

Eric Nelson. *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought*.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. x + 230 pp. index. bibl. \$27.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-05058-7.

Eric Nelson has written an important book about an important subject. The *Republica Ebraeorum* was one of the historical lenses, alongside of Greece and Rome, through which early modern Europeans looked at historical models of

political government. Unlike those classical examples, however, we can define with much more exacting specificity the who, what, when, where, and even why of this development. The texts are defined in number and tend to cluster in the century after 1550, beginning in Italy and then spreading to the Protestant North. The movement, if it can be called that, has its beginnings in the humanism of “classical republicanism” and loses itself in the wider currents of the early Enlightenment.

Nelson does not try to map this entire century’s learning. His ambition is smaller, but no less profound for that. He targets two important issues, and works through careful textual analysis to turn some conventional wisdom on its head. First, he argues that it was through Hebraic political thought that the prior model of examining forms of government was altered from one which evaluated each form in itself, whether monarchy, aristocracy or democracy, to one in which a single form was projected as best — republicanism. Paying closer attention to the rabbinic literature that was just then being first read by Christian scholars, and noting carefully its mobilization in debate by others who had the material at secondhand, Nelson gives us the “Talmudical Commonwealthsmen” who created the “Good Old Cause” of the more familiar “Eighteenth-Century English Commonwealthman.” Second, and just as momentous, is his claim that government redistribution of wealth came to currency through the literature on the Hebrew Republic. Finally, he argues that the practice of toleration, too, was derived in the seventeenth century from Jewish sources; in particular, Josephus’s account of the ancient Jewish theocracy.

Most of Nelson’s work focuses on the vigorous seventeenth-century English circle of Hebraists, which included giants such as John Selden — recently the subject of Gerald Toomer’s monumental two-volume biography — and John Milton, whose Hebrew studies have been the subject of many works, most recently and comprehensively by Jeffrey Shoulson. But looming over these arguments are the more famous faces of Hooker, Grotius, Hobbes, and Locke, by whose lights most historians of political thought have hitherto navigated these questions, as well as others such as Petrus Cunaeus and Wilhelm Schickard, known today only to cognoscenti. It is against this backdrop that Nelson’s achievement will have to be measured. Will he succeed at forcing a broadening of the narrative of the history of political thought? Will he persuade readers that three of the most central, and familiar, pillars of early modern European political thought actually came from an entirely different intellectual discourse?

Nelson’s book comes on a wave of increased interest by contemporary scholars in their seventeenth-century ancestors’ scholarship on Judaism ancient and modern. The journal *Hebraic Political Studies* represents one aspect of this, but so do the number of dissertations and translations that have appeared in the past decade. Nelson acknowledges that the political theory he examines was only one part of contemporary political discussion based on the Hebrew Republic and that this was itself but a small part of a much wider interest in the culture of ancient Judaism. It is across this broader front that fascinating work is now being undertaken, often but not exclusively by younger scholars (Toomer’s *John Selden* [2009] and Anthony

Grafton and Joanna Weinberg's "*I have always loved the Holy Tongue*": *Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship* [2011] are standard-bearers). It will have the effect of undermining the difference between political thought and intellectual history. And by undermining this division, the new scholarship puts a question mark alongside the autonomy of these categories. There is nothing new here: J. G. A. Pocock did much the same in his *Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957) by arguing that antiquarianism and political thought were thoroughly intermingled. But his version of Cambridge-style history of political thought did not get institutionalized, and his insight into the workings of seventeenth-century erudition was not followed up. The current wave of work on the Hebrew Republic, and Nelson's book above all, may finally produce this.

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