Abstract: The discourse of political biblicism in the Netherlands has often been depicted as providing a unifying basis for an emerging Dutch national consciousness. In this article, an attempt will be made to demonstrate that this discourse did not serve a single purpose, but was shaped to further the particular political goals of the two major factions in Dutch political life. The article will also show how a minority group—the Portuguese Jews—could adapt this discourse to its own ends.

There is now a considerable scholarly literature on early modern Dutch identification with the biblical Israelites. Scholars have located the earliest popular expressions of this “Neerlands Israel” discourse in the pamphlets and songs of the so-called Sea Beggars, the rebels who led the uprising against Spain in the 1560s. They have examined its expression in sermons, paintings, coins, literary works, and political speeches. And they agree that translations of Luther’s German Bible and, eventually, the Statenvertaling of the Bible—the Dutch translation of the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek (1625–1637), financed by the States General—played an important role in familiarizing a growing reading public with the historical and prophetic texts that nourished this sort of identification.

There is also agreement that fashioning the story of Dutch national birth around the Old Testament theme of redemption from slavery

provided ballast for a political narrative that lacked the weight of history, not to mention antiquity. When the Reformed minister Jacob Lydius wrote in 1668, "Above all I thank him / Who made Holland Jerusalem," he was elevating this former backwater province of the Holy Roman Empire to the center of the universe. To be sure, there was an alternative effort to create historical roots for the evolving republic, namely, the elaboration of Tacitus’ history of the Batavian revolt against Rome. Without denying the importance of this effort to root the Dutch polity in classical antiquity, however, there seems little doubt that the Old Testament was a more powerful instrument in shaping Dutch collective consciousness.

It may seem obvious why the Old Testament, not the New, was the key source in the development of a national discourse. Simon Schama argued succinctly that

The gospels of the New Testament were self-evidently universal in their import, and ultimately personal in their theme (at least to a Protestant). But the Old Testament was patriotic scripture, the chronicle of a people chosen by God to reveal his light to the world through their history.

This is certainly so. Yet the simple fact that the Old Testament provided particularly suitable material was not the only reason for its appropriation. It is no accident that medieval Spaniards, for example, did not seize on the Old Testament for inspiration when they drove the Muslims from their soil. That the Old Testament could be mobilized this way by the Dutch was partly the result of shifts in how the Bible was being read in sixteenth-century Protestant Europe.

This reading reflected a sharp break with centuries-old patterns. Since late antiquity, Christian exegesis had drawn a sharp distinction between the Old Testament figures who preceded Christ (who were righteous) and the Israelites and Jews of Jesus’ time (who embodied every imaginable vice). The early Dutch crypto-Protestants, in contrast, reading the Bible as the many Lutheran tracts circulating among them encouraged them to do, were swept up by the story of oppression and liberation that lay at the heart of the Pentateuch. They identified not only with the righteous patriarchs and prophets (as Catholics also might, insofar as the actions of these figures were associated with Christ) but with the entire Israelite

---


nation. To illustrate this novel identification with the Israelites—all of them—let me quote some verses by the Reformed preacher and poet Jacob Revius (1586–1658), interpreting the Twelve Years’ Truce with Spain (1609–1621):

The Jews marched through the desert forty years
In trouble, danger and want of everything;
But in the end and after that sad time
Joshua led them into the promised land.
The war forced us to march through the desert for forty years;
Now the Truce opens to us the promised land.4

It was not so much that the Old Testament was “patriotic scripture” as that it was being read that way.

This kind of rhetoric was by no means distinctively Dutch. The fashioning of a collective self-image in terms of the “New Israel” could be found among Calvinist populations everywhere—in France, Switzerland, Germany, England, and New England, among other places. The Dutch discourse, then, was part of a broader development. But it became absorbed into a debate that was peculiarly Dutch.

II.

