of states. "Every classic duel is a masked 'judgment of God,'" Buber writes. "That is what Schmitt, carrying it over to the relation of peoples to one another, calls the specifically political" (ibid., 74). Thus the political is not merely a vitalist celebration of violence. It is a whole theology of bloodshed. It lends war a divine sanction.

Buber offers three arguments in response, which, taken together, point toward an alternative concept of the political. His first is methodological. Schmitt holds that the specifically political appears at times of "the most intense and extreme antagonism" between foes ([1932] 2007, 29). In those moments, conflict has its own meaning; it is irreducible to any reason, value, or justification. For Buber such a view is unworkable. It suggests something absurd: that politics only truly exists "in times in which the common life is threatened, not in times in which it experiences its stability as self-evident and assured" (Buber [1936] 1957, 74). Schmitt, in other words, would reduce politics to transient periods of war and emergency. According to Buber, by contrast, the true site of the political must be found in what is "lasting" (74).

Second, Buber argues that Schmitt's theory suffers from an internal contradiction. The political manifests in struggles between "friends" and "enemies," which Schmitt notes may be "domestic" and "internal," as for example rebels in civil war ([1932] 2007, 46–7). Yet as Buber points out, rebels generally seek to transform, not dissolve, their state. And if that is the case, then there must be concrete political *structures* and *institutions* over which the conflict is being fought ([1936] 1957, 74). Thus by Schmitt's own criteria, it cannot be that the political is defined by conflict alone. It must reflect something more permanent.

Finally, Buber takes aim at the friend–enemy distinction itself. Schmitt had arrived at this idea by comparing it with other oppositional pairs: "beauty" and "ugliness" in aesthetics, "good" and "evil" in morality, and so forth ([1932] 2007, 26–7). But what

¹⁰ The book first appeared in 1922. All my references are to the second edition, published in 1934.

¹¹ For an interpretation where Schmitt's political theology aims not merely to create an *analogy* between God and the sovereign but to actually *ground* political authority in revelation, see Meier ([1998] 2011).

¹² On face this may seem surprising. Schmitt develops his concept of political theology via an analogy to the deity; but in expounding the "political," he makes almost no reference to theology, donning instead the realist mantle of Machiavelli and Hobbes ([1932] 2007, 58–68). For Buber, however, this profane discourse is merely a ruse.

Schmitt failed to recognize, Buber argues, is that each of these pairings actually implies yet *another* pair of concepts. Behind the beautiful–ugly distinction, for example, is a contrast between “form” and “formlessness.” So too with the political. Enemies and friends do not fight over nothing; their hostility takes place against a more fundamental juxtaposition between “order” and “absence of order.”¹³ Thus it is only when a challenge arises to what political life should look like that an “enemy” emerges. And it is this “dynamic of order” that is the “real principle of the political” (Buber [1936] 1957, 75).

Buber concludes by returning to the religious plane and attacking Schmitt’s “theological associate” Friedrich Gogarten, an important scholar of religion in the first half of the twentieth century and one of the founders, along with Karl Barth, of “dialectical theology.”¹⁴ Gogarten, Buber argues, was correct to reject the religious individualism of thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard. Where he erred was by adopting the opposite, collectivist extreme: that “the ethical is valid as the ethical only by its connection to man’s political being” (ibid., 76). For Buber, such a perspective abdicates individual moral responsibility. If our decisions receive their meaning solely from political interests, we cannot distinguish between the state’s good and the moral good in a broader sense. Thus although “Gogarten may speak in theological terms,” Buber contends, he gives free reign to a Machiavellian mentality (76). He lends religious imprimatur to Schmitt’s celebration of violence.

Buber’s alternative to Schmitt’s political is a new but equally all-encompassing ethos: the “religious.” To begin with, the religious is not merely one Weberian sphere of value among many; it potentially interpenetrates all of them. “If communal life were parceled out into independent realms, one of which is ‘the spiritual life,’” Buber had written in *I and Thou*, this would “rob the spirit completely of reality” ([1923] 1958, 50–1). A genuinely “religious” person, therefore, cannot live a double (or triple) life. She cannot be a caring mother in the evening, a back-stabbing politician in the morning, and an apathetic consumer in the afternoon. While she can perform many roles, all of them must be informed by the same wellspring of value. At the same time, the religious is not anti-political. Politics, Buber

insists, should neither be rejected nor sequestered from other parts of human life; it should be morally transformed and redeemed.¹⁵ Thus in a sense, what Buber articulates is a kind of inverted rendering of political theology: While Schmitt’s “total state” is one that “no longer knows anything absolutely non-political,” Buber’s ideal polity is one that no longer knows anything absolutely non-“religious.” “If ethical problems receive their relevance from the political realm,” Buber writes, “they cannot also receive them from the religious, not even [as in the case of Gogarten] if the political has a religious basis” ([1936] 1957, 76).

Yet by what means can political life be neither sequestered nor abandoned but still infused with a moral ethos? What does this “religious” orientation look like? In places, Buber seems to answer in a sociological key. “To the political sphere,” he writes in a later essay on community, “there was always opposed the organic, functionally organized society as such, a great society built of various societies” ([1949] 1958, 131).¹⁶ But at other times, he hints at a different and deeper strain: “There is no separate sphere of ethics in Judaism” (1946, 9). Or as he puts it in his book *Moses*: “The tradition of the pyramid faces that of the campfire” ([1946] 1965, 28).

THE PYRAMID AND THE CAMPFIRE

In *Moses*, first published in 1946, Buber develops his “religious” politics by contrasting Israel’s nomadic ethos—an ardent hostility to dependence on the will of others—with the despotism of the Egyptian state. The Book of Exodus teaches that “The Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel” (11:7). For Buber, this is not merely a difference in culture but a deep contrast in values and orientation. Egypt represents the summit of centralized and coercive civilization. Having subdued the Nile and its populace, the Egyptian state exhibited its total domination through monumental architecture: “As the pyramid culminates in its apex, so the Egyptian state culminates of almost mathematical necessity in the Crown, the ‘red flame’, which is addressed in the pyramid texts as living Godhead”

¹³ Without citing Schmitt explicitly, Buber offers a similar critique in his later work *Pointing the Way*. In an almost direct quote from Schmitt’s *Concept of the Political*, he refers to those who “defined the concept of the political so that everything disposed itself within it according to the criterion ‘friend–enemy,’ in which the concept of enemy includes ‘the possibility of physical killing’” (1957, 216).

