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After Machiavelli and Hobbes:
James Harrington’s Commonwealth of Israel

Abstract: In this essay, I analyze James Harrington’s discussion of the commonwealth of Israel to show how Harrington employs methods and concepts from Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes while ultimately distinguishing himself from both. I argue that Harrington makes use of Machiavelli’s method of historical example and adopts his republicanism while abandoning his belief that all states are mortal. From Hobbes, Harrington derives the idea that nature provides the principles for a timeless polity, but he criticizes Hobbes’ political conclusions. By selectively adapting and rejecting elements of both Machiavelli’s and Hobbes’ theories, Harrington arrives at a divided conception of Israel—one part historical and finite, the other ideal and immortal.

1. Introduction

In this essay, I will analyze James Harrington’s discussion of the commonwealth of Israel to show how Harrington (1611–1677) employs methods and concepts from Niccolò Machiavelli (1467–1527) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) while ultimately distinguishing himself from both. Harrington highlights the importance of the commonwealth of Israel in his own thought through the attention he pays to it (invariably making examples from its functioning “the first support of every theory he brings forward, while examples from secular history come second”) and by recognizing that it was the only commonwealth in history whose fabric and laws were infallible, “not fit to be altered by men,” because its founder and legislator was God.¹ The Israelite commonwealth, however,

is of singular importance not only in understanding Harrington’s thought per se but also in elucidating the relationship between Harrington’s political ideas and those of Machiavelli and Hobbes, because it is the only commonwealth that all three thinkers examine.

I argue that Harrington makes use of Machiavelli’s method of historical example and adopts his republicanism while abandoning his belief that all states are mortal. From Hobbes, Harrington derives the idea that nature provides the principles for a timeless polity, but he criticizes Hobbes’ political conclusions. I maintain that by selectively adapting and rejecting elements of both Machiavelli’s and Hobbes’ theories, Harrington arrives at a divided conception of Israel—one part historical and finite, the other ideal and immortal. In *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (hereafter referred to as *Oceana*) (1656) and, even more fully, in *The Art of Lawgiving* (1659), Harrington examines the commonwealth of Israel and how it embodies all the elements of the exemplary republic.² He states that the rules of the Israelite commonwealth are perfect but concedes that the Israelites never lived up to God’s dictates and therefore never created for themselves a pure commonwealth. Harrington uses this division between the ideal and the reality to support, scripturally, his own model commonwealth, an idealized version of England he calls “Oceana.”

Studies of Harrington have often pointed out his singularity and preeminence—for example, his near-universal acceptance as the exemplar of English republicanism—and the complex etiology of his thought, in that his intellectual roots are to be found among diverse thinkers and philosophical traditions.³ Although these characteristics, originality and

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² Harrington’s program in *The Art of Lawgiving* and his magnum opus, *Oceana*, published three years earlier, are the same, except for two things. Harrington acknowledges in *The Art of Lawgiving* that he omits there his complex balloting system and makes “some alteration in [his] former method.” See Harrington, *Political Works*, p. 662.

derivativeness, appear to be at odds with each other, I will show how they cohere in Harrington's writings. By analyzing Harrington's relationship to Machiavelli and Hobbes, two evident influences on his thinking, I hope to clarify Harrington's independence of, and debt to, these different sources. In examining Harrington's study of ancient Israel vis-à-vis Machiavelli's and Hobbes', I will attempt to demonstrate how he uses their ideas but modifies them so profoundly that, on closer inspection, that which distinguishes his thought from theirs is sometimes more significant than where they concur. Thus, to this day, Harrington inspires debate about whether he is best understood as a student of Machiavelli or as a disciple of Hobbes, which ensures that he is not viewed as the epigone of either.

First, I shall examine how Harrington is intellectually indebted to, yet departs from, Machiavelli, and how Machiavelli's and Harrington's similarities and differences manifest themselves in their accounts of the politics of ancient Israel. Next, I shall consider Harrington's interest in Hobbes (and the limits of this interest) as it affects Harrington's broader political theory and his timeless ideal of the commonwealth of Israel. I shall then demonstrate how Harrington, in his inquiry into Israel, emulates Plato in that he distinguishes between the ideal or form of the state, on the one hand, and actual political practice, on the other.