Initially, the rhetoric of the Beggars played a primarily unifying role, mobilizing widespread support for the rebels across confessional and provincial boundaries. Perhaps for this reason, some scholars have viewed the Dutch discourse of “Neerlands Israel” entirely in light of its unifying function. Schama is a case in point:

In the Dutch Republic, the Hebraic self-image functioned much more successfully as a unifying bond than as a divisive dogma. It flowed out of the pulpit and the psalter into the theater and the print shop, diluting Calvinist fundamentalism as it did so, but strengthening its force as a national culture for the very same reason. Indeed it was just because the roots of Netherlandish Hebraism

were not exclusively Calvinist, but reached back to an earlier and deeper humanist reformation, that it could exert such broad appeal. …[I]t was a sign of the versatility and inclusiveness of the idiom that opposing political factions could both resort to it to argue their respective positions. This interpenetration with profane history lent Dutch scripturalism its tremendous strength. It was used not in order to swallow up the secular world within the sacred, but rather to attribute to the vagaries of history… the flickering light of providential direction.5

The eminent Dutch scholar Willem Frijhoff writes in a similar vein:

Dutch society, in constant danger of splitting up, needed symbols of unity to stay together. It was the Reformed church that, better than any other, stood out as a centralizing and unifying element. Among the religious models of unity, the notion of the new Israel, or “Dutch Israel,” was particularly important. The central notion was well and truly that of being chosen; Israel being the chosen people of God, the new Israel was the instrument that God had recently chosen to realize his kingdom on earth and spread his message. Since the Revolt, which was seen as a war of independence just like the struggles of the Jewish people, the Protestants had got into the habit of comparing themselves with biblical heroes, particularly those of the Old Testament. The Prince of Orange had become the new Moses, Gideon, or David, the enemy being the Spanish Sennacherib (Philip II) or the French Nebuchadnezzar (Louis XIV), both descendants of Cain. The very existence of the Dutch Republic was literally a miracle for many.6

Both Schama and Frijhoff imply that behind the richly varied contents of this rhetoric, Netherlanders of all backgrounds—Schama mentions as examples (along with the Reformed predikanten) a humanist, an Arminian, and a Catholic—shared a single basic vision of “Neerlands Israel.”7 This was true, but only up to a certain point: once the Spanish forces had been turned back decisively, two competing camps emerged in a fundamental debate about the character of the Dutch polity. Spokesmen for each camp mobilized the common founding myth to serve their different political goals. A bystander in the Netherlands of the mid-seventeenth century

5 Schama, Embarrassment of Riches, p. 97.
7 The same basic position is adopted by Campos Boralevi, “Classical Foundational Myths.”
would have been acutely attuned to the different agendas that were promoted using the common framework of the New Israel. It is striking that modern scholars have seemed rather oblivious to this bifurcation. In what follows, I will try to show how a fundamental fissure in Dutch society impacted on the development of the “Neerlands Israel” theme and how, in an essay written in the 1680s, an author within the Portuguese-Jewish community of Amsterdam produced a Jewish formulation of this theme that both appropriated and subverted the gentile discourse.

III.

The conflicting camps in Dutch society confusingly assumed different names at different junctures in Dutch history but are perhaps best known as Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants, associated with the States-party (confederate) and Orangist (monarchist) factions, respectively. Broadly speaking, the two sides of the protracted conflict over church-state relations in the Netherlands can be said to have crystallized with the installation of the Reformed church as the “public church” of the Seven Provinces in 1575. The Calvinists, having spearheaded the Dutch Revolt, possessed a clear popular advantage over the Catholics. Moreover, as elsewhere in Europe, the Calvinists were quick to establish an effective, three-tiered organization of synods, classes, and consistories. But most Netherlanders were not devotees of any church. As Jonathan Israel writes:

In the late sixteenth century, the majority of the Dutch population... cannot unequivocally be described as Protestant or Catholic. For the majority constituted a non-confessionalized, or barely confessionalized, bloc, undecided and unformed.

Despite their privileged position, the dogmatically orthodox Calvinist preachers did not speak even for their own congregants in the late sixteenth century, and undertook the daunting task of what has come to be known as “confessionalization.”

---

8 Recently, Lea Campos Boralevi has pointed to this tension, without elaborating on it. See “Classical Foundational Myths,” p. 252.

By the early seventeenth century, the ranks of the Calvinist ministers had split decisively along theological lines that would eventually coincide with a political-ideological divide. The Counter-Remonstrants insisted on an uncompromisingly confessionalizing agenda, which they expected the state to support. For them, victory over the Spanish had been a victory for the “true faith.” They regarded it as their duty to enforce that faith through the close supervision of religious life in the new republic—that is, by exercising police powers in the spiritual realm.