¹⁴ “Dialectical theology,” also known as “neo-orthodoxy” or “crisis theology,” emerged after the First World War as a reaction against the liberal theology of the nineteenth century. Those associated with the movement, including Eduard Thurneysen, Rudolf Bultmann, Emil Brunner, Reginald H. Fuller, in addition to Barth and Gogarten, stressed revelation against natural theology; divine transcendence against immanence; and the radical, intractable evil of human nature and so the need for God’s grace. They were also frequently drawn to Kierkegaard’s existentialism. See Gordon (2013). As Buber’s critique of Schmitt is couched within a critique of Kierkegaard, it is unsurprising that Buber connected Schmitt to Gogarten. And indeed, Schmitt himself was partly indebted to Kierkegaard for his concept of the “exception” ([1922] 2005, 15).

¹⁵ An anti-political route was certainly available to Buber. Following his contemporary Walter Benjamin, he could have washed his hands of the instrumentalism of political action and the coercion of juridical order, valorizing instead a purer “ethical” sphere (Lesch 2014). Yet Buber firmly rejects this possibility. Anti-politics, he insists, amounts to little more than a secularized version of Pauline-Christian renunciation, reinforcing an artificial dualism between “truth and reality, idea and fact, morality and politics” (1967, 126). See also Yaniv Feller (2013), who has persuasively argued that Buber’s embrace of divine kingship should be understood in terms of his opposition to Gnosticism.

¹⁶ Buber’s critique of Schmitt undoubtedly informed his general aversion to state sovereignty, centralized political control, and “national ideology which makes the nation an end in itself,” sentiments which begin to appear in his writings in the early 1920s ([1921] 1983, 54). For a recent view which understands Buber’s thought as being more conducive to nationalism, see Ram (2015).

([1946] 1965, 21). The pyramid for Buber thus symbolizes a perfectly realized political theology, a Schmittian “total state.” All parts of the society are subordinated to its interest, embodied in the person of the pharaoh; and it is from this interest alone that they derive their value and meaning: “In the last resort everybody received from the King the function which made him a man” (21).

Against Egypt's domineering concept of the political, nomadic Israel offered an emancipated alternative. Historically, nomads represented a physical hazard to the state, persisting in the hinterlands beyond the reach of its laws. Yet as the political scientist James Scott (2009) has shown, their more profound threat was to its governing ideology. By refusing to accept any kind of structured hierarchy, and flourishing nonetheless, nomads were living refutations of the state's Hobbesian insistence that freedom from violence requires total domination. Thus for Egypt and other ancient civilizations, the nomad was a figure of both fear and desire. Buber quotes with fondness a Sumerian hymn that speaks of the one “who knows no submission...who has no house in his lifetime,” as well as an Egyptian source that refers to “the miserable stranger...He does not dwell in the same spot, his feet are always wandering. From the days of Horus [that is, from the most ancient past] he battles, he does not conquer, and is not conquered” ([1946] 1965, 25).

It is this intense nomadic antipathy to dependence on human will, Buber argues, that Abraham and his descendants inherited, linking life under arbitrary authority to the most profound unhappiness. Indeed such a deep place did the nomadic ethos carve out in Israel's collective memory, Buber notes, that it surfaces even in the ritual *agricultural* offering, the first-fruits prayer in Deuteronomy: “My father was a wandering Aramean...” (26:5). Thus by the time it begins its sojourn in Egypt, embryonic-Israel has acquired a visceral aversion to any political system rooted in domination, an idea which informs how Buber understands Moses' years as a shepherd in Midian. Only by leaving Egypt could Moses recover the nomadic ethos that Israel had lost through its long years of slavery: “A man of the enslaved nation, but the only one not enslaved together with them, had returned to the free and keen air of his forbearers” ([1946] 1965, 38).¹⁷

In this task, however, Moses encounters a problem. Nomadic societies—small, insular, united by blood—permit a “fluid” non-domination to coexist with a “strong collective solidarity” (28). But what happens in settled life? The Israelites might be able to sustain a nomadic ethos through their Sinai journeys. Yet their destiny is not to migrate as pastoralists but to settle as farmers; not to wander forever in the wilderness but to inherit a land flowing with milk and honey. And of course this is not merely Israel's challenge. It reflects a general problem: How can the nomadic ethos be reproduced in

civilization? By what means can its skepticism about human authority and its insistence on freedom from domination find a place in settled human societies, suffused as they are with economic exploitation, social hierarchy, and vast disparities of power? Buber offers his answer—“theopolitics”—in *Kingship of God*.

THEOPOLITICS AND THE KINGSHIP OF GOD

By subjecting themselves to God's exclusive kingship, Buber argues, the nascent Jewish people uncovered a novel means of realizing non-domination: When all human beings are fully dependent on God's will, no human being is dependent on merely human will. And such an orientation, Buber insists, constitutes not a rejection of politics but a “theopolitics.”¹⁸ This theopolitics, I will now show, is Buber's “religious” alternative to Schmitt's political. By inverting political theology, it extends the nomadic ethos into settled civilization.

Kingship, which like Buber's critique of Schmitt in “The Question to the Single One” appeared in 1936, is written in the formal and scholarly mode of Weimar academia, but Buber's normative aims show through in his methodology. The “historical facts” behind Biblical happenings, he writes, are less important than the experience of participants—their “inner truth” (1967, 117). For only if ancient Israelites experienced themselves as actually living under divine rule—not as a metaphor or ideal, but in concrete cognitive and emotional fact—could something of this experience be conceptualized, recovered, and repurposed. Buber's approach, therefore, is to peel back the layers of the text, to find, concealed beneath strata of redaction, editorializing, and ideological sediment, the “spontaneous forms, not dependent upon instructions, of a popular preservation by word of mouth of ‘historical’ events” ([1946] 1965, 15).

