

James Harrington on the Hebrew Commonwealth

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Abstract: Living in the post-9/11 world that we do, it is evident that the contemporary world continues to be very much vulnerable to political disruptions emanating from theocratic politics; and in that sense, any secularist hopes that may have been entertained for a political domestication of religion are far from having been fulfilled. That in turn suggests to us that the concerns that animated the great seventeenth-century struggle against clerical power and theocratic authority are enduring ones, and that we have reason to continue to engage intellectually with critics of priestcraft like Hobbes, Harrington, and Spinoza. Within that broader context, this article concerns itself with Harrington in particular, focusing on his efforts in his polemical writings of the late 1650s to draw resources for Erastian politics from a Hobbes-inspired account of the Hebrew republic.

1

The recent publication of Eric Nelson's important book, *The Hebrew Republic*,¹ would seem to offer an opportune occasion to take another careful look at James Harrington's fascinating writings on the commonwealth of the ancient Hebrews. We should be interested in the lessons Harrington hoped to draw from that commonwealth for the republican understanding of politics not only for the light it can shed on Harrington as an exemplar of mid-seventeenth-century republicanism, but—quite a bit more importantly—for what mid-seventeenth-century republicanism can yet teach us about

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¹Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). For a sketch of other recent relevant scholarship, see Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 124n20 and 131n61. Two other just-published articles directly addressed to this theme are the chapters by Marco Barducci ("Harrington, Grotius, and the Commonwealth of the Jews, 1656–1660") and Mark Somos ("Irenic Secularization and the Hebrew Republic in Harrington's *Oceana*") in *European Contexts for English Republicanism*, ed. Gaby Mahlberg and Dirk Wiemann (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

confronting and navigating the still-perilous terrain of religion and politics. As Justin Champion has highlighted, Harrington was the theorist who first coined the term *priestcraft*.² We no longer employ this seventeenth-century polemical vocabulary, yet the challenges of “priestcraft” and its implications for political life still afflict us (very much so), and almost certainly always will. If Harrington’s having coined the term *priestcraft* is not merely a minor curiosity in the history of anticlerical discourse, but on the contrary constitutes a significant aspect of his intellectual legacy (which I suspect that it does)—namely, as a notable contributor to the rise of modern European secularism—then we would again have good reason to pay particularly close attention to the texts that contained the seed of that sizeable legacy. The political containment and domestication of religious orthodoxy and the political power of churches and priests remains on the agenda of contemporary politics,³ and therefore we ought to probe as thoroughly as we can the intellectual roots of the project to render religion “civil”—a project that preoccupied or even obsessed leading thinkers within the Western canon from Machiavelli to Hobbes to Locke to Montesquieu to Rousseau and beyond.

Of course, I am not foolish enough to suggest that seventeenth-century political thought, Harringtonian or otherwise, can offer us an immediate roadmap for coping with twenty-first-century quandaries concerning theocracy or theocratic political authority. But the function of theory is to open up *space for reflection* on dilemmas of political life that tend to recur perennially. And my claim is that Harringtonian texts (including ones that have fallen, unjustly, into historical neglect or quasi-oblivion) still continue to do that. Insofar as we concede the benefits of wrestling with the enduring problem of religion and politics in dialogue with great texts of the Western canon, what this involves is not necessarily reading and being instructed by Harrington on his own, but more likely reading him within the broader

²Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 174.

³Examples of theocratic politics, or theocracy-aspiring politics, in the Islamic world easily come to mind, but the continuing relevance of theocracy is not limited to contemporary Islam. One non-Islamic example would be the continuing meddling of the Serbian Orthodox Church in attempts to negotiate accommodations between Serbia and Kosovo. Or if one imagines that problems of this kind are limited to the monotheistic religions, perhaps on the assumption that no religious tradition could be more politically benign than Buddhism, consider the recent reports of radical Buddhist monks helping to incite anti-Islamic ethnic violence in central Myanmar. Hence the theocratic potential of *all* of the world religions is brought home to us especially starkly in this last example. I’ll run the risk of being accused of anachronism in asserting that the fundamental problem wrestled with by Harrington and the other great secularizing early modern thinkers—the problem of affirming the sovereignty of the civil sphere and combatting its subordination to the clerical realm—is one that is still very much with us.

current of modern political thought aimed at curbing clerical power and asserting the supremacy of civil authority.⁴ It would certainly be too much to expect that a resumed dialogue with Harrington or other great thinkers in the canon of Western theory could supply maxims for meeting the challenges that confront contemporary political practice. Nonetheless, coming to see our own predicaments as the continuation of an epic intellectual struggle taken up in the seventeenth century may contribute to a better sense of why some of these problems are so intractable. The term *priestcraft* can be a bit misleading if it is taken to refer narrowly to rule by priests. The current president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, is a cleric whereas his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was not a cleric. Yet Rouhani's politics are manifestly more pragmatic, less "theocratic," than Ahmadinejad's politics. The real issue, clearly, is secular politics versus theocratic (faith-driven) politics in its various incarnations. The example of contemporary Iran also gives us reason to question Harrington's view that republicanism is necessarily opposed to cleric-dominated politics, for theocratic Iran very much prides itself on being an Islamic *republic*.⁵ Still, without committing ourselves to any specific Harringtonian claim, rereading Harrington may help to impress upon us that keeping civil authority from being swamped by religious authority remains a perennial political concern.

2

Any of the three main texts composed by Harrington subsequent to the publication of *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656) would be worthy of close study in this regard—namely, *Pian Piano* (1657), *The Prerogative of Popular Government* (1658), and *The Art of Lawgiving* (1659)—for all three are preoccupied with issues of theology, ecclesiology, and scriptural hermeneutics that are central to Harrington's core civic-republican concerns. We will start with the earliest and most compact of these post-*Oceana* texts since that probably offers the readiest way of illustrating the potential fruits of such a renewed hermeneutical exercise brought to bear on the study of Harrington. Naturally, we should avail ourselves of *The Prerogative of*

⁴My purpose in *Civil Religion* was to convey the scope of this broader intellectual movement animating modern political philosophy. Also relevant are two companion essays of mine entitled "Civil Religion and Anticlericalism in James Harrington" (forthcoming in *European Journal of Political Theory*) and "Shaftesbury's Characteristics and the Problem of Priestcraft" (forthcoming in *Challenging Theocracy: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, ed. Toivo Koivukovski, David Edward Tabachnick, and Hermino Teixeira, to be published by University of Toronto Press).

⁵For alerting me to the importance of this point (namely, the strong *republican* self-consciousness of the theocrats who animated Iran's 1979 revolution), I owe thanks to Nader Hashemi.

Popular Government and *The Art of Lawgiving* to fill out our account of Harrington's views; but as I hope to show, much of what we seek is already available in *Pian Piano*. In the introduction to his 1992 edition of *Oceana*, Pocock ventured the suggestion that it is in the post-*Oceana* polemics concerning religion and theology that we witness "the strongest force driving Harrington to write and publish."⁶ This is an entirely plausible view, and gives us ample reason to probe these texts in a careful way. In *The Prerogative of Popular Government*, Harrington himself explains why religion, and the political taming of religion, constitutes the key issue: "where [the clergy] die at the root a prince may sit a while, but is not safe."⁷ That is, if priestcraft could be definitively defeated, this would guarantee an equally definitive end to monarchy.

Harrington has been rightly classified as a theorist of civil religion.⁸ When we put Harrington alongside other civil religionists such as Hobbes and Spinoza, we can see that furnishing one's preferred vision of politics with foundations far more ambitious than those available from merely secular reason is a characteristic mark of the theorist of civil religion. It was important for Harrington no less than for Hobbes and Spinoza to give an extended account of the nature of the Hebrew commonwealth—as either exemplary or cautionary or as both. As I hope to show, delving into some of Harrington's post-*Oceana* oeuvre helps quite a bit in giving us a better appreciation of what that account was. As already flagged, this will largely take the form of a commentary on *Pian Piano*, though I won't hesitate to draw on other works of the late 1650s as well. Our reading of Harrington is more or less founded on the axiom (which vindicates itself as a reasonable one to the extent that our interpretation generates fruitful insights) that Harrington, in these "theological" works, was doing pretty much the same thing that Hobbes and Spinoza were doing: supplying their chosen political theories with revelation-based theological credentials. Without exception, these thinkers come up with scriptural interpretations that cohere with their own theoretical project: Hobbes's reading of the Old Testament supports *his* political philosophy; Harrington's reading of the Old Testament supports *his* political philosophy; Spinoza's reading of the Old Testament supports *his* political philosophy; Locke's reading of the Old Testament supports *his*

⁶Editor's introduction to James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana and a System of Politics*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), x–xi; this edition is cited hereafter as *Oceana*.

