

of the normal system. The president's power expands only with the complicity of the citizenry. The life of the Constitution is not Schmittian logic; it is the experience of actors who talk and respond to one another in a public space. Constitutional limitations are not formal but a function of how power is constituted and deployed by such actors.

From the perspective of the citizen, the culture of emergency has resulted in what Meyers calls *civic war* and the tendency toward monarchy. In contrast to the violent character of an armed engagement between combatants, civic war refers to the experience of citizens who are placed under the thumb of necessity and discouraged from exercising their judgment. Civic war refers not only to the level of social coordination and cooperation that is needed to support combatants but also to an ongoing "domestic way of life" in which the citizenry is reduced to complicity and silence. The violence of civic war is internalized by the repetition of images (the planes hitting the Twin Towers) and claims ("everything is different") that generate a continual fear that can be played upon and manipulated. Through the symbolic weight of the idea of crisis, the executive has found its opportunity to consolidate and unify power.

The president, however, cannot consolidate power alone. To explain why this is so, Meyers introduces the phrase "the division of action" to "hold emphatically before our eyes that all human action takes shape and force from a context composed of other human beings" (p. 22, fn.). Beneath our constitutional procedures is "the fundamental social fact" that citizens must also be brought along and transformed by the actions of the executive. "Civic war is a particular division of action" (p. 261). It is a division of action in which citizens are complicit in the executive's decisions. It is a form of corruption, a kind of political suicide in which the possibility for politics is being denied at the very time that politics is being engaged. For Meyers, the executive needs to play us just as the terrorist needs to play the government. In both cases, the goal is to leave the target speechless, stunned, and docile enough to carry forward someone else's agenda.

The author's general analysis of politics in America is partly fueled by his disdain for and criticism of the Bush administration. But if what he sees as the fanaticism of that administration is taken to intensify the tendency towards monarchy, the lessons Meyers draws are meant to describe both a more enduring state of American political culture and a possible source of renovation. In the former case, his analysis would suggest that the symbolic use of emergency in our current economic situation is yet another data point consistent with the trajectory of civic war. And yet, while the Obama administration has secured vast powers over huge American corporations, the opposition has continued in its vigorous appeal to the people (or, what Meyers calls the "publicizing" of a political contest). At least for the moment, the ubiquitous deployment of emergency in the cases of the economy, health care, and

the environment has left the opposition neither docile nor speechless. Perhaps in the culture of emergency, not all emergencies are the same.

In identifying a source of renovation, *Civic War and the Corruption of the Citizen* could be read as an advice-for-the-citizen book. Instead of providing a civic education in formal procedures, it urges citizens to exercise judgment and stand in opposition. However significant that advice may be, Meyers's focus on the *complicity* of citizens in the culture of emergency suggests that we (as citizens) get the government we deserve. That we can choose to act in the public sphere is certainly true. That ordinary citizens are complicit in the Bush administration's actions is a tougher sell, particularly in a crowded, complex, national political environment in which not only the other branches of government but also the media, the military, the bureaucracy, 50 states, corporations, and highly organized interest groups vie for attention. The citizen's position requires not merely judgment but information and the wherewithal to be heard. While the position of the citizen tells us something about executive overreach, it may not provide the widest vantage point for understanding our present circumstances or how to remedy them.

Conceiving a Nation: The Development of Political Discourse in the Hebrew Bible. By Mira Morgenstern. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009. 240p. \$65.00. doi:10.1017/S1537592709991733

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Mira Morgenstern describes her thesis in the last two paragraphs: "The centrality of political discourse to the creation of national identity is a logical prelude to the [Hebrew] Bible's view of leadership" (p. 200). This, of course, can be described only as an empirical argument. But she also insists that "the ancient Biblical narratives about nationality and establishing communal discourse are not just stories of a bygone era," and that, if one approaches the key texts "dynamically, the Bible forms the key to help grapple with questions centering on the very deepest concerns of security and freedom that continue to challenge the lives of all on this planet" (pp. 201–2). These comments generate two quite different questions about Morgenstern's arguments, and the priority that one gives to them may well depend on the disciplinary backgrounds and sensibilities brought to this book in the first place.

The first question will be asked by those whose deepest interest (and knowledge) is about the Hebrew Bible itself and its understanding: To what extent does the author sustain her argument not only about the "centrality of political discourse," which at times seems almost to suggest a biblical precedent for what we today call "deliberative democracy," but also about its relevance to the creation and maintenance of a specifically defined Jewish or Israelite nation some 2,500 to 3,500 years ago? I am not professionally

competent to offer much in the way of a helpful answer to this question. Two things are clear, though. Morgenstern is seemingly aware of all relevant exegetic scholarship, and her own readings are self-consciously presented as involving presumptively more “[c]areful analysis” (p. 99), “[c]areful reading” (p. 114), or “careful parsing” (p. 140) of the relevant texts than those that have been presented before. To take only one example, she argues that one should ultimately reject the received tradition that presents Samson as basically an “oversexed buffoon lacking any redemptive value” (p. 154). Instead, she takes careful note of the political situation the Israelites faced under Philistine domination and suggests that he was more sagacious than generally given credit for by biblical scholars.