2. Historical Example in Machiavelli and Harrington

James Harrington draws a close connection between his own thought and that of Machiavelli. As Harrington explains, Machiavelli revived ancient prudence, “first discovered unto mankind by God himself in the fabric of the commonwealth of Israel, and afterward picked out of his footsteps in nature and unanimously followed by the Greeks and Romans”;

Felix Raab has “detected the presence of fourteen different Harringtons in the scholarly literature.” See Felix Raab, The English Face of Machiavelli: A Changing Interpretation, 1500–1700 (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1965), p. 187. Harrington has been depicted as Platonic, Aristotelian, neo-Roman, “Virgilianized,” Machiavellian, or a synthesis of several of these elements mediated by Polybian constitutionalism. “For others Harrington’s principal intellectual debt was to Hobbes, the nature of which engagement has been vigorously disputed together with its impact upon his claimed classical republicanism. Still others have depicted Harrington as a Utopian, a Stoic, a natural philosopher, and the author of a civic religion.” Scott, Commonwealth Principles, p. 3.

4 Best known for linking the author of The Commonwealth of Oceana to Machiavelli is J.G.A. Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). Other authors, however, have emphasized Harrington’s intellectual debt to Hobbes. Paul Rahe writes: “Indeed, if truth be told, James Harrington owes far, far less to the many
ancient prudence defines government as “an art whereby a civil society of men is instituted and preserved upon the foundation of common right and interest.” Because Oceana was based on ancient prudence, Harrington saw Machiavelli as the work’s intellectual progenitor and as “the only politician that hath gone about to retrieve” this kind of prudence. Machiavelli, whom Harrington terms “the only politician of later ages,” thereby offers a yardstick against which all other political theorists should be measured.

Harrington adopts, from ancient prudence and Machiavelli, the method of historical example, in which political wisdom is sought from the practice of ancient (and sometimes modern) rulers and governments. Similarly, Harrington embraces the republicanism of ancient prudence and Machiavelli, embodied in the theory of the mixed government. In applying ancient prudence specifically to Hebrew Scripture, Harrington emulates Machiavelli, who, as will be seen in the following, treats the Bible as a secular political document, inferring political precepts from its examples. In The Prince, Machiavelli compares the prophet Moses with the pagan leaders “Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, and others of that stamp.” And while Machiavelli prefaces his discussion of these founders by stating that “one should not discuss Moses, because he was merely an executor of what had been ordained by God,” he almost immediately subverts this statement by asserting that Cyrus and others who founded kingdoms “will all be found remarkable, and if their actions and methods are considered, they will not appear very different from those of Moses, who had such a great master.”

Machiavelli then goes on to explain how it was necessary for Moses, as it was for other secular founders, to find his people in a vulnerable position in order to successfully gain their obedience. He writes: “It was necessary, then, for Moses to find the people of Israel in Egypt, enslaved
and oppressed by the Egyptians, so that they would be disposed to follow him, in order to escape their servitude.” Again, like the others, Moses had to be armed, because “all armed prophets succeed whereas unarmed fail…. If Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus had been unarmed, the new order which each of them established would not have been obeyed for very long.”7 In Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius (1517), commonly referred to as Discourses on Livy or Discourses, Machiavelli elaborates on this point, noting that “whoever reads the Bible judiciously will see that since he wished his laws and his orders to go forward, Moses was forced to kill infinite men who, moved by nothing other than envy, were opposed to his plans.”8 Moses makes use of the same means, like mass killings to achieve power, as do more mundane political founders.

