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Response: The Complications and Contributions of Early American Hebraism

These excellent essays by Shira Wolosky and Andrew Murphy demonstrate the need for deliberate study of Hebraic politics applied to the American case. Murphy shows how America has uniquely drawn on the biblical tradition in its self-understanding. Wolosky demonstrates how Hebraism is central to the foundation of America. Together, they provide substantial tools for scholars of American history and politics.

Three distinct themes recur in these papers, and all demonstrate the important role of Hebraism in the American tradition: collective responsibility, covenantal ethos, and biblical rhetoric. These themes are interdependent and together are responsible for key characteristics of America. Collective or corporate responsibility means that the nation stands as a people before God.¹ The covenant is the root of both individual and corporate responsibility, resulting in an ethos that is both vertical and horizontal. The individual has a responsibility to the community and vice versa.² Both individual and community have a responsibility before

¹ There is debate about how far this responsibility carried forward beyond the Sinai covenant. For a summary of the debate followed by a sustained defense of continuation, see Joel S. Kaminsky, Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, no. 196 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

God. This covenantal conception of community transcends the standard toolbox of social theories and ideologies, such as liberalism, republicanism, libertarianism, and communitarianism.

While the divine dimensions of covenantal politics transcend secular political philosophies in important ways, they also add a host of theological problems not found in secular alternatives. This brings us to the third theme, biblical rhetoric. Murphy's paper demonstrates the appeal of the Bible as historical and moral narrative. Wolosky offers some especially valuable insights into the question of rhetoric, elucidating Cotton's use of Hebrew to enrich the American understanding of community. Indeed, biblical rhetoric is more than using words from the Bible. This would be "biblicism" at its simplest and least potent. Rightly understood, biblical rhetoric enriches politics with a humane and divine ontology increasingly unfamiliar to the disenchanted world of the early twenty-first century. Part of the growing disenchantment has come from sociological and psychological interpretations of religion and social thought. Both papers are richer to the degree that they avoid these sterile interpretations.

Countless previous studies have addressed Puritanism; our objective here is to discern the Hebraism of the Puritans in these two cases. That requires a sharper eye than simply repeating the historical narrative or the views of earlier scholars. Wolosky does a better job than Murphy in discerning what is Hebraic in these studies beyond the mere use of Hebrew Scriptures. But more needs to be said on how Puritanism drew on the Hebraic tradition. The study of Puritanism must therefore begin with its Reformed Protestant background.

Puritanism is a Protestant tradition, and the early Protestant Reformers cultivated a conflicted relationship with Hebraism. As Wolosky's paper demonstrates, they were very interested in Hebrew. And as Murphy points out, they appropriated the narrative of the covenanted people and all that came with it, including its moral and civil dimensions. But Protestants also had to contend with the fact that their canonical Scriptures were both indebted to and highly critical of Judaism. A good Protestant was...

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3 See Hebrews or Galatians, for example.
therefore to draw on the “Old Testament.” But he was not to become a “Judaizer.”

This brings us to the more specific Protestant legacy that preceded American Puritanism—Reformed Protestantism. In appropriating Jewish Scriptures, Reformed theologians were prepared to go where Lutherans were not. Their rich and enthusiastic engagement of the Hebrew covenants accounts for the complicated nature of Reformed Hebraism. In his 1536 lectures on Genesis, Martin Luther argued that chapter 17 was a dangerous place for Christians to go without having first read Paul. Paul, Luther hoped, would inoculate Christian readers against what he considered Jewish legalism. Circumcision suggested a conditionality of obedience that did not fit into Luther’s law-grace dichotomy. By contrast, Heinrich Bullinger, in his 1534 De testamento seu foedere dei unico & aeterno, saw Genesis 17 as foundational to the whole of Scripture. God’s gracious promise to Abraham is presented as the thread that ties together both testaments. Peter Martyr agreed with this notion of gracious continuity and used the chapter as theology for Christian sacraments. John Calvin also stressed covenant continuity from Abraham through Jesus Christ.