⁷*The Political Works of James Harrington*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 537; cf. 563, referring to "sympathy ... between the mitre and the crown." Pocock's edition is hereafter cited as *Political Works*, and parenthetical page references refer to this work.

⁸Mark Goldie, "The Civil Religion of James Harrington," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 197–222.

political philosophy. What I called above the “axiom” of our interpretation suggests that what these thinkers are doing is not interpreting scripture for the sake of interpreting scripture, but rather *mobilizing* scripture on behalf of a particular vision of politics.⁹ Admittedly, other accounts can be given of what is involved in articulating a political vision paired with a particular biblical hermeneutics. If one sees a direct correspondence between a given set of political-philosophic principles and a given interpretation of scripture, rather than assuming that the latter must be in the service of the former, it may be seen as the other way around; or indeed, it may be that they simply evolved in tandem, without either being yoked instrumentally to the other.¹⁰

Nelson, in *The Hebrew Republic*, tends to presume that the obsession of seventeenth-century political thinkers like Harrington with drawing support for their political vision from interpretations of the Old Testament tells us that modern political thought is less devoted to erecting its conceptions of political life on securely secularized foundations than is generally thought. As will be evident in the interpretation that follows (as well as in what I have published elsewhere), I am skeptical that that is the right conclusion to draw from Harrington’s preoccupation with scriptural hermeneutics. That is, I am strongly inclined to think that Harrington appropriates themes from the Hebrew Bible because such tropes serve his *rhetorical* purposes as a champion of the republican tradition—and, *no less*, as a resolute foe of clerical power. One fairly decisive piece of evidence for the view that Harrington was fundamentally driven by something other than considerations of piety is his civil-religionist appeal to the idea of exploiting “the present superstition” for its potential political utility since it is “that which is always the most powerful with the people.”¹¹ Admittedly, this is in the

⁹Coleridge’s treatment of the Hebrew commonwealth as an archetype in chapter 4 of *On the Constitution of the Church and State* offers another example. He is interested in some of the same aspects of the regime that interest Harrington and Spinoza, but again, he interprets them in ways that bolster his own political vision. Given that the essential purpose, for Harrington as for the others, is to find scriptural vindication for a particular conception of civil government, Pocock badly misstates his intended point when he claims (uncharacteristically) that “whether [the Mosaic state] had been a monarchy under the high priests or a republic mattered less, at least to Harrington, than that the priest had claimed no authority independent of the election’s civil structure” (“A Discourse of Sovereignty,” in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. N. Phillipson and Q. Skinner [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 410). It mattered enormously to Harrington to be able to show that the Hebrew commonwealth *is* a commonwealth.

¹⁰This point, which strikes me as a fair one, was made by Eric Nelson in a critical response to an earlier draft of this article.

¹¹For the text, see *Oceana*, 245. In interpreting this text in the civil-religionist way that I do, quite a lot would seem to hang on Harrington’s choice of verb tense: It *hath been* a maxim with legislators. The use of the present perfect progressive tense suggests that

context of a discussion of pagan superstition, which on Harrington's view was rightly debunked by Cicero.¹² (In effect, Harrington, in the passage I have cited, endorses the religious skepticism of Cicero while criticizing the priestly credulity of Plutarch. Moreover, adding to the significance of the Plutarch/Cicero juxtaposition is the fact that while Cicero too participated in religious rites, he, unlike Plutarch, held his office as augur by virtue of being a Roman *magistrate*, not by virtue of being a priest.) Yet there are good reasons to believe that like Machiavelli, Harrington considered paganism, superstitious or not, to be politically superior to Christianity, and in that respect his commonwealth was intended to be, as John Toland approvingly called it, a "Heathenish Commonwealth."¹³ In any case, whether one reads Harrington's texts as I read them or as Nelson reads them, either way one has a compelling reason to attend closely to Harrington's writings about ancient Israel in order to mine them for a better understanding of his broader theoretical purposes; and my aim in what follows is to look closely at *Pian Piano* and some of his other polemical writings of the late 1650s for just that reason.

Pocock gives quite a good encapsulation of Harrington's version of the enterprise that interests us—namely, the enterprise of bolstering one's political vision with a parallel or corresponding reading of scripture (and of the Old Testament in particular)—when he writes: "increasingly concerned with that equation of republic and theocracy which had given rise to the millennial utterances at the end of [*Oceana*, Harrington] set out to show that both ancient Israel and the apostolic Church manifested the republican form of government."¹⁴ Harrington himself makes this purpose explicit in *Oceana*: "as the kingdom of God the Father was a commonwealth, so shall be the kingdom of God the Son" (*Oceana*, 232). If a plausible case can be made

this is a *general* maxim of wise statesmen rather than one limited to the pagan era. As Nelson helpfully drew to my attention, the Somos essay cited in note 1 above also presents Harrington as a resolute "secularizer." Ultimately, deciding between Nelson's view that the interest in ancient Israel on the part of seventeenth-century Erastian thinkers flows from "deeply felt religious convictions" (*The Hebrew Republic*, 4; cf. 128) and my view that it was animated by secularizing civil-religion concerns would require penetrating what Hobbes in *Leviathan*, chap. 8, called the (holy or profane) "secret thoughts of a man." And as Hobbes was entirely right to underscore, that is impossible.

¹²Cf. *Oceana*, 40, where Harrington refers to *The Nature of the Gods* as Cicero's "most excellent book."

¹³This is one of my themes in "Civil Religion and Anticlericalism in James Harrington," cited above. The phrase "Heathenish Commonwealth" is from Toland's "The Life of James Harrington" that introduces the Toland edition of Harrington: see xxvi of the 1737 edition published in Dublin. Toland claims that Richard Baxter named his anti-Harringtonian book *The Holy Commonwealth* precisely as a pointed rebuke to Harrington's "heathenish" version of republicanism.

¹⁴Pocock, "Historical Introduction," in *Political Works*, 76.

that the text of the Old Testament presents God as intending Israel to be a republic, then partisans of a true commonwealth in Cromwell's England would have, in effect, divine sanction for their own political project.

Harrington's interlocutor in *Pian Piano* is Henry Ferne, an Anglican and royalist cleric who received a copy of *Oceana* from one of Harrington's sisters, and wrote back letting the sister (and Harrington) know of his acute displeasure with the book. It is striking that the very first objection to *Oceana* posed by Ferne in the letter to Harrington's sister that provoked *Pian Piano* was a challenge to Harrington's appeal to the precedent of ancient Israel: Harrington "is not a little mistaken [in *Oceana*] in thinking the Israel commonwealth or government under Moses so applicable unto his purpose as he would make it" (*Political Works*, 370). No less striking is Ferne's expression of his awareness of the close affinity between Harrington's views and those of Hobbes with respect to ecclesiological questions (including scriptural support for their views): "what is said in relation to the church, or religion in the point of government, ordination, excommunication, had better beseemed Leviathan and is below the parts of this gentleman" (*ibid.*). As Pocock points out ("Historical Introduction," 89), Ferne was by no means the only critic of Harrington to notice the strong resemblance between Harrington's ecclesiological views and scriptural interpretations and those of Hobbes. Matthew Wren hit on a nice turn of phrase when he observed that "Mr *Harrington* ... does silently swallow down such Notions as Mr *Hobs* hath chewed for him" (*Political Works*, 423n1). In reply, Harrington points out that the interpretation of 1 Samuel 8 that he shares with Hobbes is traceable back to Josephus; hence "the doctrine that God was king in Israel by compact or covenant ... is more ancient than Hobbes" (422–23).

Ferne complains bitterly of the "meddling in matters of religion" (371) by the likes of Hobbes and Harrington (aggravated in the case of Harrington by the fact that, as a landed gentleman, he ought to have known better).¹⁵ This draws a powerful retort from Harrington: "whenever the clergy have gained this point, namely that they are the Catholic Church, or that it is unlawful for gentlemen, either in their private capacity to discourse, or in their public to propose, as well in the matter of church as state government, neither government nor religion have failed to degenerate into mere priestcraft" (372).¹⁶

¹⁵Ferne: "lamentable it is to see so many (especially gentlemen of good parts) so opinionate ... in matters of religion" (371; cf. 370, already quoted, and bottom of 382). On p. 384, Harrington asserts that *theologians* have corrupted scripture with their mistranslations and misreadings, and only lay scholars are equipped to set this right. See Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 107 and 111–12, for a discussion of the same theme in Spinoza.