Harrington emulates Machiavelli’s stand that biblical political precedents are comparable to their secular counterparts.9 He almost certainly has Machiavelli in mind when he defends “politicians” who are vilified as “irreverent or atheistical” for comparing “(though but by way of illustration) legislators or politicians such as Lycurgus, Solon with Moses, or other commonwealths, as Rome and Venice, with that of Israel.” Harrington accepts that scriptural examples may be intermingled with secular ones. From the fact that the advice of the heathen Jethro (Moses’ father-in-law) is adopted into Scripture, Harrington finds proof that God himself does not distinguish between political wisdom gained from the Bible and that gained from nonreligious sources. As Harrington sees it, Jethro, in his capacity as king and priest of Midian, proposes to Moses a government that is Midianite, which “was of like nature with that of Melchizedek, or of the Lacedaemonian kings who were also priests.”10 Because both Israelite and pagan commonwealths can be comprehended politically, Harrington freely draws parallels between the Israelite standards of the camp and the Roman eagles; the military rolls in Israel, Athens, and Rome; and the offering of a sacrifice in both Israel and Rome before the meeting of the popular assembly.11

While Machiavelli focuses on the actions of biblical figures, especially Moses, Harrington looks more broadly to the structures and institutions of Israel. Harrington’s reliance on institutions instead of virtue, however,
is itself Machiavellian, though Machiavelli offers republican Rome’s constitutional orders as his model. Machiavelli states that “as every history is full of examples, it is necessary to whoever disposes a republic and orders laws in it to presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always have to use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for it”; “it is the laws,” created by rightly constituted orders, “that make [men] good,” that is, that “compel them to serve the common good and refrain from harming their fellow citizens, as civil and political life demands.” Harrington echoes Machiavelli in writing: “‘give us good orders, and they will make us good men’ is the maxim of a legislator and the most infallible in the politics.” Like Machiavelli, Harrington denies that a commonwealth can be based on the virtue of good men. Thus, Harrington writes: “‘Give us good men and they will make us good laws’ is the maxim of a demagogue.” As did Machiavelli, Harrington decides upon a republic of good orders as the constitutional exemplar.

Harrington uses the example of the commonwealth of Israel to show that its institutions, which are divinely planned, inform and justify the acceptance of the institutions of Oceana. The commonwealth of Israel, according to Harrington, begins with Moses and ends with Zedekiah, the last prince, “in whose reign was Judah led away captive by Nebuchadnezzar.” Though Harrington defines this whole period as the commonwealth of Israel, he selects his examples mainly from the period of Moses and Joshua. Harrington’s focus on their tenure is reasonable, as the political framework of the Israelite commonwealth was conceived during their time. In addition, Harrington can plausibly claim that neither Moses nor Joshua was a king, which buttresses his position that Israel was a commonwealth. Harrington, however, asserts that Israel was a commonwealth even during King David’s reign. He supports this claim by viewing David as a limited monarch within a larger popular government: “For David was a king, who nevertheless did not otherwise make any law than by proposition unto the people, and their free suffrage thereupon.” As for most other kings of Israel and Judah, Harrington does not emphasize their limited powers so much as their unstable and ineffective


13  Harrington, Political Works, p. 643. Harrington refers to “the government restored by Zorobabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah,” who returned from the Babylonian exile, as “the Jewish or cabalistical commonwealth.” He considers this commonwealth a corruption of Mosaic rule, as it created laws (like banishment and the confiscation of property) that did not exist in Mosaic law. Under this government, “the word of a scribe or doctor was avowedly held to be of more validity than the Scripture.” Ibid., pp. 644–645, 649.