The Remonstrants, on the other hand, shared the humanist spirit of most of the regent ruling class. For them, victory over the Spanish had been a victory over tyranny and oppression. An authoritarian enforcement of religious norms, then, was contrary to the principles for which they had fought. They favored freedom of conscience. Yet they supported the establishment of the Reformed church as the public church, lest a lack of formal consensus on religion invite bloodshed and theological chaos. They viewed the public church as an instrument for maintaining civil peace, not as an instrument for imposing orthodoxy and uniformity.

Tensions between the two sides reached a crisis point in 1617-1618, with the battle lines drawn between the orthodox Reformed preachers and Prince of Orange Maurits of Nassau (stadholder of five of the seven provinces), on the one hand, and the Remonstrants and the so-called Landsadvocaat (leader of the States of Holland), Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, on the other. What transpired is a complex story. To simplify greatly, Prince Maurits engineered a successful coup d’état. As a result, a National Reformed Synod (with foreign participants) was convened at Dordrecht in late 1618 and the spring of 1619, and Remonstrant theology was declared heretical. Oldenbarnevelt was executed that May, and unrepentant Remonstrant preachers were banished. In a republic widely viewed as a bastion of tolerance in early modern Europe, the winning party now sought to initiate a sweeping program of religious purification (the so-called “Further Reformation” [nadere reformatie]), including additional suppression of Remonstrants, Catholics, Lutherans, and Jews.

The Counter-Remonstrant “revolution” petered out by the mid-1620s, but the resounding success of the orthodox ministers fueled Counter-Remonstrant/Orangist ambitions for generations. The alliance of the House of Orange and the orthodox Reformed ministers proved enduring. It was not without political logic. The powerful states of Holland resisted the stadholders’ domination for the same reason they sided with the Remonstrants: Their primary interests (aside from securing their position of power) were to maintain peace and prosperity, which precluded religious conflict or adventurism in foreign policy. In time the
identification of the strict Reformed clergy with the quasi-monarchist Orangists, and of the Remonstrants with the States of Holland, became a fixture of the ongoing Kulturkampf.  

IV.

It was only natural that the rhetoric of “Neerlands Israel” would assume a different thrust in each of the two camps. For the Counter-Remonstrants, the New Israel was not a national entity based on *patria*, but a religious community consisting of Reformed believers. The Counter-Remonstrant preacher Florentius Costerus (1656–1703) explicitly stated that while the Old Testament term “Zion” applied to the *nation* of Israel, in the New Testament the church—the community of believers—had replaced the ethnic, national entity. (Counter-Remonstrant insistence on this point has convinced some scholars that the rhetoric of “Neerlands Israel” rejected the Old Testament notion of chosenness, but that generalization is misleading and apologetic.) God’s Law was intended for all men and women; it was the task of the Reformed ministers and secular rulers to establish it on earth.

Though the Reformed were the “Second Israel,” they were no more inherently righteous than the “First Israel,” the biblical Israelites. In fact, the latter’s ingratitude and backsliding—and their consequent

---

10 Jonathan Israel recently argued for a modification of the traditional, rigid conception of these two camps as dominating the Dutch sociopolitical landscape. He describes the emergence in the later Golden Age of an “Orangist democratic republicanism” that was anti-clerical, on the one hand, and critical of the regent class, on the other. This important modification does not, however, significantly affect the developments we will be describing in the two camps, which emerged earlier and continued to do battle later. See Jonathan Israel, *Monarchy, Orangism, and Republicanism in the Later Dutch Golden Age: Second Golden Age Lecture, Delivered on Thursday 11 March 2004* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Centrum voor de Studie van de Gouden Eeuw, 2004).


punishment—were frequently held up as an example and warning. Article 36 of the Synod of Dordt’s revision of the *Confessio Belgica* (*Nederlandse Geloofbelijdenis*) justifies and underscores the need for political supervision of moral life. It states “that our good God, because of the corruption of the human race, has ordained kings, princes, and authorities, intending that the world should be governed by laws and policing, in order that the dissoluteness of men should be suppressed and everything should proceed according to good ordinances.” While “nationalist” biblicist rhetoric externalized the “villain” (the Spanish, the pope, the French), the rhetoric of Reformed orthodoxy reflected more strongly the fear of the “Babel” within. God had planted his church in the Netherlands, but he could uproot it, as Reformed ministers emphasized by quoting Jeremiah 45:4: “The Lord says thus: Behold, that which I have built I break down, and that which I have planted I pluck up, namely this whole land.” The fate of the *patria*, a blessing from God, was in the hands of the Reformed church.