His core finding is this: For a substantial period during their early history, the Israelites experienced God as their king. Of course, the idea of the deity as “king” is hardly new, something Buber acknowledges. Yet in his formulation, it takes on a shape that is both radical and uncanny. To begin with, Buber argues that divine rule in ancient Israel was understood to be exclusive and direct. No one was permitted to serve as God's intermediary; none could share in God's sovereignty: “‘You shall be for Me a kingly domain’, ‘there was then in J'shurun a King,’” Buber writes, citing Exodus and Deuteronomy respectively, “This is *exclusive* proclamation also with respect to a secular lordship: the Lord does not want, like the other kingly gods, to be sovereign and guarantor of a human monarch. He wants Himself to be the Leader and the Prince” ([1936] 1967, 136).

¹⁷ Buber thus diverges sharply from Sigmund Freud, who in his own book on Moses (penned only seven years earlier), depicted Israel's prophet as an Egyptian through and through, the leader of a faction supporting the proto-monotheistic pharaoh Akhenaten ([1939] 1967).

¹⁸ In *The Prophetic Faith*, Buber defines theopolitics as “a special kind of politics...which is concerned to establish a certain people in a certain historical situation under divine sovereignty, so that this people is brought nearer the fulfillment of its task, to become the beginning of the kingdom of God” ([1944] 1960, 135).

Buber's unusual Hebrew translation here, where "*mamlekhet kohanim*," usually "kingdom of priests," is rendered instead as "kingly domain," points to a second aspect of his thesis: God's kingship was not understood at all in a metaphorical sense.¹⁹ To describe the deity as "king" is usually intended as a figurative shorthand for its role as law-giver, judge, and cosmological architect. A human king, by contrast, sits on a throne, hears out disputes, and leads his troops in battle. Though elevated from his people, he dwells among them, something commonly assumed to be beneath a monotheistic creator-God (cf. Harvey 2009). And yet this, Buber contends, was exactly how ancient Israel understood divine rule, that is, as "kingship of God":

[By] 'king' I mean precisely the 'primitive' *melekh* [king] which the elders of Israel mean when they (I Samuel 8:19ff) demand a king.... For thus had they experienced it: God had dispensed justice for them, He had gone on before them and had fought their battle, the *melekh* of an original early period ([1936] 1967, 25).

God's throne was the ark of the covenant and His palace the tent of meeting. When Israel traveled, God's tent-palace traveled with them. When Israel made war, God's ark-throne was brought to the front lines. The deity, Buber thus insists, was the nation's king [*melekh*] in every sense of the word: its counselor, decision-maker, arbiter, and field marshal (ibid., 102).²⁰

This leads to the final and most critical implication of divine kingship for Buber: its politics—or rather, theopolitics. God's rule, he stresses, was experienced as a palpable part of Israelite psychology. But—and critically—this did not precipitate a quietist turn away from political life. On the contrary, precisely because God's sovereignty was thought to extend into every human domain, politics, too was understood to be a legitimate form of "religious" expression. "There is in...[premonarchic] Israel no externality of ruler-ship," Buber writes, adding "*for there is no political sphere except the theo-political*" (136).

In this way, Buber is careful to preempt the tendency of Michael Walzer (2012) and others to read an anti-political message into Hebrew scripture. Ethics and politics are best understood not as opposing value spheres but as different manifestations of a unified effort to work through the implications of divine rule:

We may characterize the domain, in which the *individual* as such seeks to deal seriously in vital fashion with the exclusiveness [of God's sovereignty], as the ethical.... The same is valid for the *people* with respect to politics. The striving to have the entirety of its life constructed out of its

relation to the divine can be actualized by a people ([1936] 1967, 118–9, emphasis mine).

If politics refers to the collective affairs of a people, the premonarchial Israelites practiced politics. They conquered territory and built cities; they lived under laws and redistributed wealth. They embodied "a tendency toward actualization which can be no other than a political one" (ibid., 118). That they did so under divine sovereignty in no way detracts from their political character. In this sense, Buber's target is simultaneously Pauline Christianity and Weber's division of value spheres. The God of Israel, he writes, "is not content to be 'God' in the religious sense. He does not want to surrender to a man that which is not 'God's'.... He makes known His will first of all as constitution— not constitution of cult and custom only, also of economy and society." Having made this veiled reference to *Economy and Society*, Weber's magnum opus, Buber concludes his analysis with a final shot at his predecessor: "*The separation of religion and politics which stretches through history is here overcome...*" (119).

Here we arrive at theopolitics' foremost contribution: transposing the nomadic ethos into settled life. For the nomad, there is no greater slavery than dependence on another's arbitrary will. And it is precisely freedom from dependence that theopolitics achieves. Human beings, by making themselves mutually and fully dependent on God, become mutually and fully independent of one another. Thus counterintuitively, it was precisely the Israelites' extreme allergy to domination that led them to embrace absolute divine rule: "[The] intractableness of the human person, the drive of man to be independent of man, but for the sake of a highest commitment, already appears in the Sinai covenant" (138). Under such an arrangement, power, reserved to the deity, cannot be exploited by men for their own aims. And when power *is* exercised, it is understood as having been done so by God in the form of divine law. Its use is not interpreted as arbitrary.²¹

At the same time, theopolitics tames and channels an anarchic tendency within nomadism that is not only antinomian, but antisocial:

The just law of the just *Melekh* [King, i.e., God] is there in order to banish the danger of 'Bedouin' anarchy, which threatens all freedom with God. The unrestrained instinct of independence of the Semitic nomads, who do not wish to permit anybody to rise above them and to impose his will upon them, finds its satisfaction in the thought that all the Children of Israel are required to stand in the same direct relation to the Lord; but it achieves restraint through the fact that the Lord himself is the promulgator and guardian of the law ([1946] 1965, 108).

¹⁹ The passage in question is Exodus 19:6. Buber's translation is self-conscious, as he makes the same translation earlier in the book ([1936] 1967, 37).

²⁰ Against the charge that direct theocracy was not unique to Israel in the ancient world, Buber surveys the religious practices of its neighbors, arguing that while other nations also regarded their gods as "kings," they confined their rule to the heavens, leaving politics to human rulers ([1936] 1967, 86, 92).