14  Ibid., p. 176.
regimes, which he describes in just one paragraph. And, in contrast to his examination of David’s rule, he shows little concern for reconciling their monarchical rule with his belief that Israel remained a commonwealth during their reign.\(^{15}\)

Harrington employs Machiavelli’s method of historical example to demonstrate that the commonwealth of Israel (like the Roman republic for Machiavelli) possesses contemporary relevance: the English should approve Oceana’s structures based, in part, on the insights gained from an examination of Israel’s institutions. In both republics, he discovers a parallel economic structure and political superstructure or constitutional arrangement. Harrington argues in *Oceana* that the stability of a republic or commonwealth, as of political forms more generally, depends on the economic structure, that is, the distribution of land: “and such... as is the proportion or balance of dominion or property in land, such is the nature of the empire.” When one man possesses all or nearly all the land, an absolute monarchy exists. When the nobility holds all or almost all property, the constitution is a mixed monarchy. “And if the whole people be landlords, or hold the lands so divided among them, that no one man, or number of men, within the compass of the few or aristocracy, overbalance them, the empire (without the interposition of force) is a commonwealth.”\(^{16}\)

Harrington believed that a commonwealth was the proper (and stable) government for England because it had largely attained equality in landholding.\(^{17}\) To maintain a stable state, Harrington suggests that the balance be fixed by law, “which is called agrarian.” This agrarian law is “of such virtue that, wherever it hath held, that government hath not altered, except by consent.... But without an agrarian, government, whether monarchical, aristocratical, or popular, hath no long lease.”\(^{18}\)

Oceana’s agrarian laws were prefigured in ancient Israel by “the division of the land of Canaan unto the whole people by lot,” where the land was to be controlled by the people or, at least, with neither “one nor the

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., pp. 642–643. Earlier, in part 2 of *The Art of Lawgiving*, Harrington defines a commonwealth in such a way that would make place for some kings: “Now where there is no king, or no king in a distinct capacity from the senate, and the senate hath no farther power in lawmaking than to propose unto the free suffrage of the people, the government is a commonwealth.”

\(^{16}\) Ibid., pp. 163–164.


few overbalanc[ing] the whole people.” 19 Israel’s “agrarian law, or jubilee, entailing the inheritance of each proprietor upon his heirs forever,” fixed the popular balance. 20 Because all lands reverted to their original owners in the jubilee, every fiftieth year, a broad distribution of property was ensured.

The commonwealth of Israel’s basic governmental superstructure also heralds that of Oceana. In outlining his model of Oceana, Harrington divides its people based on “their quality, their ages, their wealth, and the places of their residence or habitation.” 21 As Harrington divides the people of Oceana for political purposes, God (and Moses) divided the people of Israel, first genealogically and then geographically. 22 In Oceana, the vote is restricted to male citizens above the age of thirty; in Israel, suffrage was limited to males who were twenty years or older. In Oceana, elections are indirect, using a complex system of lots and secret ballots in a series of stages, from “parish” through “hundred” to “tribe.” 23 Similarly, in Israel, elections were performed “sometimes by the lot, without suffrage, and sometimes by the ballot, that is, by a mixture of lot and suffrage.” Harrington argues that the Israelites selected both their kings (“when the people would needs have a king”) and the members of the Sanhedrim, the senate consisting of seventy elders. 24 And, like Oceana’s elections, Israel’s were organized in a series of stages. 25

The most significant element in the superstructure for Harrington is the distinction between debating and resolving. In Oceana’s constitutional scheme, the senate (or upper chamber) debates, and the people, through their representatives in the “prerogative tribe” (or lower chamber), resolve or vote. 26 Harrington finds that God establishes a similar functional division in the commonwealth of Israel between the seventy-member senate, or Sanhedrim, and Israel’s popular assembly, which consisted, at times, of the whole congregation of Israel and, at other times, of a smaller body.

19 Harrington, Political Works, pp. 604–605. See also pp. 174–175.
20 Ibid., pp. 233, 634.
22 Harrington, Political Works, pp. 621–625.
of twenty-four thousand men. Harrington's reason for separating a debating senate from a voting popular assembly is his belief that only the wisest in the commonwealth, to be housed in the senate, are intellectually capable of discovering what is best for the commonwealth and that only the people, through their representatives, are able to choose which proposals are in their common interest. In arguing that the people as a whole are unfit for political debate, Harrington presupposes the existence of a natural aristocracy of the wise. These wiser men, in contrast to "the herd," are more capable of learned debate and sagely advice. But while the natural aristocrats are wiser and therefore better political debaters and policy presenters, their wisdom does not ensure that they will choose the people's common interest over their own personal interest. Therefore, the popular assembly is necessary to defend the interests of the whole. For while the people may not be sufficiently intelligent "to find out the truth of themselves," and therefore they cannot be trusted with debating and fashioning their own laws, "yet, if they be shown truth, they not only acknowledge and embrace it very suddenly, but are the most constant and faithful guardians and conservators of it."  