Good order required clear hierarchy, whereas seventeenth-century Dutch society suffered from an unresolved relationship between stadholders and states (both the provincial states and the States General) and a public church lacking the powers of a state church. What the Counter-Remonstrants sought was a society in which God was recognized as the sole sovereign, with the church granted spiritual preeminence, and stadholders, political preeminence. The biblical functions that best symbolized this dual form of authority were, for many ministers, those of prophet and king. As vessels for God’s message, the ministers were “ambassadors of God” (*Godsgezanten, ambassadeurs*) or “watchmen on the walls” (from Isaiah 62:6), who, like the Old Testament prophets, brought the word of God to the people and rulers of Israel. But the Counter-Remonstrants were also profoundly aware of the need for real, institutionalized authority. Thus, at times they chose to depict the church’s ministers and preachers as functionaries akin to the priests of the Temple in Jerusalem. (The tripartite organization of the Reformed church under ministers, elders, and deacons was compared to the Old Testament hierarchy of

---

15 “Dat onze goede God, uit oorzaak der verdorvenheid des menselijken geslachts, koningen, prinsen en overheden verordend heeft; willende, dat de wereld geregeerd worde door wetten en politiën, opdat de ongebondenheid der mensen bedwongen worde en het alles met goede ordinatie onder de mensen toega.”

16 See Bisschop, *Sions vorst en volk*, p. 73.

priests, Levites, and elders.) The contrasting images of prophet and priest may reflect the ambivalence of a once insurgent movement seeking its place in a new regime.

A similar ambivalence can be perceived in the Counter-Remonstrant model of the king. The archetype was William the Silent, not in fact a king but a stadholder, whose legitimacy stemmed from his role in the Netherlanders’ liberation from the Spanish. The biblical image for William the Silent, Joshua leading the New Israelites into the promised land, remained forever integral to the Orangist legacy, with the ideal stadholder continually associated with Joshua. But the liberation phase had passed, and the task of the stadholder in the new regime—as Counter-Remonstrants envisioned it—was to provide godly rule and maintain public morality. In this mode, the ideal stadholder was likely to be represented as Hezekiah, uprooting idolatry from within, cleansing the Temple (in cooperation with the Levites), defending against the idolatrous enemy from without, and relying on the word of the prophet. Josiah served as an alternative image, teaching the “words of the book of the covenant,” commanding obedience to the law, and taking action (in cooperation with the high priest) to eliminate idolatry. Such was the glorious, if imaginary, “tradition” of the House of Orange-Nassau.

In contrast, the Remonstrants clung to an irenic and patriotic idea of the New Israel. In this respect, they revealed a sense of destiny that was rather free of confessional anxieties. Thus, for example, the Remonstrant preacher Johannes d’Outrein (1662–1722):

God chose the Jewish people to be his people. We may say that God has done the same for the Netherlands people (although not to the disparagement of other peoples).

22 My emphasis. “God had het Joodsche Volk tot sijn Volk verkozen. Dit mogen we seggen, dat God ook gedaan heeft ontrecht Neerlands volk. Hoewel niet met uitsluiting van andere volkeren.” Johannes d’Outrein, De opening van de veld-tocht, des jaars 1706 en 1708: Door twee boet-predikatien over Joël 2:12-18 (Amsterdam, 1708), second sermon, p. 30. See also Bisschop, Sions vorst en volk, p. 175.
Remonstrant thinkers had their own anxieties, but they were more likely to be about the dangers of ecclesiastical power. In a properly ordered sovereign state, both ecclesiastical and secular institutions were to be subordinate to the sovereign. The influential Remonstrant Johannes Uytenbogaert (1557–1644) pointed to the biblical king Jehoshaphat as a model of such a sovereign. When magistrates and ministers are summoned by the sovereign “to come to court and render a reckoning of their proceedings to him,” Uytenbogaert wrote, “they must not any of them [that is, any of the ministers] give for an answer that such matters are ecclesiastical [and thus not under the king’s jurisdiction].” This idea of Jehoshaphat’s authority over ecclesiastical matters may have been drawn from the fact that he appointed (and thus authorized) the priests and Levites to adjudicate disputes “in matters of the Lord.” Such an arrangement made sense to the Remonstrants, because they saw the purpose of government as serving the needs and providing for the welfare of the people rather than bending them to the will of God.