²¹ Buber anticipates and responds at length to the objection that rulership by God (theocracy) is in practice rulership by a priestly class (what he, following Weber, calls "hierocracy"). His argument hinges on his concept of charismatic leadership. Unlike a king, whose authority is upheld via direct relations of domination, the charismatic individual's authority is non-coercive, deriving solely from his ability to persuade the people that he has a special commission to speak for God ([1936] 1967, 139–41).

For a people that has jointly and equally accepted the “yoke” of God’s kingship, divine law’s coercive force is not recognized as coercion ([1944] 1960, 99). Yet the result, Buber insists, is not anarchy, “not a negative freedom, a disorderly lawlessness,” but a “firm, bold standing under the one authority” ([1936] 1967, 25).

THEOPOLITICS’ ACHIEVEMENTS AND LIMITS

Throughout his scriptural commentaries, Buber illustrates how theopolitics infused the institutions and ethos of Israelite society. He concludes, however, by stressing its intrinsic limitations.

Buber offers two examples of how theopolitics shaped Israel’s institutions: the Sabbatical year [*Shmita*] and the Jubilee [*Yovel*]. The Sabbatical extends the logic of the Sabbath [*Shabbat*] from communal to territorial life. Just as human beings rest one day out of seven, the land of Israel itself is made to “rest” one year out of seven. Proactive cultivation of the soil is prohibited, and a special holiness—that is, *kedushah*, or the status of being “separated” or “reserved” for God—attaches to any produce that does grow. The Jubilee, in turn, broadens the logic of the Sabbatical from years to decades: At the conclusion of seven Sabbaticals, the land not only rests but also is restored to its original holders.

On one level, the Sabbatical and Jubilee for Buber are primarily symbolic institutions. For an agricultural society subject to famines, neglecting an entire year’s crop requires real faith in the deity’s control of nature. And by publically promulgating the “postulate that God owns all the land,” it builds confidence in the “real and direct rule of God” ([1946] 1965, 179).

Yet on another level, Buber notes, these institutions produced a tangible yield: As the fiftieth year begins, all slaves are freed. Slavery, of course, is the nomad’s nightmare, a total dependence on the arbitrary will of another. What both the Sabbatical and the Jubilee offer, therefore, is not only a token reminder of God’s kingship but a concrete expression of its power: A return to a condition of non-domination between man and man. People, these practices insist, “ought not to thrust one another aside, they ought not to impoverish one another permanently or enslave one another.” They should be made “free and equal again and again, as they were at the beginning” (181). And so the Sabbatical cycles effectively furnish a “renewal of the Covenant” both in symbol and sociopolitical substance (179). Not only the agricultural produce but also the national community as a whole becomes “reserved” for God—a “Holy People” [*Goy Kadosh*] (181).

Buber further elicits theopolitics’ institutional form via a contrast with its ancient counterpart: the Greek *polis*. He begins magnanimously, referring to the *polis* as “antiquity’s most beautiful creation” (1967, 115). Yet we soon see that this compliment is actually a slur. The *polis*, he continues, acquired its beauty only through the minds of modern philosophers; in search of utopia, they fabricated an aesthetic ideal belied by historical fact.

What is presented as a model of equality and democracy was actually a deeply unequal society, one whose way of life depended on a vast slavery (115–16).²² And while the slaves were sometimes freed, this was done “occasionally and temporarily, superficially and imperfectly,” only to be “revoked by force through political upheavals.” Buber’s intended contrast is clear. Where in ancient Israel the law codified “the idea of rhythmic adjustment” in socio-economic status, in the *polis* we find “legal statics...interrupted only by occasional crises.” Where the Torah’s central “social concept” is the equality of all human beings under God, Greek philosophy preaches a “radical inequality.” And where Judaism’s watchwords are kindness [*hesed*], righteousness [*tzedakah*], and justice [*mishpat*], in Greek thought “virtue” itself was a term reserved “solely for the aristocrats, that is, the well-to-do” (116).²³

Buber locates the greatest embodiment of the theopolitical spirit in the figure of Gideon from the Book of Judges. Judges is an early prophetic work that recounts Israel’s history following the conquest of the land but prior to the monarchy. Its narrative follows a cyclical pattern: the people sin; they are punished with defeat by foreigners; they repent; God sends a charismatic leader—a “judge” [*shofet*]—to lead them in battle; and this judge, having vanquished Israel’s enemies, relinquishes his leadership, at which point the cycle begins again. Buber’s interest in the text stems from this last stage. Historically, individuals have often converted their success as military leaders into political power. Yet Israel’s judges repeatedly declined to take this step. They did not seek power, and they refused to accept it when offered.²⁴

What makes Gideon (a judge) a special figure for Buber is that he frames his refusal in explicitly theopolitical terms. Gideon is approached by the masses

²² The charge that certain thinkers romanticized aspects of the *polis* for their own theoretical ends goes back at least to Hegel, and has also been leveled against (among others) Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt. It is not clear whether Buber had any particular target in mind, or was simply reacting against what he saw as a problematic trend.

²³ Of course, Buber’s argument is vulnerable to the same critique that he levels against the *polis*: While both the Sabbatical and Jubilee existed on paper, it is far from clear how consistently they were practiced. The author of Chronicles, for example, suggests one reason for the Babylonian exile was Israel’s lengthy non-observance of the Sabbatical (36:20–21). And Nehemiah records the Israelites recommitting to both the Sabbath and Sabbatical (10:29–30, 32). At the same time, Josephus, writing in the first century CE, notes that the Jews in Palestine practiced the Sabbatical (1999, 14:10.6).