While Reformed theologians agreed on the centrality of covenants, working out the details was not so easily done. The Abrahamic or Davidic covenants were understood as unconditional, but other covenants (Sinaiic or Deuteronomic) were not. Reformed Protestants could not appropriate just the Abrahamic covenant while ignoring the rest. Even if the individual Christian believer was now part of the gracious and unconditional Abrahamic covenant, what about the communities ordained by God? Were not communities, even civil polities, also bound by covenants? Were these conditional or unconditional covenants? The Reformers did assert the existence of civil covenants. This is evident from their use of

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the civil magistrate to restrain impiety or heresy, their respective discussions of the role of prophet and civil magistrate as partners, and their explicit attempts at civil covenanting. Calvin sought to have all Genevans covenant in 1538 by subscribing to his first catechism. Both Martyr and Bullinger took a covenantal approach to the civil magistrate and the community at large. John Knox, when urging interposition by lesser magistrates, explicitly stated that both England and Scotland were in covenant with God. The Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos, a work of French Reformed theology, asserted the existence of two civil covenants involving God, the king, and the people. The Scots and the English signed a literal “Solemn League and Covenant” in 1643.

One way Reformed theologians could navigate the problem of both individual and communal faithfulness to a covenant involved what is incorrectly labeled “Calvinism”—predestination or election. Not only did Calvin not invent the doctrine of divine election, it is another variant of Christian Hebraism. Reformers revived soteriological questions that could no longer be deferred to Catholic theology (excepting Augustine, whom almost all the Reformers adored). Election and divine sovereignty became a tool to untangle the Hebraic covenants. In his commentary on Genesis 17, Calvin spoke of Abraham’s “twofold class of sons” in the Church, distinguishing those who are gathered (but not redeemed) from those who are reckoned the sons of God by faith “in the


innermost sanctuary of God.” What distinguishes the true sons of God is “gratuitous election.” And that is determined only by the hidden counsel of God. We are able to distinguish these two classes by their “respective marks of faith and unbelief.”

15 But “predestination” accounted only for individual cases of disobedience or apostasy. It did not solve the problem of corporate responsibility itself; nor did it solve the question of church discipline or civil polity, let alone the relationship between them.

The resulting struggles over faithfulness in the church-state split tore British Protestantism apart as the Reformation ethos of semper reformandum drove its adherents from controversy to controversy. The early Protestant reforms of Archbishop Cranmer were more progressive than Edward’s father would have tolerated but reflected the more moderate approaches of Martyr and Bullinger. The ironic legacy of Edward’s successor, Mary I, was to exile her Protestants to Reformed cities on the continent, to inspire radicals like Knox and Christopher Goodman, and to trade the irenic voice of Zurich for the more aggressive voice of Geneva. The Anglo-Scottish Protestant exiles returned with a new and seditious (Geneva) Bible, the Genevan Psalter, an egalitarian form of church polity, and a view of church discipline that opposed royal supremacy. In addition to all this, “Bloody Mary” unwittingly furthered apocalyptic and millennial narratives that found their voices almost a century later in the English Civil War. Elizabeth inherited a church split on matters of ritual, worship, and ecclesiastical government together with an active Presbyterian movement next door in Scotland. Although many Reformed English clergy dissented, large numbers of them still remained within the Church of England. By the 1590s some Reformed Protestants began to separate into the “Gathered” or “Congregational” churches of the kind addressed in these papers. Many came to America, especially after the excesses of Archbishop Laud and Charles I.

In the final three decades of the sixteenth century, the civil theology of English Reformed Protestantism began to outgrow its continental roots.

16 What began as conflicts over ritual and clerical vestments became literary combat over church polity. Presbyterians Thomas Wilcox and John


16 The role of the continental Reformers in these controversies is complicated. Both sides of the English debates cited continental Reformers to be in their favor. All parties in Zurich and Geneva urged calm and unity in the disputes over clerical vestments and rituals in the 1560s. In the Presbyterian controversies of the 1570s, however, both Rudolph Gualter and Heinrich Bullinger had great doubts about the English Presbyterian movement, while Theodore Beza found it difficult not to support Presbyterianism. Hastings Robinson, ed., Zurich Letters, vol. ii, letters XCVIII and C, pp. 240–243, 249–254.
Field's *Admonition to the Parliament* (1572) and Presbyterian Thomas Cartwright’s *Second Admonition* appealed ecclesiastical differences to Parliament and re-entangled church and state.\(^{17}\) English Puritans also advanced a dual “federal” theology that went beyond the aforementioned covenants. This new theology included a covenant of works made with Adam and applied to all his descendants. This proposed covenant of works, arguably a deviation from previous Christian Hebraism, reintroduced the possibility (and necessity) of moral obedience and encouraged the Puritan obsession with nature. Putting everyone under one covenant also justified the maintenance of corporate responsibility, simultaneously dividing “wheat” and “tares” within individual churches.\(^{18}\) (This was one of the paradoxes that most afflicted American Puritanism.)