Remonstrant theology was thus relatively compatible with contemporary republican notions that drew on a classical philosophical tradition. The great jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), among others in this camp, cited both biblical and classical examples to support his arguments about ideal government. Liberty, stability, and prosperity were best nurtured, he maintained, by an aristocracy, a government by the social elite. Such was the government of ancient Judea under the Judges. Such was the government of democratic Athens and republican Rome. And such was the government of the Dutch regents. In the 1650s, Jacob Cats (1577–1660) formulated very similar arguments. Likewise, Johan de Wit (1618–1676) maintained in his Public Gebedt (1663–1664) that the “aristocratic republic” of the regents of Holland was the best form of government, chosen by God himself “for his people, the children of Israel.”

It need hardly be pointed out that the rule of the Judges over Israel after Joshua’s death bears little resemblance to the Aristotelian conception of aristocratic government. But the Remonstrants, like their opponents,


24 See II Chronicles 19:8–11.


sought scriptural backing. And what these thinkers regarded as important about the biblical precedent was not the structure of the regime of the Judges, which bore little resemblance to that of the regents, but the fact that God disapproved of anointing a king over Israel. God himself was an anti-Orangist.

VI.

On some level, such rhetoric was undoubtedly flattering to the Jews of Amsterdam. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the positive association of the Dutch with the ancient Israelites in the rhetoric of “Neerlands Israel” necessarily indicated a more positive view of contemporary Jews. Neither the Remonstrants nor the Counter-Remonstrants particularly befriended the Jewish community, though members of both engaged in cordial relations with Menasseh ben Israel and other Jews. Yet in principle there was never any doubt that Jewish interests were better served by the Remonstrants than by the more intolerant Counter-Remonstrants.

Indeed, insofar as political biblicism was expressed in the language of national consensus, drawing from humanist sources that predated Calvinism and emphasizing the liberation of the Dutch from the tyrannical Spanish, it could be cautiously enjoyed even by Jews. The model of the biblical Jews as a people bound together by a covenant with God coincided with the contemporary Jewish self-image. The patriotic self-depiction of the Dutch vis-à-vis the Spanish (or, in 1672, the French) as David before Goliath, as Moses before Pharaoh, as Gideon before the Midianites, as Hezekiah before Sennacherib, or as the Maccabees before Antiochus created, in a way, symbolic and emotional common ground between Jews and Christians. So did the Dutch adoption of Moses the lawgiver as the emblem of good government. There was surely something reassuring to Jews about the scenario sketched by the Catholic poet Joost van Vondel (1587–1679) in 1659, in his poem “On Moses Receiving the Law”:

Hebrew Moses received the Law from God
With which he returns from above to the people
So they become respectful and welcome them with longing.
As the people honor the laws, so shall a free state stand.\(^{27}\)

\(^{27}\) “Hebreeusche Moses hee de wet van Godt ontfangen, / Waermede hy naer ’t volk van boven wederkeert, / Dat hem eerbiedigh groet, en welkomt met verlangen. / De vrye Staet luit op, als ’t volk de wetten eert.” Joost van Vondel, Poëzy, of, Verscheide gedichten, 2 vols. (Franeker: Leonard Strick, 1682), vol. 2, p. 327. Schama, Embarrassment of Riches, p. 120. I have used Schama’s translation.
This sort of political biblicism could particularly be appreciated by descendants of baptized Jews who had fled the Iberian Peninsula, among whom the image of the Spanish monarch as an enslaving Pharaoh was cultivated long before the Beggars fomented rebellion in the Low Countries. These Jews, of course, did not accept that the Dutch had superseded them as the “true Israel.” (In fact, this proposition was absurd from their point of view. They were much more likely to express competitive attitudes toward Spain than toward the Netherlands.) Still, they could well believe God sided with the Dutch, and they could identify with the Dutch in their victory against Spain.28