²⁴ In his essay “*Manhigot Sheba-Mikra* [Biblical Leadership]” (1964a, cf. 2000), Buber identifies five leadership “archetypes [*avot hatzuroi*]” (129) unique to the Hebrew Bible: the Patriarch, exemplified by Abraham; a founder-type, exemplified by Moses; the Judge, exemplified by Gideon; the King, exemplified by David; and the Prophet (129–132). The quality which unifies these figures is not simply their inclusion in scripture, but their election “contrary to the way of nature [*shelo miderekh hateva*],” the fact that they rise to prominence despite being “weak [*halash*]” and of “inferior [*nehul*]” origin (126–127). For an in-depth discussion see Avnon (1998, 88–97).

who offer him both kingship and dynastic rule: “Rule over us, both you and your son, and your son’s son also” (Judges 8:22). At first, Gideon’s reply simply mirrors the request: “I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you.” But he concludes with what amounts to a rebuke: “The Lord shall rule over you” (8:23). For Buber, this statement captures the essence of the theopolitical spirit: *Kingship itself*, as an institution, is reserved to God alone. No human being, now or in the future, is entitled to dominion over another human being, for dominion itself is a province of the divine. In this way, Buber writes, Gideon “dares to deal seriously with the rulership of God” ([1936] 1967, 59). His “No”—an “unconditional No for all time and historical conditions”—concretizes the “immediate, unmetaphorical, unlimitedly real” kingship of God (59, 93).

Schmitt is never explicitly cited in *Kingship*. But when the book is read through Buber’s critique from “The Question to the Single One,” his fingerprints are all over the text. Israelite theocracy, Buber notes, is often presented as “hierocracy,” rule not by God but a priestly class. Consequently, it is conceived in terms exactly opposed to theopolitics: Because the leader claims God’s authority, “the power over men is fundamentally at its strongest” (59). Yet Buber, making a veiled reference to Schmitt, insists that this interpretation is fundamentally flawed, reflecting a reading of Hebrew scripture in “the grip of political theories” (25). Real theocracy is precisely the opposite of hierocracy, precisely the inverse of political theology. In place of an all-powerful sovereign modeled on the deity is the actual deity whose power, reserved to it alone, need never be felt. In place of a “political” solidarity defined by violence is a theopolitical one defined by peaceful equality. And in place of a dependence on the will of other human beings—monarchs, Pharaohs, landlords, and taskmasters—is a total dependence on the will of God that is also a total freedom from men. For Buber, therefore, Schmitt’s political theology resembles less the Bible’s monotheism than the pagan despotisms on Israel’s borders—each one a “union of power between god and man,” led by “divinized” princes exercising absolute power over their people (89).

Theopolitics is thus Buber’s answer to political theology. It is the alternative, “religious” politics hinted at but never spelled out in his attack on Schmitt in “The Question to the Single One.” Given that both that essay and *Kingship* appeared in 1936, it is safe to assume that Buber worked on both at the same time. And it is reasonable to believe that he saw the two works as complementing each another: One, a critique of Schmitt at the level of philosophy; the other, a critique at the level of Biblical exegesis. Thus by joining collective solidarity to individual non-domination, he draws a roadmap for realizing the “true original nomad faith” even in the midst of settled civilization ([1944] 1960, 43). Human beings, he insists, are capable of organizing themselves under a distinctly political form of “rule” (that is, *arche*, as opposed to *a-arche* or “anarchy”) without relying on violence. Indeed whenever he invokes the

term “anarchy” in *Kingship*, it is not as praise but pejorative.²⁵

Yet at the very instant that he answers Schmitt, Buber poses another dilemma. The upshot of divine rule is its counterintuitive combination of freedom and submission: Total dependence on God guarantees total non-dependence on human beings; the “more purely it occurs, the less it wishes to compel obedience” ([1936] 1967, 148). But for exactly this reason, Buber notes, it is also highly unstable. Lacking coercion, its efficacy rests entirely on the vigorous theopolitical spirit of its participants. So long as every person acts *as if* God is sovereign, God effectively *is* sovereign; so long as divine rule sustains itself in thought, it sustains itself in fact. But once the theopolitical spirit fades, so too does the reluctance to dominate. Thus for the unaffected egoist, divine rule offers not a call to equality but a way of escaping responsibility. Indeed precisely because he is “sheltered” by theopolitics’ prohibition on human power, he finds himself a fox in his community’s chicken coop: He can exploit whomever he wishes (148).

Buber thus concludes that direct divine kingship, for all of its promise, ultimately fails as a viable political system. His source is the Book of Judges itself. Switching from an historical to a sociological key, he argues that although divine rule “envisions a community as voluntariness,” in fact it “degenerate[s] into a moderately sanctioned disorder” (148). As the unbelieving egoists grow in number, conflicts arise. Lacking a “unified and superior earthly government,” it becomes impossible to “maintain order and civilization.” Israel is “plunged again and again into anarchy” (84). And so the people, exhausted by war, their faith in divine leadership diminished, “rebel against the situation.” They take what for Buber is the most pivotal step in the history of political theory: Requesting—and receiving—a human king (162).²⁶

²⁵ Buber explicitly distinguishes theopolitics from anarchism in describing the conclusion of Judges, arguing that rulership of God entails an “order” which anarchism explicitly rejects ([1936] 1967, 83–4). As we have seen, it was precisely defining the “political” in terms of “order” that grounded Buber’s attacks on Schmitt in “The Question to the Single One” ([1936] 1957, 74–5). Likewise, in discussing the Jotham story in Judges, Buber argues that the narrative “could be understood anarchistically [*anarchistisch*]” only if it were read “independently of the Gideon passage.” Thus while its message is indeed that it is “seditious that men rule over men,” its alternative is not that “no one needs to rule,” but that “God alone” should rule; not a “commonwealth without government,” but a “commonwealth for which an invisible government is sufficient” ([1936] 1967, 75). See also the previously cited passage from *Moses* where he contrasts “the just law of the just *Melekh*,” with “the danger of ‘Bedouin’ anarchy” ([1946] 1965, 108). For contrary views, see Gudopp (1975), Ratzabi (2011), and Susser (1981).

²⁶ Like many scholars, Buber understands the Book of Judges to be a redaction of two books: An older anti-monarchical work and a more recent pro-monarchical work, with the final product reflecting an attempt at reconciliation. Based on Buber’s stated methodology—of unearthing the text’s “popular” voice—he could have dismissed the redaction as unreflective of the “true” Israelite standpoint. Yet he declines to take this step, arguing instead that the redactor’s effort was an authentically religious one: Deeply sympathetic to the *spirit* of direct divine kingship while acknowledging its *practical* failure ([1936] 1967, 83).