Since the sixteenth century, there had also been a controversy over the use of the Mosaic judicial or civil law by Christians.\(^{19}\) This controversy is further background to the debate over Cotton’s proposed judicial code. Reformers were agreed that the Mosaic *ceremonial* law had been overturned by Christ. They were not in agreement as to what parts of the *judicial* law could be precisely separated from the ceremonial law and what their use should be vis-à-vis the natural law or the *jus gentium*. Most Reformers were not prepared to recommend the judicial law unequivocally, but many found portions of it indispensable in practice. Furthermore, to reject the entire judicial law would be to undermine theonomic elements of the English common law. The sixteenth-century debate was also complicated by the Anabaptist movement, whose members prescribed the Mosaic judicials but readily disobeyed the civil magistrate as a carnal relic of the old covenant. Much of the civil theology of the sixteenth-century Reformers must be read with the Anabaptists and the Roman Catholics in mind. Calvin, Bucer, Bullinger, and others had to preserve the legitimacy of civil magistracy while sorting out its proper jurisdiction for soul and body. This further complicated their engagement with the biblical polities.

Even though the American Puritans hoped to establish a community that would settle these controversies, practically every dispute followed them to the shores of their new Israel. American churches, particularly in New England, became the final testing ground for the Reformed


\(^{18}\) This expression relates to the parable of wheat and tares in Matthew 15, a prominent subject in Reformed debates over ecclesioloogy and a recurring theme in the Williams-Cotton debates.

\(^{19}\) See, for example, Bullinger, *Brief Exposition*, pp. 116–117; or Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.16–17.
Protestant engagement with Hebraism. This background now brings us to our papers.

Andrew Murphy’s essay draws from the thesis of his latest monograph, *Prodigal Nation*. As with his earlier *Conscience and Community*, Murphy does an impressive job of marshaling texts to demonstrate an important claim. What is not always clear from this paper is what it teaches us about American Hebraism beyond the straightforward thesis: New Englanders saw themselves through the lens of a providential history, as reflected and promoted by their jeremiads. This thesis is essential to American self-understanding and politics, and it is a necessary first step. But Murphy focuses on demonstrating the continuity of the jeremiad rather than providing precise insight into what the jeremiad or the political sermon drew from the Hebraic tradition. Aside from the seesaw of judgment and hope, and its use by political elites or mass movements, what does it mean to be a “chosen nation”? What details can be learned about the Puritan use of Hebrew Scriptures? Is it all just rhetorical? Is this a particular historiography or a particular theology? Murphy gives us only preliminary details: the use of particular Hebrew prophets or the condemnation of particular sins. More must be built on this foundation.

Reform and repentance in the context of providential history are certainly provocative enough, but future studies of Early American Hebraism must go deeper. This depth must extend not only to the Puritans themselves, but also to their Reformed Protestant context. For example, “Rowlandson was clear that just because a people had once been near to God, God could nonetheless forsake it if it continued in sin, a point echoed by Eleazar Mather: ‘If we forsake him, he will forsake us, notwithstanding all former engagements.’” Did Rowlandson mean that his audience would be forsaken spiritually? How can this be reconciled with what the Reformers taught about the (unconditional) Abrahamic covenant? How did these ministers reconcile the two kinds of covenant? Did they use any particular texts in their sermons in attempting the reconciliation (II Samuel 7 or Psalm 89, for example)? Pursuing these kinds of questions in greater detail would further evince the tension between the individual and the community investigated by Wolosky. There is also the question of how the Puritans used Hebraism to navigate the

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civil-ecclesiastical relationship. Murphy notes that the books of the prophets were frequently used. But what role did the patriarchs play in these sermons? How about ancient magistrates? Better yet, are the patriarchs cast as playing a civil role? (Bullinger suggested as much.) Did the clergy just want to lament, so it found particular lamenting texts to match? Or is there something more? What is the soteriological context of these texts? How did ministers reconcile the temporal and the spiritual in covenant faithfulness? All of this would require much more attention to specific uses of the Bible.