In contrast, the more confessional political biblicism of the orthodox Reformed preachers was threatening to the Jews (and other non-Reformed groups). It is true that, in general, within the dynamics of Reformed Old Testament moral theology, the Jews were a side issue, essentially absent from the religio-moral equation. Reformed preachers regarded their church—the church of the new covenant—as the moral and religious backbone of Dutch society. The nation’s fate depended on their behavior. God’s own people were punished for their own sins, not those of their neighbors who lived in error. As the Reformed minister Herman Witsius (1636–1708) wrote in 1669 about his flock, “You are God’s own people to whom the Lord has come so close and whom he has elected as his own in a special way from among so many other peoples, and of whom he therefore reasonably expects more than of the rest.”30 God could be called “the Netherlands’ God,” one minister wrote, “though we have in our midst idolaters and the remnant of the Canaanites [the Jews], [because these people] are reckoned merely as inhabitants.”31 But at the same time, the


29 Simon Schama has emphasized this broad-based, patriotic use of biblical rhetoric in his chapter, rich in example, on “Patriotic Scripture.” See Embarrassment of Riches, pp. 51–125.

30 “En zijt Gods volk daar de Heere soo na by gekomen is die hy uit soo veel andere volken op een bysondere wijse hem tot een eigendom verkooren heeft, en daar hy dan blijjck wat meerder van verwacht als van de rest.” Herman Witsius, De Twist des Heeren met syn wyngaert (Utrecht, 1719), p. 388.

31 “Niettegenstaande we midden onder de Afgoden-dienaars en overgeblevene Canaanïten woonen, die slechts by ons als bywoonders moeten gerekent worden.” J. van Boskoop, Het in beginselen verhoogde Nederlandt verder opgeluistert, inzonderheid door het Erffelyk verklaren der Hooge Waardigheid des Stadhouderschaps (Rotterdam, 1748). See also C. Huisman, Neerlands Israël: Het natiesbesef der traditioneel gereformeerd in
Counter-Remonstrants believed the Dutch “Israelite” ruler should eliminate false religious doctrines and support true religion. “Oh, if only the pious zealots—the Hezekiahs, Jehoshaphats, and Josiahs—would entirely extirpate the detestable idolatry in ‘Nederlandts Israël,’” one Reformed minister urged, “putting it on ever more flimsy foundations!” This sentiment was probably more a pious wish than an expectation, but such intolerance was at odds with the well-being of the Jewish community.

We might ask at this point whether either camp’s political Hebraism had any practical impact on political life. The biblical analogues never served as actual models for the structure and operation of Dutch political institutions. That is, the oligarchic regime of the regents might be imaginatively regarded as a replication of the regime of the biblical Judges, but it had not been created to reproduce the biblical form of rule, which no good burgher could possibly have wanted. Nonetheless, the rhetoric was not empty. It was intertwined with Dutch society’s contemplation of the proper exercise of power in a republic—a discourse that rested on classical philosophical and ancient Christian, including Old Testament, foundations.

From the point of view of the Jews, who stood at the sidelines of the debate, there was no pressing need to respond directly to the Dutch appropriation of Old Testament imagery and political models, or to the struggle between the Counter-Remonstrants and the Remonstrants. The Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam naturally followed events closely but prudently withheld comment, preferring to work behind the scenes to cultivate the support of the regents, who were in any case inclined to curb the zealotry of the orthodox preachers. A fascinating exception is an essay by the ex-converso litterateur Daniel Levi de Barrios, published in 1683 or 1684 as an introduction to his *Triumpho del gobierno popular*, a lengthy institutional portrait of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam written for a Jewish audience. Let us briefly examine this unique Jewish response to the Dutch notion of “Neerlands Israel.”

de achttiende eeuw (Dordrecht: J.P. van den Tol, 1983), p. 57. This passage shows very clearly, incidentally, that orthodox Reformed ministers used the language of chosenness in their conception of Neerlands Israel.

32 “Och, of ‘er godvrugtige yveraars, Hiskiassen, Josaphats en Josiassen opstonden die den verfoeilyken beeldendienst in Nederlands Israël geheel uitroeiden, immers die binnen enger palen zetteken!” C. van Velzen, Kerkelyke Redevoeringen, 2 vols. (Groningen, 1758), 1:212. See also Huisman, Neerlands Israël, p. 57.