THE SECULARIZATION OF POLITICS

Theopolitics proved impossible to sustain. Weary of incessant war, the Israelites again ask for a human king. And God, recognizing a change in the people's spirit, grants it. As Buber argues in his 1944 book *The Prophetic Faith*, this moment marked a world-historical shift not only for the Jewish people but for politics in general. When a human being ascended the throne in Israel, it instantly secularized politics, granting it a Weberian disconnect from other human domains. Moreover, it set into motion a process whereby those domains—religion, aesthetics, morality, economics, and society—each acquired autonomy.

Israel's request for a king is repeated and finally granted in the First Book of Samuel. The question is why. In Judges, Gideon denies the people's offer of the throne in forceful terms, a denial that extends not only to himself and his descendants, but seemingly to all of Israel, for all time. In Samuel, the people petition the prophet, the prophet consults with God, and God immediately approves. But if God did not change, what did?

The answer, Buber argues, is the people of Israel, and in particular, the strength of their theopolitical spirit. As they flee Egypt, traverse the Sinai, and conquer Canaan, the Israelites, in Buber's view, conceive of themselves as living under direct divine rule. God's kingship permeates every aspect of their lives. War, politics, economics, morality, and cultic sacrifice: All are woven together through a religious orientation. As they transition into settled life, however, this feeling begins to fade. Without the divine presence continually in their midst—God's palace-tent and ark-throne—the Israelites gradually forget their deity. Their loyalties fracture. For agricultural fertility, they sacrifice to the gods of the soil [*baalim*]. For festive celebration, they consort with their neighbor's idols (Buber [1936] 1967, 95–8). To be sure, the God who delivered them from Egyptian bondage retains their loyalty in moments of crisis—in repelling foreign incursions and punishing tribal misdeeds. And He keeps an altar at Shiloh overseen by a cult of loyal priests. Yet Israel's religious orientation undergoes an invisible but profound transformation. Previously, God was understood as the subject of binding obedience and a wellspring of indeclinable obligation. Divine word was law—at every moment, and in every human sphere. Now, God is regarded like any other pagan deity: A source not of responsibility but of power, an object which, through a properly worded incantation or an unblemished offering, can be pressed into service. God, in short, is redefined as *useful* and *useable*. He is recognized for “his power of victory, not his sovereignty” (1964b, 751).

It is in this context, according to Buber, that Israel's request for a king should be understood. With the divine reduced to its utility, recognition of its kingship becomes contingent, isolated to those spheres in which it has instrumental value. And so when deity can no longer prove its value—when Israel suffers defeat in battle, for example—a new king must be found to replace it (751). “Give us a king to judge us like all the nations” the Israelites petition Samuel. Such a request, the biblical

text informs us, “displeases” him (Samuel 8:6). But in responding to Samuel's concerns, God indicates just how far Israel has strayed from the theopolitical spirit. “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you,” God says to his prophet, “For they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not be king over them” (8:7).

Nonetheless, God's answer also has another implication for Buber: Israel's kings will be radically different from those the world has known. They will be kings not in place of, but *under* God (1964b, 751–2). In the ancient Near East, the king was a semi-divine figure. Regarded as either the deity's viceroy or a kind of god himself, he held absolute sway over the human realm. Heaven was God's domain; the earth was his ([1936] 1967, 86). What this meant practically was that human kings were thought to legitimately exercise coercive power. Even without divine sanction, they could fight battles, force labor, and punish criminals. No check existed on their authority. What God implies by approving the people's request, for Buber, is therefore that Israel's kings must be different. Though responsible for economics and war—capable, as Samuel warns the people, of “taking your fields” and “conscripting your sons”—they are to conduct state affairs mindful of the deity's ultimate dominion (Samuel 8:14, 8:16). And while sharing the title of “king,” their role is to be more like that of a permanent judge: Instruments of divine will, aware that the power they wield is not their own. They are to be human kings, but in a theopolitical spirit.

Its uniqueness notwithstanding, this novel approach to kingship collapsed almost as soon as it began. And what it bequeathed to history was not a new model of human rule, but a world-historical rupture: the secularization of politics. In principle, the monarchy was meant to strengthen Israel's theopolitical spirit. In practice, it rent a fissure in its lifeworld, dividing the political sphere from the religious.

Buber's central example is Solomon. Fulfilling his father David's pledge, Solomon builds a temple to God in Jerusalem and delivers an oration designed to recommit the people to divine law. But the address, while offering a stirring affirmation of monotheism—“He is God, there is no other”—is equally notable for what it leaves out: any reference to God as *king* (1 Kings, 8:60). And, as Buber notes, it also has a conspicuous way of referring to the divine-human relationship. Deuteronomy enjoins every person to “be whole with the Lord your God” (18:13). Solomon, by contrast, concludes his oration with subtly different appeal: “Let your *heart* be whole with the Lord our God” (1 Kings, 8:61). For Buber, this shift in emphasis—from the self in its undivided entirety to the heart alone—presages a broader psychological and institutional realignment: A movement away from the unity of all human domains under God's rulership and toward a plurality of value spheres, the “religious” and “political” in particular.

Thus in a deeper sense, what Solomon's oration reflects is the dissipation of the theopolitical spirit. “There already blows here,” Buber writes, “the air of a political life in which the *ruach* [spirit] of God no longer reigns...[and] a time when the temple-mount and the

citadel-mount, religion and politics, are separated” ([1936] 1967, 117). Before the monarchy, God rules as the “sole owner of all land” and the “sole sovereign of the community.” With its advent, God is demoted, reassigned as a feudal chieftain in charge of “spiritual” and “religious” affairs. Although the deity remains in liturgy the Lord, “creator of heaven and earth,” His sovereignty extends no further than Israel’s hearts. It stops short of its palaces and city gates: “There is here an acknowledgment of the Lord of the heavens and the Lord of the cult too, but there remains no place for God as the leader of the people, and indeed Solomon did not need this. The functions of the Lord are to be reduced so that they do not bind the king” ([1944] 1960, 83). By doing this, Buber argues, Solomon awarded a victory to political theology and began the secularization of politics. But he also created an opening for the prophetic stance.