Also worth addressing is the question of eschatology in American Hebraism, particularly the political sermon. (Wolosky’s subject, John Cotton, was notably given to eschatological readings of history.) Murphy alludes to Foxe but provides little else. As he demonstrates, the political sermon continued beyond the eighteenth century. By the time of the War of Independence, eschatology had moved from the battle against the Antichrist to the battle against political tyranny! How did Hebraism fit into all this Anglo-American political eschatology? An examination of this subject in the colonies would be an impressive study on its own. But if Murphy’s larger thesis is correct, and the American political sermon (beyond the jeremiad) continues to the present day, then yet another point of entry into American Hebraism is opened.

Lastly, Murphy undermines the merits of his paper by casting the Deuteronomic view of calamity as “hardly unique to either the Christian or Jewish tradition” (n. 4). Is this view indeed just another “providentialist history,” or is there something particular to the biblical tradition? If one defines the subject broadly enough, Murphy is correct. Many cultures have seen history in terms of divine favor or disfavor. But “We’ve been bad. God’s angry with us” would be essentially neither Hebraic nor biblical. The details do make all the difference, and it is these details that justify this journal.

Shira Wolosky has given us a fresh insight into the challenges facing John Cotton, the legendary seventeenth-century New England pastor. This is an outstanding contribution to the study of American Hebraism, and I especially commend the sincerity and respect with which she approaches her subject. Wolosky provides enriching details about Cotton’s use of Hebrew, which are not found in previous accounts. Hers is also a fine political study, demonstrating the biblical roots of early modern commonwealth republicanism. There is some additional genius in choosing

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23 Examples include Cotton’s *The Powring [sic] Out of the Seven Vials or an Exposition, of the 16 Chapter of the Revelation, with an Application of it to our times* (London, 1642) and *An Exposition Upon the Thirteenth Chapter of Revelation* (London, 1655).
a figure whose life and work best demonstrate the conflicted approach of Reformed Protestantism to Hebrew covenants. Earlier in this essay, I cast the problem as a theological challenge. Cotton tried to preserve a covenantal social vision in a theological milieu that hadn’t accommodated its soteriology to its Hebraic civil theology. Wolosky casts it as interiority and exteriority. Putting these two together, one must then ask the origin of “separatist interiority.” Is it a biblical problem? Is there a Christian variant? What does it owe to Jewish interiority? The answer to these questions will help us define a fundamental challenge of Christian Hebraism.

To get at the conceptual challenge a bit more, let me return to Cotton’s opponents, Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams. Hutchinson was exiled for emphasizing the covenant of grace to the exclusion of the covenant of works. That’s an important point insofar as both were later Reformed theological devices with substantial implications for politics. They are not, so far as I understand it, Hebraic theological devices. Are these then components of the Christian tradition working against the Hebraic tradition? Even if we set aside the so-called federal theology of the late sixteenth century, is Hutchinson even pointing out the challenge of reconciling conditional covenants with unconditional ones? In Hutchinson, the question is one of personal experience—the interiority of which Wolosky speaks. But in Williams, the question is more social (exteriority). It is the civil-ecclesiastical question and the “wheat” versus “tares” question. This could be cast as a uniquely Christian problem insofar as it dealt with matters of church discipline, the cura religionis (two kingdoms), and sacramental administration. But it also gets back to the question of election and predestination. Cotton’s arguments kept trying to reconcile the Reformed belief in divine election with the civil covenant. But Williams pursued election in such a way that it imploded rather than sustained that covenant.

Williams reminds one of the tone-deaf Ulysses S. Grant, who supposedly said that he knew two tunes: one of them was “Yankee Doodle,” and the other wasn’t. In Williams’ case, the only soteriological tune he

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knew was a hyper-predestinarianism. Everything else just wasn’t, and that colored the rest of his civil theology. God knew and would save those who were his, and they were Williams’ primary concern. The kind of civil covenants used by the Puritans could therefore only result in spiritual oppression or hypocrisy. This raises questions about the efficacy of Reformed theology’s aforementioned tool (predestination) for enabling Reformed Protestant Hebraism.