¹⁶This debate about "meddling in matters of religion" gets pursued under the rubric of the sixth query (382–83). Harrington is emphatic that only lay scholars (such as Grotius, Selden, and Cunaeus), not theologians, can be trusted to make available reliable accounts of the Hebrew commonwealth. As already noted, Champion

Ferne's overarching suggestion in the letter of November 4, 1656, is that it is shameful that a landed gentleman like Harrington has allowed himself to be duped into a revolt not only against monarchy but also against aristocracy and (especially) against the Church of England. Harrington's response, right from the start, hangs on how one interprets the political constitution of ancient Israel. Far from republicanism requiring a repudiation of aristocracy, all bona fide popular commonwealths incorporate a respect for aristocracy in the institution of the senate: "that the senate ever had the supreme authority, as well in matters of religion as state, is not only clear in all other popular governments, but in the Old Testament" (371).¹⁷ Indeed, virtually the whole of the epistolary debate between Ferne and Harrington that composes *Pian Piano* is a debate about how to interpret the Old Testament, and in particular, about whether the Old Testament is as compatible with Harrington's republicanism as *Oceana* claims it to be.¹⁸

Pian Piano is basically divided into seven queries, abstracted from the original challenges posed in Ferne's letter to Harrington's sister. In each case, Ferne elaborates on the original objection, and Harrington responds. In the debate over the first query, Ferne basically rejects the idea that either the senate or "the assemblies of the people" had any real power or authority, "both of them receiving laws by the hand of Moses" (373). The idea of Israel as a Harringtonian "commonwealth," according to Ferne, misrepresents both the monarchical nature of Moses's authority and the relation between God and the people of Israel (again, basically a monarchical authority). Harrington's republican narrative assumes that God's covenant with Israel places "God and the people on equal terms," that God's laws have validity only insofar as the people consent to them (*ibid.*). In fact, what the Old Testament teaches is that Israelite theocracy flows from the unilateral authority of God (embodied practically in Moses). How does Harrington

points to the text on p. 372 as representing the very first occurrence in print of the term "priestcraft"; it occurs again on p. 384. However, as Paul A. Rahe (*Against Throne and Altar* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 210) points out, Harrington's coinage was anticipated, a decade previously, by Henry Marten's slightly less tuneful "Clergy craft."

¹⁷Cf. 378: "a commonwealth without the senate must of necessity degenerate into anarchy." See also bottom of 544.

¹⁸Concerning Harrington's reliance on the example of ancient Israel, see Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic*; and Gary Remer, "After Machiavelli and Hobbes: James Harrington's Commonwealth of Israel," in *Political Hebraism: Judaic Sources in Early Modern Political Thought*, ed. G. Schochet, F. Oz-Salzberger, and M. Jones (Jerusalem: Shalem, 2008), 207–30. Another very helpful discussion of Harrington's engagement with the Hebrew commonwealth is offered by Justin A. I. Champion in "Mosaica respublica: Harrington, Toland, and Moses," forthcoming in *Perspectives on English Revolutionary Republicanism*, ed. Gaby Mahlberg and Dirk Wiemann, to be published by Ashgate.

respond? He vehemently rejects Ferne's suggestion that it is an act of impiety to present Moses's Israel as a commonwealth. In particular, he argues that close attention to the biblical texts shows that "the authority of *proposing* unto the people ... was derived by the king from the judge, by the judge from the Sanhedrim, by the Sanhedrim from Moses, and by Moses from God," but the responsibility for "the suffrage, or *result*" indeed resided with the people (374; my italics).¹⁹ In consequence, "God was the king in Israel by covenant, *proposed* by himself or his servant Moses, and *resolved* by the people" (ibid.; my italics). The theocratic monarchy of the Old Testament was in fact an *elective* monarchy (a government not by command but by covenant); and as soon as the people withdrew their consent and demanded a different form of regime—as they did in the key text of 1 Samuel 8²⁰—God had no choice but to bow to the people's power of result

¹⁹One should not fail to notice the important suggestion here that the political sovereignty inhering in Moses was passed neither to Joshua nor to Aaron but rather to *the senate*. This is in fact crucial to Harrington's subtle narrative: it suggests that what fundamentally defined the Mosaic regime was neither Moses as founder, nor Aaron as high priest, nor the "Jethronian prefectures" cited by Ferne, but precisely the Sanhedrin. One might say that in this sense the Mosaic regime was essentially an aristocratic regime.

²⁰It may be that *both* in the case of Spinoza and in that of Harrington, reading Hobbes triggered the insight that if Israel became a monarchy with the episode narrated in 1 Samuel 8, then it must have been a commonwealth (republic) *prior* to this episode. See Beiner, *Civil Religion*, chap. 11, for an analysis of parallel concerns in Spinoza. But chapter 1 of Nelson's *The Hebrew Republic* makes clear that Hobbes was hardly the first thinker to attempt to spin a political philosophy out of this text. Moreover, we have already cited Harrington's own view, enunciated in the context of denying that his debt to Hobbes is as large as it appeared to his critics, that the republican reading of 1 Samuel 8 in fact goes as far back as Josephus. Nelson's thesis is that the key reason why a whole range of seventeenth-century political theorists became preoccupied with the meaning of 1 Samuel 8 is that "a tradition of rabbinic commentary [on the relevant texts] became available to the Christian West only during the Hebrew revival of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries" (*The Hebrew Republic*, 26). Also very interesting is Nelson's claim (25) about Hobbes's "alarmed response to what had become of republican political theory in the 1650s." Nelson's suggestion is that Hobbes was so appalled that his interpretation of 1 Samuel 8 had helped to give impetus to forms of republicanism like that of Harrington (or worse, Nedham or Milton) that he felt obliged to excise that whole discussion from his 1668 Latin version of *Leviathan*. As regards the republican appeal to 1 Samuel 8 by Nedham and Milton, see Marchamont Nedham, *The Excellencie of a Free-State*, ed. Blair Worden (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2011), 72–73; and *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. 7, ed. Robert W. Ayers, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 424 and 449–50 as well as the additional references flagged in 359n15. For corresponding texts in Sidney, see for instance Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, ed. Thomas G. West (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1990), 39, 130, 323–24, and 336–39; and Nelson, *The Hebrew Commonwealth*, 52.

(*ibid.*). Notwithstanding the fact that Moses was its founder and God was its king, Israel *was* a “commonwealth.” Moreover, Harrington insists that Ferne is mistaken to claim that Moses “was a monarch, or stood alone.”²¹ From the moment of the institution of the Sanhedrin, Israel was a mixed regime, and Moses became “but prince of the senate, which *God* appointed to stand with him” (376; *my italics*).²²

Interpretation of the Old Testament is also central to Ferne and Harrington’s fundamental dispute over whether monarchy is or is not the best regime (second query). Ferne affirms as his ultimate principle that “order is the main concernment of government, and order is more perfected by reducing to unity, or having still one chief in the order” (376–77). But Ferne’s “unity” is really a duality, for “God [led his people] by the hand of Aaron and Moses: Moses chief in the whole government, and Aaron the chief in the priesthood” (377). Again, Harrington faults Ferne for insufficiently close reading of the texts: after the institution of the Sanhedrin, the high priest was “subordinate unto it, whether in the matter of religion or state” (377–78). As already pointed out, the Sanhedrin “was to stand ... with Moses; therefore Moses, from the institution thereof, was no more than prince or archon of it and general of the commonwealth; in each of which functions he was succeeded by Joshua” (378).²³

²¹Cf. the beginning of Harrington’s reply to the fourth query, where he states that the Hebrew regime could not have been a monarchy on account of “the elders that stood with Moses” (380).

²²Whereas Harrington is everywhere else in his theorizing insistent on Moses’s reliance on Jethro for the construction of his commonwealth, in his debate with Ferne Harrington strenuously denies that the institution of the senate owed anything to Jethro’s counsel. The message is that the senate is *divinely* mandated, rather than the product of merely prudential ordering. It is highly uncharacteristic of Harrington to claim, as he does at the end of *Pian Piano*, that specifically the institution of the Sanhedrin counts as “such civil power ... as cometh nearest unto God’s own pattern” (387). It tells us just how important the Sanhedrin is for Harrington with respect to his project of appropriating Israel as a model for republican politics (but see note 31 below).