THE PROPHETIC STANCE

Israel’s prophets, according to Buber, voice the theopolitical spirit in the midst of profane politics. They stress the reality of God’s kingship and the inauthenticity of political theology. And they serve as gadflies to both king and populace, reminding the former that his power is not truly his own, and the latter that no human being is entitled to dominate another. Yet the advent of the prophetic stance, Buber emphasizes, represents less a fall from utopia than a response to unavoidable loss. And precisely because it is practiced under nonideal conditions, it offers what he believes to be a model for our own time: It keeps alive the “anarchic psychic foundation [*anarchischer Seelengrund*]” of theopolitics without insisting—dangerously and unfeasibly—on its direct realization.

The prophet’s fundamental teaching is the “undivided human life.” To bar the deity from *any* sphere of human activity, he proclaims, is wicked and idolatrous—a rebellion against God’s kingship ([1946] 1965, 199). And so his charge is to reverse this trend, to realize “the unity of religious and social life in the community of Israel,” and substantiate “a ruling by God that shall not be culturally restricted but shall comprehend the entire existence of the nation” (186). He attempts to reintegrate awareness of the Torah’s basic charge—to seek kindness, righteousness, and justice—into “the whole life, the whole civilization of people, economy, society, and state,” as well as the “whole individual, his emotions, and his will...his life at home and in the marketplace, in the temple and in the popular assembly” (1967, 195–6). What he asks for, in short, is not only wholeness of the heart but of the entire human being. “The prophets,” Buber writes, “never differentiate between the spiritual and the temporal, between the realm of God and the realm of man. For them, the realm of God is nothing more than the realm of man as it is to be” (119).

Yet in completing his task, the prophet confronts a formidable obstacle: The corrupting tendencies of kingship itself. In theory, the Israelite monarch’s power is not his own; his hands are tied by God’s law; and his

person is demythologized, presented not as a demigod but a human being through and through. But once in power, he transgresses his limitations. With an army of soldiers dependent on his command, he forgets his dependence on God. Exercising the power to punish, he takes no notice of that power’s real origin. And although his arm, bearing a Torah scroll, is literally bound by divine statute, he experiences no penalty for overreaching.²⁷ Thus while paying lip-service to the invisible God, in truth he deifies himself, testing, overstepping, and ultimately annihilating the line separating him from the pagan kings. “The possessors of power and property,” Buber notes, “naturally resist the demand for the integral fulfillment of divine truth and justice; they therefore try to limit the service of God to the sacral sphere, and in all other spheres recognize his authority merely by words and symbols” (196).

The prophet’s role vis-à-vis the king, therefore, is to continually affirm God’s kingship, reject political theology, and so infuse the king himself with the theopolitical spirit. Having no power but his voice, no title but his name, and no claim to authority but his charisma, he must nonetheless face down the greatest power in the land. And while he cannot challenge the monarchy as such, he can remind the enthroned of where real kingship lies: “The Lord is the true vanguard, the true champion, the true leader, the true king. That is the *nabi* [prophetic] attitude” (Buber 2000, 134). The prophet thus serves as a necessary foil to the monarch. A relentless gadfly to human power, he takes on the “commission of the Lord’s representative which is not fulfilled by the kings in Israel” ([1944] 1960, 67, cf. Avnon 1998, 93).

In this sense, the prophet also epitomizes what Buber, in his writings on existentialism and ethical phenomenology, holds to be an inescapable truth of the human condition: A person chooses neither his hour, nor his society, nor his polity. He finds himself enmeshed in norms, economic structures, social dynamics, and political institutions that he did not create and cannot fully escape. Confronted with this reality, people often react in one of two ways. A first group embraces it. They celebrate the world as it is, exult in its facticity, and reconcile themselves to its ways and values. To paraphrase Hegel, they rejoice in the present, attuning their rationality to accommodate its governing rationality. A second group revolts against it. Finding their world a site of unpunished injustice and unchecked immorality, they turn their backs. To preserve the beauty of their souls, they retreat into anti-political quietism or thought’s internal exile.

Buber’s prophet takes a third path. “The prophets,” he writes “do not fight the state as state,” but the “state that lacks a divine, a spiritual element.” Because they

²⁷ Deuteronomy (17: 18–19) teaches that “when [a king of Israel] sits on the throne of his kingdom, he will write for himself a copy of this teaching [lit. “*torah*”] in a book...And it will be with him, and he will read in it all the days of his life.” From this passage, rabbinic thought inferred that each king of Israel should write and keep for himself a small Torah scroll literally bound on his arm. See for example Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim u’Milchamot*, 3.1.

are “faithful to the Jewish concept, they cannot deny the world as it exists, cannot turn away from it; they must endeavor to permeate it with spirit, the spirit of true community” (1967, 118–9). Recognizing the ineluctability of his hour, the prophet neither refuses nor embraces it. He takes stock of the world, scrutinizes its flaws, and measures its needs. Rejecting the inevitability of domination, he seeks to diminish it—on a real, objective, and structural level—in all his social roles. And he accepts it as a test and challenge—indeed a “higher form of challenge” than any possible under immediate divine rule (1964b, 735). He embodies the theopolitical spirit in a post-theopolitical age.

PROPHETS IN THE PRESENT

“And the boy ran to tell Moses and said: ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!’/And Joshua son of Nun, attendant to Moses from his youth, spoke out and said, ‘My lord Moses, restrain them!’/And Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets!’”

—*Hebrew Bible, Book of Numbers (11:27–29)*

This article has offered a new reading of Martin Buber’s political thought. Though Buber is not often read for his insights about politics, running through his oeuvre is an overlooked, original, and important critique of political theology. And though Buber was an unsystematic thinker, a close reading of his scriptural commentaries reveals that he found an alternative in the Hebrew Bible’s earliest political theory: the kingship of God—what he called “theopolitics.”

As originally conceived, theopolitics is principled and uncompromising. It teaches that no human being, at any time, in any sphere of activity, has the right to make another dependent on her will. Theopolitics’ history, however, teaches that this has been unworkable. It tells of a people who tried to sustain a radical egalitarianism, who cyclically fallowed their fields and freed their slaves, then backslid into idolatry, had stretches of real success, but ultimately failed, succumbing to egoistic defection, the craving for security, and the all-too-human need for a tangible semiotics of political power. It tells of both the promise and paradox of direct divine rule: The same voluntariness that guarantees its freedom also makes it uniquely fragile. It persists in practice only as long as it persists in its adherents’ minds. These were the circumstances, Buber argues, that gave rise to human kings. And ascending alongside them were the prophets. These individuals promulgated the theopolitical spirit while accepting its institutional impracticality; they refused as idolatrous any comparison of God and human sovereign while affirming the reality of worldly power. In concluding this article, I will argue that it is this prophetic stance, with certain modifications, that Buber believes we should adopt in our own time.