Morgenstern wants to bring out more than the importance of political discourse; she is also intent on demonstrating the role played in that discourse by those occupying nonleadership roles, especially women. She offers an avowedly feminist reading of the texts analyzed. Some involve the terrible subjugation of women, most obviously demonstrated by the gang rape and then slaying of a Levite concubine by the townsmen of Gibeah, which concludes the Book of Judges and is the topic of two separate discussions (pp. 65–72, 182–84). But she offers a very different depiction of the importance of a (and perhaps “the”) feminine voice with attention first to Ruth (the subject of Chapter 3) and then Esther, who also receives her own chapter (pp. 164–94). The four other chapters focus on Joseph (chap. 1), Moses (chap. 2), Jotham (chap. 4), and Samson (chap. 5). It should be clear even from this listing that the book is quite uninterested in the achievements or travails of the Israelite kings for illumination about the construction of national identity or the conduct of politics. Kings Saul or David, for example, play almost no role, save for Morgenstern’s seeming endorsement of the Prophet Samuel’s view that Saul had “not obeyed the Divine command to destroy completely the Amalekites in battle” (p. 83 n. 21) by sparing the life of their leader and, therefore, ultimately forfeited the right of his descendants to continue to rule Israel. Instead, we get a chapter on the hitherto unknown (to me) Jotham and his rhetorical challenge to the tyrannical judge Avimelekh.

As already suggested, however, there lurks what to many readers will be an all-important second question: To what extent does immersion in biblical materials written millennia ago, about people who may or may not have existed and about whom we certainly have no reliable records outside of the biblical text, provide any real insight about our own current political concerns or dilemmas? Is it really true, for example, that the Book of Esther is “perennially relevant” (p. 192) and, if carefully analyzed, “reveals itself actually to be centered on the most basic issues of human existence and identity” (p. 193)?

Ironically, this claim for the enduring relevance of the Book of Esther might be true because of the textual pecu-

liarity that it contains no mention of God at all. No part of the Bible is further from depicting a providential God constantly intervening in history or otherwise engaging in stewardship over the people of Israel. Of course, two of the principal characters, including, obviously, Esther herself, are Jewish, part of the diaspora displaced to Persia and, like most diasporic communities, aware of their status as the Other and concerned about enemies, both real and potential, who might even wish to eradicate them, as was the case with Haman. One might say that such concerns are indeed perennial, whether one thinks of diasporic Jewry or Jews in Israel, on the one hand, or, equally to the point, if one looks at many other communities that have experienced their own tragic exiles and concerns about potential genocide.

Would Morgenstern be happy with an entirely secular analysis of biblical events and, consequently, of lessons to be learned? One might also ask to what extent she is writing in her own voice when she says that “politics must always be measured in terms of the relationship between the human and the Divine. Realization of the self achieves positive force to the extent that it grapples with the challenges and standards presented by God” (p. 39). To be sure, in her concluding chapter she demonstrates her lack of dogmatism, rejecting the notion that the Bible presents a “formulaic solution for achieving the ‘best’ polity” (p. 198). For Morgenstern, discourse and deliberation take priority over blind obedience to texts that, she insists, are almost never as clear in their meaning as some suggest. (She makes this point via a critical analysis of Jephthah, who kills his daughter because of a vow he had made to sacrifice the first living being exiting from his home in return for being allowed by God to win a particular battle (p. 186).) But this commendable latitudinarianism toward interpretive possibilities is not the same thing as dispensing entirely with any reference to God.

I still remember vividly hearing a lecture that Michael Walzer gave at the Harvard Hillel Society around 1967, offering what might be said to be a “social studies” view of the Exodus narrative. It was brilliant and illuminating. Afterward, though, one student plaintively noted that Walzer’s analysis included no role at all for divine providence, and he suggested that any such analysis of the Exodus, however brilliant from the perspective of secular social scientists, had little in common with a truly Jewish understanding of those events. From my own perspective, I have no problem with an analysis that dispenses with any truly agential role for God or for the relevance of divine commands and the like. But I am not convinced that Morgenstern is similarly indifferent, and to the extent that that is true, secularists might admire her book as an impressive piece of exegetical scholarship while expressing some doubt about the enduring relevance of her particular discussions (save, perhaps, as cautionary examples about the unwisdom of mixing religion and politics).