²³Harrington’s highlighting of Moses’s dual status as “prince or archon” and as “general” naturally prompts one to think of Cromwell’s status as “archon” of what was still fundamentally a commonwealth. One should note that Harrington’s account is an important departure from that of Hobbes. For Hobbes, there is certainly no shared sovereignty between Moses and the Sanhedrin; and Hobbes ties sovereignty to the *theocratic* authority associated with the high priest rather than to the military authority inherited by Joshua (see Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 51, 58n60, and 127–29). In the most fundamental sense, Moses was *his own* high priest, and therefore Aaron was indeed “subordinate”—but to Moses, not to the Sanhedrin. (On 649, Harrington claims, surprisingly, that for Melchizedek [Genesis 14:18] but not for Moses, the offices of the king and the high priest were fused into one office, but it is hard to imagine that, *de facto*, this was not true of Moses as well.) For Hobbes, no

Harrington ends the second query with a compacted analysis of what amounts to the fall of the commonwealth (378). Following the death of Joshua, the Israelites (“mindless of the excellent orders of their commonwealth”) allowed their senate as well as their lesser courts to lapse, and what resulted was degeneration into anarchy and needless warfare. In response to this anarchy there was, during the period covered by the Book of Judges, a resort to dictatorial power in the Roman sense—for dictator in the Roman sense is, Harrington claims, precisely what “judge” means (*ibid.*; cf. 474). But this stopgap failed to stem the anarchy and corruption into which Israel had fallen, and this (“the true cause” of the turn away from the republican regime²⁴) in turn impelled the people toward “monarchy, under which they fared worse.”²⁵ This change of regime brought about “the execrable wickedness of most of their kings (the like whereunto was never known),” and eventually, the nadir of captivity for Israel and Judah. “This,” Harrington needles Ferne, “is that unity and order which you celebrate” (378). Monarchical unity is “the unity of a person that may do what he list” (379), which is hardly a recipe for true political order.

The next query raises the (for Harrington) decisive issue of the distribution of landed property. Ferne concedes that the Hebrews “had a kind of agrarian,” but he insists that this division of land by lot “notwithstanding left place for a sufficient difference and excess in dignity of persons, bounds of estates, measure of wealth and riches” (*ibid.*). In short, Ferne denies that the agrarian policy was as egalitarian as it would need to have been in order to furnish a model or archetype for Harringtonian republicanism. In reply, Harrington offers scriptural evidence that the majority of the land was indeed in the hands of the people, and thus Israel lacked the material basis for a viable monarchy: that is, one had a “popular balance” rather

less than for Harrington, it is essential that one not have a high priest with authority (“whether in matter of religion or state”) separate from that of the civil sovereign; but of course Hobbes would agree with Ferne that this sovereignty must be unitary, not shared with a senate.

²⁴*Political Works*, 378; cf. 474, on “the main cause of monarchy.”

²⁵Harrington elaborates this thesis in full detail in the fourth query (380–81), citing a lengthy catalogue of examples of tyranny, bloodshed, and political disorder in monarchical (postrepublican) Israel and Judah. (Obviously, the very fact that Israel had split into two distinct states was part of this story of political tumult.) Cf. *The Art of Lawgiving*, bk. 2, chap. 4. As is underscored by this text (640)—as well as the corresponding text in *The Prerogative of Popular Government* (525)—what concerns Harrington in 1 Samuel 8 is not only its implication that monarchy is erected on a republican foundation, but also Samuel’s prophetic warning to the people about the ills that monarchy will generate (verses 11–18). The critique of Hebrew monarchy offered by Harrington (and its lessons for contemporary politics) shares much in common with the parallel narrative offered by Spinoza.

than a properly “monarchical balance” (379–80). Lacking the appropriate material basis for sustaining a monarchical regime, the kings of Israel and Judah sought to distract the people with destructive wars. This unhappy history has much to teach Harrington’s contemporaries—as Harrington does not fail to point out—for according to his analysis in *Oceana*, this experience of “infirm and troubled” monarchy, owing to a mismatch between the regime and its material foundation, was precisely replicated in Stuart England (*ibid.*).²⁶

A fuller elaboration of Israel as an archetype of Harringtonian agrarian law is offered in Book 1, chapter 11 of *The Prerogative of Popular Government* (458–64).²⁷ On Harrington’s view, “the balance of a government” (459) unavoidably follows the balance in the distribution of property (a democratic balance in the holding of property produces democratic or republican government; an aristocratic property balance produces mixed monarchy; a monarchical property balance produces despotism). Changes in the balance of property produce corresponding changes in the balance of political power. Therefore, if one wants to ensure that a form of government originally intended to be republican *remains* republican, one *must* establish a legislative device perpetuating a democratic balance in the distribution of land. Hence the indispensable need, in a republican constitution, for an agrarian law. Did the Hebrews have such a law? Indeed they did: “the jubilee was a law instituted for preservation of the popular balance from alteration” (463).²⁸ There is no clearer way of determining God’s *political* (or constitutional) intention than by looking at how the balance of property was first established. It was originally based on a divine lottery; hence “God, in ordaining this balance, intended popular government” (462).²⁹

Especially conspicuous in this chapter is the language of divine purpose (or as Harrington goes so far as to call it on p. 459: “divine right”). Harrington

²⁶Harrington’s official (proto-Marxian) line is that monarchy becomes problematic, that is, loses its normative legitimacy, if and only if the material “base” and the political “superstructure” fall out of sync. But it is hard not to suspect that his true view (truer than the official line) is that monarchy is *inherently* normatively flawed.

²⁷As regards the notion of Israel as an “archetype,” note Harrington’s statement on p. 464 that in composing *Oceana*, “I have not varied from the authority of Israel in a tittle.”

²⁸For a comprehensive discussion, see Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic*, chap. 2. Interestingly (and not accidentally), Spinoza and Rousseau are just as interested in appealing to the Hebrew institution of the jubilee in articulating *their* versions of republicanism as Harrington is: see Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 2nd ed., trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 198–99; and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 313n.

²⁹“God, by the ballot of Israel ... divided the land” (462). As Harrington explains on p. 521, this simply means that the Hebrews used sortition to distribute the land of Canaan.

emphasizes repeatedly that it was *God* who was responsible for the egalitarian distribution of land³⁰—just as, in *Pian Piano*, it was God who was responsible for introduction of the senate. Clearly, the institutions that matter most to Harrington are the ones that receive divine imprimatur.³¹ On page 463, he declares that it is precisely in the institution of the agrarian balance that one can discern “the clearest footsteps of God in the whole history of the Bible,”³² which is probably *the* most emphatic invocation of divine intention that one can find in Harrington. And on the same page, in response to Wren’s suggestion that the Hebrew institution of the jubilee may not have been sufficient for the purpose assigned to it by Harrington, Harrington avers that this calls into question “the prudence of God”—rather than, as elsewhere, “the rules of human prudence [on a par] with other commonwealths” (496; cf. 652).

Another aspect in which the commonwealth of Israel serves as a privileged archetype of a Harringtonian regime gets presented in Book 1, chap. 12 of *The Prerogative of Popular Government* (473–76), namely rotation. Rotation goes to the core of the idea of political equality: “Equal rotation is equal vicissitude in, or succession unto, magistracy conferred for equal terms” (473)—which it is possible to read as a seventeenth-century updating of Aristotle’s basic conception of republican citizenship as defined by the ideal of “ruling and being ruled in turn.”³³ As Harrington puts it, “as the agrarian answereth

³⁰Again, see the text on p. 462 quoted in the previous note. On p. 459, however, he is more equivocal: the “democratical or popular” balance in Israel was introduced by the legislator, namely “God, or Moses.”

³¹The “advertisement to the reader” on p. 496 encourages the reader to reflect on whether Israel “were not erected by the same rules of human prudence, with other commonwealths”—with the obvious implication that it is Harrington’s own strongly held view that there is no difference between Israel qua republic and Sparta or Rome. But if so, in what sense did God have some special role in instituting the senate or the agrarian law? Clearly, the appeal to God as legislator is no more to be taken literally in Harrington than in, say, Machiavelli or Spinoza. See also the title of the conclusion of Book 2 of *The Art of Lawgiving* (652) for further confirmation that any talk of “divine patterns” is merely rhetorical.