33 Daniel Levi de Barrios, *Triumpho del gobierno popular y de la Antiguedad Holandesa* (Amsterdam, 1683–1684) (hereinafter TGP), pp. 1–58. Extant copies of this work vary somewhat; I have used Exemplar B (*Etz Haim*, Ms. 9 E 43). For a more detailed description of this work, see Miriam Bodian, “Biblical Hebrews and the Rhetoric...”
VII.

De Barrios’ analysis makes an important polemical point at the very outset. There was, he insisted, no single model of Israelite government. Under Moses, Saul, David, and Solomon, Israelite government was monarchical. Under Joshua, the Judges, and the Maccabees, it was aristocratic. In exile—in Egypt, Babylonia, and the post-antique diaspora (including his own time)—it was democratic. The assertion that God did not ordain a certain form of Israelite government as the proper one for all time was significant because it allowed De Barrios to argue that the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jews were not indications that the Covenant had been nullified or replaced. Rather, the Jews were entering a new phase of their history which required a different form of governance.

Still, in principle, De Barrios preferred democracy, eagerly noting its prevalence among the Jews of Amsterdam in his own day. (His wish to identify Jewish government with “democracy” is revealed in his claim that even in antiquity, Moses had desired a democratic regime.) Politically, De Barrios seems to have sympathized with more radical currents that were beginning to emerge in Dutch society, articulated by such figures as Pieter de la Court (1618–1685) and Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677). Democracy was best, he asserted, because it eliminated the misuse of power for personal gain, which was the chief danger of government by the few. Monarchy almost inevitably degenerated into tyranny, “for rare is the monarch who puts the good of his subjects before his own, and rare are the subjects who serve God more than the king.”

De Barrios further asserted that throughout their exile (or, more correctly, exiles), even in pre-Mosaic Egypt, the Jews had been “democratic.” Democracy was thus the most ancient and long-lived mode of government. The second “democratic” regime of Jewish congregations or settlements discussed by De Barrios was that of the Jews during the

---

34 TGP, p. 2.
35 On the basis of Numbers 11:25–29, De Barrios noted that Moses “humbly desired that all should be prophets, so that all should be equal; and that all being equal, there would be no occasion to envy the government either of an individual or of the elect few” (TGP, pp. 5–7).
36 TGP, p. 4.
37 Ibid., pp. 23–24.
Babylonian exile, and in this discussion he first hinted at what he understood to be the salient feature of Jewish communal “democracy.” He referred to Strabo’s contention (cited in Josephus) that the Jews of Alexandria lived on their own streets under their own laws and rulers, “with absolute power as if they were a republic unto themselves.” De Barrios struck a similar note in discussing the Jews’ third “democratic” period, extending from the destruction of the Second Temple to his own time—the period of the “Sustentadores o Parnasim.” He referred to “all the Israelites who were dispersed among the nations” as “governing themselves with the Mosaic Law.” These two statements strongly suggest that De Barrios associated democracy first with liberty in its ancient sense, i.e., collective freedom from foreign interference or tyranny, and second with rule by one’s own laws and customs.

These two themes—political independence (that is, communal autonomy) and self-government founded on the Law of Moses—recur throughout De Barrios’ Triumpho del govierno popular. He also expatiated on the antiquity, immutability, and eternity of Mosaic Law, comparing a united Jewish people with an unstable, fragmented gentile world. While the Chaldaeans, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Persians, Medians, Greeks, and Romans had all perished along with their monarchies and laws, “the Law of Moses persists among the people who observe it.” And while the Christian sects proliferated, each with its different rites—“Papists,” Socinians, Lutherans, Quakers, Calvinists, “and many other sects”—only Mosaic Law retained its original, uncorrupted form. The antiquity, continuity, and stability of government so sought after by the gentile nations were in fact, De Barrios implied, achieved only by the Jews.

De Barrios’ use of the term “democratic” government, or govierno popular, in reference to the Jewish community is highly misleading. He seems to have meant government brought into being by the people and based on their sovereignty. But political thinkers could enlist such a notion to support various types of government, including absolute monarchy, and they had done so in the past. Indeed it might be said that De

38 Ibid., pp. 28–33.
39 Ibid., p. 31. For the passage from Strabo, see Menachem Stern, Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974), vol. 1, p. 278.
40 TGP, p. 28.
41 Ibid., p. 35.
42 Ibid., p. 623.
43 Ibid., pp. 646–647.
Barrios himself used it to justify any Jewish regime based on the Law of Moses—a regime that could assume a variety of structures, according to circumstances.