To be a prophet in the present requires living in deep moral tension. As a matter of *normative principle* we affirm that no person is entitled to make another person dependent on her will. But as a *practical necessity*, we

accept such forms of power. Company managers need to assign work to their subordinates; military commanders need to order their soldiers; parents sometimes need to say “no” to their children. Our task is thus not to impose theopolitics. As Buber writes of Elijah, “he serves his God as a nomad, but he has no nomadic ideal” ([1944] 1960, 80). Rather than overthrow the secular state with the modern equivalent of direct divine rule (anarchy), we criticize human authority in every sphere of activity. We provide a clear and steady voice for the theopolitical *spirit*, reminding persons and institutions alike that they have no inherent right to power and of the wrongfulness of domination. We censure and chasten, rebuke and reprimand. This, Buber insists, is the “*nabi* [prophetic] attitude—with or without the application of the term” (2000, 134).

Of course, this is by no means the extent of Buber’s political program. He writes, for example, about how the state’s role can be gradually scaled back to make room for more organic and spontaneous forms of social organization, like the kibbutz ([1949] 1958, 104, cf. 40).²⁸ He deeply opposes all forms of imperialism, xenophobia, and “hypertrophic” nationalism ([1921] 1983, cf. Gordon 2008). Moreover, he acknowledges that there are important differences between the Biblical age and our own. Israel’s prophets had to contend with kings who, in their vast dominion, were always in danger of succumbing to self-deification. People in our time must vie not only with Schmittian “total states” but with far more depersonalized hierarchies: the market’s “immutable laws,” bureaucracy’s rationalizing forces, and the fetters of inequality. As Buber writes, in a veiled reference to Weber, such “dogmas of gradual process” imply that exploitation today is as immutable as in pre-modernity ([1923] 1958, 57). They leave no room for the belief that domination can be diminished.

Yet despite these differences, Buber argues that our responsibility today is essentially the same: To voice the theopolitical spirit in a society that always risks burying it beneath layers of dependence; to reject political theologies of all stripes; and to reinforce the belief that every human being “is placed in freedom, and that every hour in which he, in his current situation, feels himself addressed is an hour of genuine decision” (1967, 219). Thus while we may superficially sustain the distinction between value spheres, deep down we breathe the theopolitical spirit. “No factory and no office is so abandoned by creation,” Buber writes, that it is insulated from the possibility of a “sober and brotherly glance,” from an awareness of “faces and names and biographies,” from the treatment of each individual not as a “number with a human mask but as a person” ([1929] 1957, 37–8). And as foils, not to kings, but to naturalizations of all kinds, we constantly reaffirm the basic theopolitical message: That interpersonal exploitation is not a necessity, but a choice; that true freedom is not lordship over others, but mutual non-domination; and that “destiny is not a dome pressed tightly down on the

²⁸ See especially *Paths in Utopia* ([1949] 1958). For analyses of Buber’s contemporary politics, see Avnon (1998), Kohanski (1972), Mendes-Flohr (2006), and Susser (1979).

world of men,” but lives shared together in genuine solidarity ([1923] 1958, 57).

In this way, Buber also gives us a vantage to question contemporary applications of political theology more broadly. When theorists today invoke theological ideas, it is almost never to support Schmitt’s state theory but rather to advance emancipatory and egalitarian aims antithetical to his politics (Agamben [2011] 2013; Badiou 2003; Raschke 2015; Reinhard, Santner, and Žižek 2005; Robbins 2011; Santner 2011). Indeed it is precisely the promise of harnessing the power of religious rhetoric without its accompanying metaphysical commitments that has made political theology attractive to a wide range of postmodern thinkers grasping for new sources of normativity. Buber, seemingly, would be sympathetic to these efforts. But as should now be plain, his project differs from them at its core. Adopting the mode of political theology entails theorizing analogically from religion, assigning theological concepts to tasks traditionally reserved for moral and political ones: The sovereign’s power becomes like God’s power (Schmitt [1922] 2005); the state’s “general will” becomes like the deity’s “general will” (Rousseau [1762] 2010); the American people’s presence in politics becomes like the divine presence “hovering” over the universe (de Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 1.1.4). Yet what Buber learned from both Hebrew scripture and recent history is that we are *not* gods. We are creatures in flesh and blood. And neither freedom from domination nor solidarity with others can be achieved by feigning divinity. Thus instead of using theological language to support preconceived ideas, Buber looks to the Hebrew Bible to ground his normative views. His concept of theopolitics arises from ethically attentive exegesis, not philosophical rumination. It reflects an enduring lesson of Israel’s nomadic ethos: That our hope, in the end, lies not with the philosopher’s pen or the sovereign’s sword, but in the hard, daily task of ethical life. Political theory may help to guide these labors; only we can work for their success.

In an early essay on Hasidism, Buber observes that despite the movement’s association with mysticism, this “magical element” was in truth peripheral. Like Israel’s prophets, its “old/new principle” was primarily practical: The absence of God’s *presence* did not entail the end of God’s *meaning* (1946, 70). Hasidism recognized that we can no longer rely on miracles for salvation. We must take responsibility for our own destiny.²⁹ And yet what Hasidism also perceived is that our destiny in an important sense *is* God’s destiny. “You think I am far away from you,” says the Hasidic deity, in Buber’s words, “but in your love for your neighbor you will find Me” (1967, 212). When we live the spirit of theopolitics in all our relationships, we effectively restore a condition of divine sovereignty (1946, 70). We drain our social relations of coercion. We realize God’s purpose without God’s presence. And this, for Buber, is ultimately the point.

²⁹ In this way, the Hasidic message is for Buber a restatement of the prophetic one; it “completes and widens the ancient teaching of Israel” (1946, 106).

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