³²The “footstep” image refers back to the challenges from Wren quoted at the bottom of p. 461 and the top of p. 462.

³³One of the journal referees pointed out that whether it can be interpreted in this way or not depends on whether one sees Harrington’s republicanism as in theoretical continuity with Aristotle’s republicanism, and this is an issue that has elicited controversy rather than consensus in the Harrington literature. This seems a fair point, although Harrington’s revival of the Aristotelian idea of ruling and being ruled in turn does not necessarily commit him to a revival of other aspects of Aristotelian political philosophy. The larger issue here is whether republicanism constitutes in some sense a *unitary* intellectual tradition, or whether there are competing (Aristotelian and anti-Aristotelian) republican traditions. Without question, it is a crucial issue, but one that I won’t attempt to take up here.

unto the equality of the foundation or root, so doth rotation unto the equality of the superstructures or branches of a commonwealth" (ibid.). Did Israel satisfy this fundamental requirement of republican government? On pages 474–76, Harrington sets out the Hebrew practice of "the monthly election of two thousand deputies in each of the twelve tribes [therefore totaling twenty-four thousand deputies at any one time]" (475). This "congregation" (or assembly: *ecclesia*) then elected in turn "priests, officers and magistrates" (ibid.).³⁴ It was indeed this *ecclesia* that elected Solomon as king and elected Zadok as his high priest (475–76; cf. 526–27). This latter point is surprising since it suggests (contrary to suggestions elsewhere) that Israel did not cease being a commonwealth when it became a monarchy. Harrington anticipates that "prov[ing] an order in a commonwealth [by instancing] a monarchy" will be received as contradictory, but he stands his ground: since kings were subject to popular deposition (Harrington offers the example of Rehoboam³⁵), having a monarchy was *not* inconsistent with Israel continuing to be a commonwealth (476).³⁶ In effect, Harrington presents the political institutions of Israel as those of representative government: even *after* Israel became a monarchy, it was the *ecclesia* more than the kingship that defined

³⁴Cf. 519: As originally legislated by Moses, "all ordination of magistrates, as of senators, or elders of the Sanhedrim, of the judges, or elders of inferior courts, of the judge or *suffes* of Israel, of the king, of the priests, of the Levites, whether with the ballot or *viva voce*, was performed by the *chirotonia* or suffrage of the people." Harrington calls this "the constitution of Moses" (520), and adds, "nor ... is it or ever was it otherwise in any commonwealth" (ibid.). Harrington claims that there was only one exception to this universal norm of ordination by popular suffrage, namely Moses's appointment of Joshua to the unique task of securing a commonwealth that did not yet exist (522–23; cf. 530–31, replying to Henry Hammond).

³⁵Cf. 641. As one can see from chapters 10–12 of 2 Chronicles, Rehoboam was in fact only partially deposed: ten of the twelve tribes revolted against him, but he continued as king of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin—resulting in the division of the Hebrew state into the separate states of Israel and Judah.

³⁶This yields a significant tension in Harrington's account. On p. 525, Harrington states that in bowing to the Israelites' desire for monarchy, God chose "rather to abandon this sottish and ungrateful people unto the most inextricable yoke of deserved slavery." But if, as is suggested on p. 476, monarchy is merely a modification of what remains a fundamentally *republican* regime, why is he deploying this highly charged language of monarchy as a "yoke"? And on p. 528, Harrington writes: "Israel, from the institution of Moses to the monarchy, was a democracy or popular government," implying that popular government *lapsed* when monarchy commenced (cf. bottom of 528, top of 529). Perhaps one could fudge this by saying that in a sense Israel did, and in a sense it didn't, remain a commonwealth when it opted for the kingship of Saul. (Obviously, it remained a commonwealth to the extent that the very institution of Saul's monarchy rested upon the acclamation of the people; but it ceased to be a commonwealth to the extent that Saul's successors became ever more tyrannical and corrupt.)

its political order, and the *ecclesia* was indeed composed of political representatives subject to regular rotation.

With Israel, as with any commonwealth, the *people* are the final disposers of binding law. As Harrington lays out best in Book 1, chapter 7 of *The Prerogative of Popular Government*, the political business of a commonwealth is divisible into “proposition” and “resolution”—that is, God (as creator), or Moses (as legislator), or the senate (as supreme authority), *propose* laws, and these propositions get “resolved” (i.e., decided) by the people voting either to assent to them or not to assent to them. Hence: “the laws or orders of a commonwealth derive no otherwise ... [than] from their authority received and confirmed by the vote or command of the people” (421). That is, on Harrington’s account, *even God*, no differently than Moses or the senate, was merely the “proposer” of the laws, dependent on the people for their “reception and confirmation.” Harrington cites Exodus and Deuteronomy to the effect that God does his proposing via Moses (421–22), but what is decisive theoretically is the distinction between proposition and resolution, irrespective of who serves as proposer. Proposing is proposing, and resolving is resolving, and (Harrington is emphatic) only *the people* can bear responsibility for the latter.

There is of course one last feature of a properly Harringtonian regime that Harrington needs to trace back to the Hebrew commonwealth in order fully to vindicate the exemplarity of Israel. It is, quite possibly, for Harrington the most important of all, namely, its policy regarding the limitation of clerical power, and the institutions by which it ensures that religious authority is not abused. It may seem strange to speak of limiting religious authority in the context of an ancient theocracy that even Harrington himself sometimes speaks of as being ruled by God. Still, Harrington *does* see aspects of religious liberty not only in Greece and Rome but also in ancient Israel. This last and arguably most important feature of the Hebrew commonwealth is flagged in *Pian Piano* right at the start of Harrington’s response to Ferne’s original letter (371). Ferne, we will recall, had denounced “meddling in matters of religion” by the lay gentry.³⁷ This implies that theologians hold a monopoly when it comes to interpretation of the political significance of the Old Testament. In reply, Harrington asserts that “the senate ever had the supreme authority, as well in matters of religion as state [not only] in all other popular governments, but in the Old Testament”;³⁸ and since “the senate is the more peculiar province of the gentry,” interpretation of the requirements of religion is emphatically *not* a monopoly held by priests or theologians. This account of the Hebrew senate has the *dual* effect of supporting Harrington’s Erastian interpretation of the Mosaic regime and (because of

³⁷Cf. 382 (Ferne’s answer to the sixth query): “divines have ... cause to complain when [learned gentlemen] are too bold with holy things.”

³⁸Cf. 386: the Sanhedrin “had the government of the national religion.”

the text's highlighting of the senate as "the more peculiar province of the gentry") asserting his own legitimate right, as a *gentleman-scholar*, to interpret scripture.

In the same context, Harrington highlights the fact that the Hebrew commonwealth was *typical* (or archetypical) of republican regimes in combining a national religion with respect for liberty of conscience: "the liberty of conscience or prophetic right in the commonwealth of Israel, *as in others*, was such as by which Christianity, notwithstanding the national religion, might grow" (ibid.; my italics). There was indeed a national religion (the religion of Moses), but this national religion did not preclude freedom of religion (any more than paganism did).³⁹ Harrington cites the Gospel according to St. John to the effect that "there was nothing in the [Jewish] law why [John the Baptist] might not introduce his baptism, and therefore why he might not gather churches, or instruct the people in his way."⁴⁰ Admittedly, the *practice* of the Jews fell well short of their own legal norms—hence there *was* persecution of Christ and his followers (371; cf. 505–6 and 513–14). But, Harrington counters, this has to be understood as "the abuse of their power"—that is, as a departure from their legal regime rather than required by it (371).

These issues get pursued further in Harrington's reply to the seventh query (385–86). There was always in Judaism a freedom of prophecy such that it was left to the people, preached to by this or that prophet, to decide whether to deem a particular prophet a true prophet or a false prophet.⁴¹ The same freedom of prophecy applied when Christianity came on the scene: "Nor doth the Sanhedrim ... refuse [John the Baptist] the like prophetic right" (386). The same all-important claims are asserted in *Oceana*: "prophetic right ... was above all the orders of this commonwealth. ... And whereas it was not lawful by the national religion to sacrifice in any other place than the temple, a prophet was his own temple, and might sacrifice where he would. ... By this right John the Baptist and our Saviour, unto whom it more particularly related, had their disciples, and taught the people. ... Wherefore the Christian religion grew up according unto the orders of the commonwealth of Israel, and not against them."⁴²

³⁹On p. 371, Harrington points out that "both [Jesus] and his apostles observed the national religion," which makes the (for him) important point that there is no necessary incompatibility between associating oneself with the received religion, and exercising one's liberty of conscience by preaching and winning converts for one's own version of that religion.