Insofar as his essay was a rebuttal of Dutch political Hebraism, De Barrios underscored the problem of dissent. The Reformed ministers sought to impose a godly regime on an unwilling (or partially unwilling) people. In contrast, he implied (with considerable distortion of both the biblical narrative and the contemporary reality), the Jews had always freely chosen to live under the Law of Moses, whether by “electing” Moses to be their leader or by “electing” the parnasim of the Amsterdam community.44

In escaping the tyranny of Spain and opting to live by the Law of Moses, then, the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam were echoing the Israelites at the Red Sea and at Mount Sinai. The ancient liberty of the Jews to govern themselves by the Law of Moses had been denied them many times in history, but they had always restored self-government by common agreement after their liberation from captivity. There was, in other words, no New Israel, only the original Israel, with whom God had made a covenant through Abraham.

Yet De Barrios was not without sympathy for the Dutch and their rhetoric of Neerlands Israel. He shows this clearly at the end of his introductory essay. It may be appropriate here to point out that the full title of his work is *Triumpho del govierno popular y de la Antigüedad Holandesa* (The Triumph of Popular Government, and of Dutch Antiquity). His biblical plays on words suggest that the Jews and the Dutch actually shared an ancient ancestral ties: They both descended from Shem (the Dutch through Shem’s great-great-grandson Yoqtan). More significantly, they had parallel histories. According to the *Antiquitates* of Pseudo-Philo, Yoqtan had intervened heroically to rescue Abram and other dissenters who refused to cooperate in the plan of the evil Nimrod to build the tower of Babel. Yoqtan ultimately failed to prevent Abram from being thrown into the brick kiln, but Abram was saved by a miracle, while Nimrod and his followers suffered death by fire.45

44 In fact, the Mahamad, or board of parnasim, was a self-perpetuating body dominated by a close-knit group of wealthy merchants. See Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 111.

De Barrios’ version of history associated Nimrod with tyranny, tyranny with imperial Spain, the Spanish with Catholic idolatry and the Inquisition, and the Inquisition with fire. The Dutch, in contrast, were linked spiritually with the Jews. The non-idolatrous, Noahide beliefs of the sons of Eber (father of Yoqtan), it was suggested, could be found in the Calvinist doctrines of their seventeenth-century counterparts. These convictions had stirred Yoqtan’s descendants in the Spanish Netherlands to rise up and overthrow an idolatrous, tyrannical monarch, and afterwards it was they who offered the sons of Abraham a refuge from the flames of the autos-da-fé.

In proposing an ancient bond between Portuguese Jewry and the Dutch people, De Barrios was experimenting with the discourse of his Dutch contemporaries, politely rejecting their version of divine history while offering them a minor role in the epic of the “true Israel.” Yet consciously, and perhaps unconsciously as well, he drew his entire conception from the rhetoric of Dutch political Hebraism in both its variants:

The Counter-Remonstrants depicted the New Israel as a community of believers without borders, a diaspora people that could nevertheless claim hegemony over a sovereign nation. Not surprisingly, De Barrios emphasized that even in exile the Jews resembled a sovereign nation, with a structure of leadership and governance.

The Remonstrants, on the other hand, accentuated the national traits and history of the New Israel. In doing so, they frequently referred to the Exodus story, in a way that paralleled crypto-Jewish and ex-converso identification with the same narrative. It may have been refreshing for ex-conversos to live amid a people with whom they could share the experience of Spanish oppression and the Inquisition. The “Neerlands Israel” rhetoric of magistrates and preachers may also have been irritating, however, in its displacement and marginalization of the Jews.

On one level, De Barrios’ essay can be read simply as a flattering representation of Jewish political life in biblical and post-biblical times, aimed to please a Jewish audience. But it was also a response and a challenge to the Dutch appropriation of Israelite history. In this regard, it was an effort at reclamation accomplished by adopting the very idiom the Dutch had used in their appropriation.

Touro College