Williams was a harbinger of the kind of pietist squabbles over covenant sincerity that would eventually divide Reformed Protestantism in America. Hyper-separatism in the name of covenant faithfulness lined up against substantial transmission of the Hebraic covenant to America. Even by the eighteenth century, many Reformed American clergy (what scholars used to call the “Old Lights”) retained a largely parish-like view of church and society. This view was arguably Hebraic. Other Reformed clergy emphasized an even purer church, this time discerned by conversion narratives and revivals. This had a devastating effect on American political Hebraism—an eventual shift to what Wolosky calls “separatist interiority.” The great schism occurred in the Great Awakening and its creation of American evangelicalism. Once again, Reformed Protestantism’s complicated Hebraism is at the root of the narrative. The predecessors to the American revivals were covenant renewal ceremonies among the colonial churches. Did this mean that the American attempt to mimic the Jewish corporate covenant with a particularly Christian spirituality was doomed? To get to the answer, one might ask how Hebrew Scripture or covenant theology was used in both the early covenant renewals versus the later revivals, and what this means for Christian Hebraism in its American manifestations.

A final, salient point on Williams is that he rejected the idea that America was a new Israel. As Murphy points out, the notion of England or America as a new Israel was a very important device for early modern Hebraism. Typology saw Old Testament persons or events as prefiguring Christ and the Church. Williams wanted to spiritualize rather than literalize functions of the biblical magistrates. There was yet another

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25 Cotton puts the question to Williams as “It is true the Lord knoweth who are his and none of his Elect shall perish. But nevertheless, Is it not a tempting of God, to presume upon Gods Election for our salvation, and to neglect the meanes of our preservation?” Cotton, Bloudy Tenent Washed, p. 50.

26 Alan Simpson has it correct when he says, “Any attempt to understand Roger Williams must begin with the fact that from first to last he was a religious enthusiast.” Simpson, “How Democratic Was Roger Williams?” William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser., 13:1 (January 1956), p. 54.

point of continuity within the Reformed Protestant Hebraic synthesis that Williams rejected. Infant baptism was the sacrament that Williams’ predecessors and opponents asserted to be the Christian equivalent of circumcision. It was the key to the civil covenant, as evidenced in controversies over the Halfway Covenant. Williams came to reject baptism. Couple all this iconoclastic civil theology with the scholarly adoration of Williams as some kind of proto-liberal, and you have the basis of a very interesting future study.

Finally, as much as I would love to cast Cotton’s opposition to both Hutchinson and Williams as championing a Hebraic position, this understanding would leave us with a substantial dilemma. Cotton’s defense of the status quo, on grounds furnished in part by his Christian Hebraism, includes a distinct fear of heresy and its consequences for the community. Cotton believed the civil magistrate had what Reformers called a “two table” duty. (This meant that the magistrate was to enforce all of the Ten Commandments.) Williams had no such belief. Fear of doctrinal heresy no longer strikes Americans as a civil problem, for we have institutionalized religious pluralism. I suspect that few would really agree with Cotton anymore. But we must then ask, How does a muscular or robust political Hebraism deal with religious dissent or ideologies of secularism? How important is it to Hebraic notions of community? One can just brush it aside or respond with a defense from secular political philosophy. But it seems that one should address the question from inside the tradition. John Locke’s *Epistol de tolerantia* (1689) is often seen as doing that. But Locke should not be hailed as an iconic figure. He came late to the party and asserted nothing that hadn’t been said before—even when one remembers Roger Williams. Scholars rightly debate whether Locke was baptizing liberalism or liberalizing Christianity. What must be considered first is the multitude of explicitly religious arguments for toleration and pluralism. (Murphy’s *Conscience and Community* is an excellent place to start.)

28 See, for example, Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvi.3.


pluralism, political Hebraism had to do the same thing. Will America figure into that somewhere? And what does all this mean for defining a “chosen people”? This is not only a central question within Judaism. As these papers point out, it is a key to America’s understanding of herself.

I hope my comments here have persuaded readers of *Hebraic Political Studies* that the study of American colonial religion and Reformed Protestantism is an important and relevant subject for research. I hope further that scholars of American colonial religion and Reformed Protestantism who are not attuned to Hebraism will see that it is a relatively unexplored point of entry into their research areas. Social history is reaching its limits, as is the mid-twentieth-century historiography. The way out of these dead ends is a sincere and dedicated study of American religion’s Hebraic roots. These papers are excellent places to begin.

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