⁴⁰The unstated implication is that Christianity owes its own genesis to the liberty of conscience available in pre-Christian republics, but fails to extend the same courtesy to those subject to its own jurisdiction (hence Ferne's attempt to browbeat Harrington into submitting to orthodoxy).

⁴¹Cf. Harrington's equation of "liberty of conscience" and "prophetic right" (471).

⁴²*Political Works*, 186; cf. Pocock, "Historical Introduction," 95.

Thus far, we have attempted to sketch the Israelite regime as Harrington conceives it, drawing upon his post-*Oceana* polemics. This involves the following. (1) The kingship of God founded on a (revocable) covenant with the people, that is, on popular consent. (2) The supremacy of Moses as a Solon-like or Lycurgus-like founder. (3) The subsequent institution of the Sanhedrin (more divinely inspired than other aspects of the regime), which becomes an *essential* pillar of the regime and in effect acquires cosovereignty with Moses.⁴³ (4) The subordination of Aaron as high priest specifically to the Sanhedrin, not to Moses. Hence: the strict subordination of priestly power. (5) God, or Moses, or the senate, as *proposers* of the law, but *the people* as “resolvers” of the law. This, of course, puts democracy at the center of Hebrew republicanism. (6) An agrarian law. This, like the senate, carries a special divine seal, so to speak. (7) Rotation of offices. And (8) civic norms that render the national religion consistent with religious toleration. Some of these aspects of the regime seem to follow a Hobbesian template; others are distinctively Harringtonian. This account of Israel serves to lay out and rhetorically justify the fundamental features of Harrington’s republican political vision; but no less important is Harrington’s account of the *corruption* of this regime. What accounts for the undoing of a vision of politics “as cometh nearest unto God’s own pattern” (387)? How does it come to be unraveled? The all-important distinction between *chirotonia* (popular election) and *chirothesia* (laying-on of hands) analyzed exhaustively by Harrington in Book 2 of *The Prerogative of Popular Government* is central to Harrington’s narrative of the regime’s corruption.

As has been pointed out by Jeffrey Collins, Harrington here was actually following Hobbes’s lead (and again, this and related instances of debt to Hobbes were mightily present to Harrington’s contemporary interlocutors, and highlighted by them as evidence of a culpable complicity with

⁴³Hence p. 371’s reference to the “supreme authority” of all republican senates (including that of Israel). However, one could ask (anticipating Rousseau): If the people can revoke at any time the fundamental nature of the regime, and if laws are not laws until the people assent to them, why aren’t *the people* the supreme authority (i.e., the holders of sovereignty)? If one takes full account of Harrington’s discussion of the distinction between *proposing* laws and *resolving* them (*Prerogative of Popular Government*, bk. 1, chap. 7), I think one has to conclude that real sovereignty, for Harrington no less than for Rousseau, indeed rests with the people. Cf. 549 (commenting on Athens): “the people were sovereign.” (Did Rousseau read Harrington? There is no way to know, since Rousseau never cited him. But he surely had read Book 29, chapter 19 of *The Spirit of the Laws*, in which Montesquieu had elevated Harrington into a pantheon consisting of only five truly exemplary philosopher-legislators. Wouldn’t this have given Rousseau a compelling reason to acquaint himself with an author whom Montesquieu characterizes according to his ardent passion for republicanism?) Richard Tuck’s forthcoming Seeley Lectures (entitled *The Sleeping Sovereign*) bear aptly on the issues sketched in this note.

Hobbes).⁴⁴ If one takes a work like Quentin Skinner's *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* as one's guide to Hobbes's relation to the republican tradition, one will assume there to be an unbridgeable gulf between Hobbes and the leading republican theorists of his time. But if one looks closely at canonical republican texts like the works of Harrington, a much more complex and interesting relationship between Hobbes and the republican tradition opens itself to view.⁴⁵ In fact, Harrington owed a very large debt to Hobbes—again, as was highlighted polemically (but rightly highlighted) by contemporary critics of the political theory developed in *The Commonwealth of Oceana*. Harrington's commitment to an Erastian civil religion; his preoccupation with the politics of the ancient Hebrews; his scriptural interpretations, and the ecclesiology he draws from the Old Testament; his challenges to Christian orthodoxy—all of these crucial aspects of Harrington's post-*Oceana* writings not only run parallel to major themes in Hobbes; they are directly influenced by Hobbes's arguments and interpretations, as Harrington himself was not averse to acknowledging. Therefore, while disclosure of a more complex and richer relationship between Hobbes and Harrington is by no means the only reason to take an interest in the

⁴⁴Jeffrey R. Collins, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 190 (cf. 126–28, 130, 197, and 261–62); see *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 365–67 (chap. 42). Tuck, in “The ‘Christian Atheism’ of Thomas Hobbes” (in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. M. Hunter and D. Wootton [Oxford: Clarendon, 1992], 111–30), shows that Hobbes, both in *Elements of Law* and in *De Cive*, was still committed to a doctrine of *chirothesia* (apostolic succession). It is only in *Leviathan* that Hobbes makes the decisive ecclesiological move toward ordination as *chirotonia* (by popular suffrage)—thereby outraging his Anglican erstwhile friends and allies.

⁴⁵Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On p. 212, Skinner cites Harrington's most conspicuous challenge to Hobbes; on p. xiii, he refers to *Oceana* as a “classical statement of the republican theory” targeted by Hobbes. In neither place is there any acknowledgment of the rich complexities in the Hobbes-Harrington relationship, which are amply acknowledged by Pocock and others. See for instance Pocock's “Historical Introduction,” 32, 76, 78–82, 83–84, and 89–96. See also Collins, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes*, 183–91 and 277–80, and Collins, “Quentin Skinner's Hobbes and the Neo-Republican Project,” *Modern Intellectual History* 6, no. 2 (2009): 361–62 and 363; Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic*, 122; Jon Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 182–85; and Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, chap. 11, where Harrington's political theory is dubbed “Hobbesian republicanism.” Last but not least, see Jonathan Scott, “The Rapture of Motion: James Harrington's Republicanism,” in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 139–63, which gives very concerted attention to the question of Harrington's debt to Hobbes. On Scott's reading of *Oceana*, Harrington is so indebted to Hobbes that he virtually relinquishes his claim to being considered a classical republican at all.

post-*Oceana* debates pursued by Harrington, one can certainly consider better insight into the Hobbes-Harrington relationship as a not insignificant *side benefit* of such inquiry. I would hazard the suggestion (which clearly implies a challenge to Skinner's Hobbes) that if we are unable to grasp what draws Harrington and Spinoza and Hobbes together in a (largely but not entirely tacit) intellectual and political kinship, it tells us that we are missing something essential in Harrington and Spinoza and Hobbes.

In any case, as Harrington encapsulates the issue on page 518, "*chirotonia* is election by the many [whereas] *chirothesia* is election by one, or by the few." Or as he puts it on page 538: "the whole difference between popular and monarchical government falls upon these two words; and so the question will be whether the Scriptures were intended more for the advantage of a prince, of an hierarchy or presbytery, than of the people." In that sense, what is at stake in the *chirotonia/chirothesia* distinction is the normative status of popular government per se. But it is also, as we shall see, highly relevant to Harrington's narrative of the corruption of republican politics, including the politics of the Hebrew commonwealth. One gets an especially forceful account of the key distinction in the introduction to Book 2 of *The Prerogative of Popular Government* (502): "*chirotonia* is popular suffrage, whether given ... by the holding up of hands or ... without the holding up of hands." *Chirothesia* "signifies ordination conferred ... by some distinct order from the people [meaning: religious authority distinct from the people], whether with imposition of hands or without it."⁴⁶ Clearly, the essential issue is not whether hands are raised or placed, but whether ordination does or does not involve popular participation. Identifying ordination with *chirotonia* aligns it with the basic norms of republican politics, namely "*election* (that is to say of magistrates) or *ratification* (that is to say of laws) *by the many*" (*ibid.*; my italics).

But as Harrington had already suggested in *Pian Piano*, inscribed in the distinction between *chirotonia* and *chirothesia* is an invidious history of the corruption of Hebrew republicanism (a process of corruption later replicated within the history of Christianity).

Ordination in the commonwealth of Israel, being primarily nothing else but election of magistrates, was performed by the suffrage of the peoples, or ... by the ballot.⁴⁷ Nor was it otherwise till the Sanhedrim

⁴⁶Cf. 537: "*chirothesia* being originally nothing else but a way of policy excluding the people."

⁴⁷Harrington concedes that, say with respect to the election of Solomon as king or Zadok as high priest, there may have been a process of *anointing* as a ceremony confirming the ascent to an office (as a rite of coronation, so to speak). But strictly speaking, the ordination consisted in the *election* to office rather than any laying-on of hands which may have *followed* that election. Harrington strikes an unmistakably Hobbesian note when he observes, in reference to the process of anointing: "The opinion that the

got a whim of their own, without any precept of God, to ordain their successors by the *chirothesia* or imposition of hands, and the parties being so ordained [were] called presbyters ... whereby, cheating the people of the right of electing their magistrates, the Sanhedrim instituted the first presbyterian government. ... [A later innovation] by Hillel, high priest and prince of the Sanhedrim, [consisted in getting] the whole power into his hand, which being of such consequence that no magistrate could thenceforth be made but by the high priest, it changes this same first presbytery ... as I may say into the first papacy. For this track was exactly trodden over again by the Christians: first, to the presbytery, from thence to the bishop, ... and out of this bishop stepped up the Pope. (384–85)⁴⁸

One cannot help asking: What happened to the Hebrew commonwealth such that it went from being the archetype of a perfect republic like *Oceana*, to being the inspiration behind a millennium and a half of Christian antirepublicanism? That's the story that Harrington undertakes to narrate in Book 2, chap. 4 of *The Prerogative of Popular Government* (and to renarrate, in a slightly different way, in Book 2, chap. 5 of *The Art of Lawgiving*).

Reprising the account offered in *Pian Piano*, Harrington basically puts the blame on a "presbyterian" conspiracy on the part of power-hungry Jewish priests: "All elections in Israel [were] usurped by the presbyterian party" (534). With "the introduction of *chirothesia* by the presbyterian party, which must have taken place some time after the [first] captivity," this presbyterian cabal (supposedly led by Hillel, the high priest) managed to "deface even the work of God himself" (ibid.).⁴⁹ How did this usurpation come about?

ordination of the priests and Levites lay in the ceremonies of their consecration is every whit as sober and agreeable unto reason as if a man should hold the kings of England to have been made by the unction of the bishops."

⁴⁸Harrington repeats the same narrative on p. 537, referring to the papacy as a "second presbytery" presided over by a *chirothesia*-dispensing high priest. When Harrington declares on p. 518 that the essential issue is the three alternatives of election by the many, election by the few, and election by one (with the assumption that the second and third represent forms of priestly usurpation), this nicely maps onto his threefold ecclesiological typology, namely, "gathered congregations" (= democracy), Presbyterianism (= aristocracy), and papacy (= monarchy). There is much here that is reminiscent of Hobbes's famous analysis of the three knots upon Christian liberty in *Leviathan*, chap. 47. Notwithstanding the phrase "from thence to the bishop" in the text at the top of p. 385, what is missing from Harrington's typology is the episcopal regime: the rule of bishops. But as Harrington bitingly points out to Ferne on p. 386, with the overthrow of the episcopal regime in Cromwellian England, the Anglican version of Christianity had been reduced merely to the status of a gathered congregation. In chapter 47 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes, again famously, appears to celebrate the same outcome.

⁴⁹Cf. 526: "After the captivity, ... the Sanhedrim came ... to over-reach the people." In the text on p. 534, Harrington dates the priestly usurpation at around "three

Harrington draws from Maimonides (536) a strikingly simple answer: ordination by *chirotonia* requires assembly by the people. With the Roman ejection of the Hebrews from “their own country” and their descent into captivity, such popular assemblies were no longer possible.⁵⁰ Hence the vacuum left by “the defect of the *chirotonia* of the people” came to be filled by *chirothesia* (ibid.).

“Cabala” is exactly the appropriate language to use in this context, since “Cabala” is Harrington’s tag for the Israelite dispensation subsequent to its corruption (645). As Pocock observes, one can see already from the title page of Book 2 of *The Art of Lawgiving* (615) that with the corruption of their commonwealth, the noble republican citizens of Israel have become merely “the Jews.”⁵¹ In *The Art of Lawgiving’s* retelling of the story of the corruption of Hebrew republicanism, unlike the versions told in *Pian Piano* and *The Prerogative of Popular Government*, there is no mention of Hillel as the arch-subverter, but considerable stress is put on the idea of “the oral law” within Talmudic Judaism, and its claimed supremacy over the written law of Moses. This oral law is what Harrington refers to as “the cabala,” and recognition of its primacy goes hand in hand with a new and unprecedented ascendancy of the principle of *chirothesia* (645–46). Appealing to the oral law as a higher authority than the written law, the high priest seized control of the great synagogue by appointing an unelected presbytery, thereby subverting the principles of Mosaic republicanism.⁵² The great synagogue now became a vehicle of priestly oligarchy (648)—a “cabalistical or Jewish commonwealth” where “the word of a scribe or doctor was avowedly held to be of more validity than the Scripture” (648, 649). This was the reign of the Pharisees (646), and—crucially for Harrington—the “liberty of conscience” that had hitherto

hundred years before Christ,” but this chronology seems to fit poorly with his effort to make Hillel the main culprit. Pocock (535n1) suggests that this demonization of Hillel (cf. *Pian Piano*, 384) was mainly inspired by Selden.

⁵⁰Presumably he is now talking about the *second* exile (which began ca. AD 70). But if this explanation is right, it is hard to see why it wouldn’t work equally well for the first exile.

⁵¹Pocock, “Historical Introduction,” 98. There is a strong parallel between the story that Harrington tells of the corruption of “Elohim” into “Cabala” (or of the Hebrew commonwealthmen into the priest-dominated Jews), and Spinoza’s narrative of the corruption of republican virtue (see Beiner, *Civil Religion*, chap. 11). For both Harrington and Spinoza, the nub of the story is the conquest or usurpation of Mosaic Judaism by “the Pharisees.” (Interestingly, one can even find a parallel narrative of Israelite corruption in Nietzsche’s *Antichrist*—charting the decline of the race of the Old Testament from a noble warrior-dominated people to a crafty priest-dominated one; see Beiner, *Civil Religion*, chap. 30.)

⁵²As one of the journal’s referees helpfully pointed out, there’s a subtle tension between Harrington’s evident hostility to the Jewish oral law and his clear acceptance of the authority of, for instance, the rabbinical elaboration of the Noahide laws; see *Political Works*, 713 (“it is a tradition with the rabbis”) and 743.

been enshrined in the Mosaic constitution gave way to Jewish persecution of Christ and his followers under the cabbalistic (i.e., antidemocratic) rule of the Pharisees (647–48). Hence it was not *the people* who crucified Christ and persecuted Christians but their priestly overlords.

Of course, Harrington's whole analysis of the Hebrew commonwealth would be of merely historical interest if different principles were applicable to a properly Christian commonwealth (as Oceana is meant to be). Accordingly, Book 2, chap. 5 of *The Prerogative of Popular Government* is devoted to questions of Christian ecclesiology as intended by Christ and the original apostles.⁵³ Harrington's own view is that there is absolutely no difference between a priest or magistrate of the church and a magistrate of the state: both are human offices (hence: "ecclesiastical policy [is] subject unto human prudence"). And on Harrington's reading, exactly the same view is vindicated by the New Testament itself: "*Neither God nor Christ* ever instituted any policy whatsoever upon any other principles than those of human prudence" (547; my italics).⁵⁴ That is, *both* the Mosaic dispensation and the Christian dispensation were intended to be governed by the principle of *chirotonia*, not *chirothesia*⁵⁵—however much both the first dispensation and its successor came to be corrupted by the "imposture" (544, top) of priests. Accustomed as they were to the public norms of the Hebrew commonwealth, it would be natural, Harrington suggests on page 562, for the first Christians, in organizing their churches, to retain the primacy of popular suffrage. "Why should they suffer such power in new and private, as they would not endure in their old and public magistrates?"

The fundamental meaning of *chirothesia* is that it asserts an *oligarchical* authority just where one ought to have—as Harrington calls it on page 528—"the power of the people." "It is now above three thousand years since the institution of the Sanhedrim, from which time the ambitious elders first, then the Talmudists, and of latter ages divines, have been perpetually striving for or possessing themselves of this same oligarchical invention of the *chirothesia* pretended to be derived from Moses" (531).⁵⁶ The theme of religious

⁵³Cf. *The Art of Lawgiving*, Book 2, chap. 6.

⁵⁴Cf. *ibid.*, conclusion to Book 2 (652: "not God, nor Christ, nor the apostles, ever instituted any government ecclesiastical or civil upon other principles than those only of human prudence").

⁵⁵Cf. 649: "the government of the church instituted by Christ was according unto the form instituted by Moses." Harrington goes on to suggest that the one thing that distinguished the two regimes is that Moses "separated the Levites unto the priesthood," whereas under Christ, closer to the pre-Mosaic regime of Melchizedek, "the royal and priestly function were not separated." This implies that Moses's religious authority was subordinate to that of Aaron, which is hardly credible; and also implies that Christ exercised a kind of "kingly" authority, which is even less credible.

⁵⁶Cf. 535: with the presbyterian coup by Hillel, "the aristocracy of Israel [became] oligarchical."

oligarchy also figures importantly in *Pour Enclouer le Canon*, where the Israelite Sanhedrin is again presented as the archetype of “mere oligarchy, by means of ordination” that is guaranteed to corrupt any commonwealth. The pope and his seventy cardinals modeled themselves on the Hebrew high priest and his seventy elders, and consequences no less fatal to a legitimate republicanism are promised by those among Harrington’s contemporaries aspiring to “a government of saints.” Those who claim a government of saints will in fact construct a government of hypocrites, for “the surest testimony of sainthood in rulers is when they are willing to admit of such orders in government as restrain the power to do wickedly, or of lording it over their brethren.”⁵⁷

As J. C. Davis has highlighted extremely well, Pocock seems torn between reading Harrington as a “millennialist” thinker, looking to notions of supernatural grace as a way of solving the problem of how to secure the immortality of the republic, and reading him as a resolutely secular theorist who insists upon the natural construction—rather than divine inspiration—of the Israelite commonwealth.⁵⁸ The secularist pole of Pocock’s interpretation is encapsulated in his frequent (and apt) references to the figure of Moses’s Midianite (i.e., heathen) father-in-law, Jethro, as an emblem (the privileged emblem, one might say) of the primacy of nature in relation to grace. If the statecraft of ancient Israel depended decisively on the prudential counseling of Jethro the Midianite, then the Hebrew theocracy was, as Pocock puts it, an “entirely natural form of government,” and Moses’s work as a legislator was in principle on entirely the same plane as that of Lycurgus or Solon.⁵⁹ In

⁵⁷*Political Works*, 730–31; and Pocock’s commentary at “Historical Introduction,” 106–10. Cf. *Oceana*, 63.

⁵⁸J. C. Davis, “Pocock’s Harrington: Grace, Nature and Art in the Classical Republicanism of James Harrington,” *Historical Journal* 24, no. 3 (1981): 683–97; see esp. 688, summarizing Pocock’s failure to settle on a consistent interpretation. Millennialism is a consistent theme in Pocock’s reflections on Harringtonian republicanism, and it is very effectively challenged in Davis’s critique. As Davis points out (688–89), direct textual evidence for this aspect of Pocock’s interpretation is pretty slender. One possible way of explaining the eschatological note underscored by Pocock that would not require any ascription of piety to Harrington is that Harrington is trying to supply his own version of the messianic rhetoric deployed in chap. 26 of Machiavelli’s *Prince*.

⁵⁹“Historical Introduction,” 97; cf. 47, 79, 91–92, 97, and 121. On p. 114, Pocock interprets the very last of Harrington’s *Aphorisms Political* (*Political Works*, 778) as a vindication of Jethro’s Midianite wisdom. See also 109 on Vane’s (theocratic) response to Harrington on this issue. Jethro is also discussed in Davis, “Pocock’s Harrington,” 689 and 692–93. *Political Works*, 496, cited by Davis, offers particularly vivid illustration of Pocock’s point about the significance of Jethro. See also 177, 209, 305, 547, 617, 629, 652, and 713. As Harrington makes explicit on p. 629, the purpose of emphasizing Moses’s close association with Jethro (the king of a heathen commonwealth) is to absolve Harrington of accusations that there is something “irreverent or atheistical”

chapter 6 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli referred to God as the “great tutor” (*si gran precettore*) of Moses, but in Harrington, Moses’s great tutor is Jethro.⁶⁰ The critical appraisal of saint-oriented politics that we have just noted in *Pour Enclouer le Canon* gives us further reason to be skeptical of the “millennialist” reading that is no less present in Pocock’s interpretation: if it is Harrington’s view that a republic of saints inevitably generates new forms of the religious oligarchy that he is most concerned to avert, a notion of apocalyptic grace is the *last* thing that we should expect to see Harrington proposing as a foundation on which to erect his republicanism.⁶¹

3

What defines the core of the republican vision as we encounter it in Harrington? Jonathan Scott offers a nice text from Algernon Sidney suggesting that the defining purpose of the English republican tradition was to conceive an idea of an English commonwealth that would synthesize and perfect the republicanism of premonarchical Israel, of Sparta, of Rome, and of Venice.⁶² Hence for Sidney, no less than for Harrington or Milton or Spinoza before him, the Hebrew commonwealth remained an essential touchstone for republican reflection. But vehement anticlericalism, for Harrington and those he influenced, was always a constitutive aspect of this core republican vision. It may seem somewhat odd to appeal to the Old Testament in order to preach liberation from priestly domination, but merely juxtaposing Harrington and Spinoza proves to us that Harrington was in no way unique in invoking an image of Hebrew republicanism in order to advance a determinedly anticlerical agenda. Moreover, both Harrington and Spinoza picked up indispensable cues from Hobbes with respect to how to pursue this project. At the end of *The Prerogative of Popular Government*, Harrington encapsulates his position on politics and “ecclesiastical policies” as follows: “popular government you see is naturally inclined unto the very best, and the spiritual aristocracy unto the very worst” (563). Why is spiritual

in juxtaposing Moses to pagan statesmen (as both he and Machiavelli do). For texts treating Moses on a par with Lycurgus and Solon, see 376, 400, 421, 524–25, 531–32, 542–43, 558, 628, 629, 631, and 719. See also 7–8 of Appendix I (entitled “Two Problems, historical, political, and theological, concerning the Jewish Nation and Religion”) attached to Toland’s *Nazarenus*, 2nd rev. ed. (London, 1718).

⁶⁰Somos, “Irenic Secularization,” 87–96, offers an expansive discussion of how Jethro gets deployed in Harrington’s texts.

⁶¹Cf. Davis, “Pocock’s Harrington,” 695: “Oceana is not a republic of saints, nor under the rule of a saintly elite.” For Harrington, faithful disciple of Machiavelli that he is, prudence, not providence, is what should be relied upon in solving the problems of politics.

⁶²See Scott, “The Rapture of Motion,” 141n10.

aristocracy naturally inclined “unto the very worst”? The short answer is that kings love priests, and priests love kings (especially when the king endows the clergy “with good revenues”), with the inevitable consequence that republican liberty is subjected to a double yoke. That is, to be free from priestcraft, politics must be free from kings; to be free from kings, politics must be free from priestcraft.⁶³ Harrington’s idea of republican liberty was intended to elevate both the political and the religious freedom of citizens to new heights,⁶⁴ and the realization of the lofty aspiration embodied in this political vision required, in Harrington’s view, a dual and simultaneous assault upon two mutually reinforcing types of illegitimate authority: that of hereditary monarchs and that of clerical hierarchies. In our contemporary political world, the struggle against monarchy has almost completely fulfilled its aims, but the battle against theocratic priestcraft prosecuted in the mid-seventeenth century by such epic figures as Hobbes, Spinoza, and Harrington still has some way to go.

⁶³Here I have borrowed a very nice encapsulation suggested by one of the journal’s referees.

⁶⁴For an important account of Harrington as a “pioneering” partisan of *popular* government, even by comparison to fellow mid-seventeenth-century republicans, see Rachel Hammersley, “Rethinking the Political Thought of James Harrington: Royalism, Republicanism and Democracy,” *History of European Ideas* 39, no. 3 (2013): 365–68, esp. 365n65. If Hammersley’s argument is correct, then Harrington (and not for instance Spinoza) would likely deserve recognition as the first major figure within the Western canon for whom democracy was emphatically *not* a pejorative term.