27 Harrington concedes that Israel's senate did not normally propose laws, as most other senates do, "in regard that the legislator of Israel was infallible, and the laws given by God... were not fit to be altered by men." Nonetheless, he states that "it is not to be thought that the Sanhedrim had not always that right... of proposing unto the people, but that they forbear it in regard of the fullness and infallibility of the law already made, whereby it was needless." Israel's Sanhedrim was a law-advising senate in theory but not in practice. Ibid., p. 176.  

"The church or congregation of the people of Israel... had the result of the commonwealth, or the power of confirming all their laws, though proposed even by God himself, as where they make him [that is, God] king (Exodus 19). And where they reject or depose him as civil magistrate and elect Saul (I Samuel 8:8)." Because all the laws of Israel, after having been submitted by God, "were no otherwise enacted than by covenant with the people, then that only which was resolved by the people of Israel was their law; and so the result of that commonwealth was in the people." Ibid., pp. 175–176. Harrington contends that even in a divinely ordained commonwealth, the people's right of approval was guaranteed by God. Harrington also speaks not only of God, but of Moses, as the one proposing laws. See ibid., pp. 619–620. While the popular assembly consisted at times of the whole body of the people, Harrington believes that Scripture recognizes a smaller "representative of the people," composed of twenty-four thousand men. His textual source for this assembly is I Chronicles 27:1, which calculates the number of Israelites—chiefs of clans, officers of thousands and hundreds, and their clerks—who served King David as twenty-four thousand. Harrington interprets this verse as referring to the people's representative, "which gave the vote of the people at the creation of their laws or election of their magistrates." Ibid., pp. 474, 636–637. When the verse describes these assistants to the king as "working in monthly shifts during all the months of the year," Harrington construes these monthly shifts as pertaining to a monthly rotation.


29 Ibid., pp. 284, 172.
The principle of rotation is a basic institutional device of Oceana’s legislature, in which annual elections and three-year term limits result in one-third of each chamber being replaced each year. In Israel, Harrington surmises, a new representative body appeared each month, with twenty-four thousand new men appearing—two thousand from each tribe—and twenty-four thousand departing. At this rate, he believes, “the rotation of the whole people came about in the space of one year.”

Harrington’s delineation of Israel’s political institutions reflects Machiavelli’s method of distilling political prudence from ancient practice (as well as the Florentine’s mixing of biblical and secular examples). But Harrington departs fundamentally from Machiavelli on whether the commonwealth of Israel (or any state) can escape the finitude of time. Machiavelli grounds his political theory in actual (or what was then accepted as actual) political facts. In The Prince, he explains that because he wishes to write on what will be useful, “it seems… better to concentrate on what really happens rather than on theories or speculations.” Machiavelli continues: “For many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist.” And all actual states, Machiavelli says, are temporary. “All things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady,” Machiavelli writes in Discourses. “[T]hey must either rise or fall.” In contrasting Rome, a republic bent on expansion, with Venice, an inward-looking republic, Machiavelli concludes that neither type can evade mortality. Rome expanded, employing the plebeians for war and accepting foreigners, which afforded “infinite opportunities for tumult,” eventually leading to its demise. Venice, too, which seeks stability over greatness, cannot maintain its stability indefinitely, Machiavelli asserts. Eventually it would be forced by circumstances to expand, which in a self-contained state like Venice “would come to take away its foundations and make it come to ruin sooner,” or, “if heaven were so kind that it did not have to make war,” Venice would be overtaken by idleness, resulting in effeminacy or division; “these two things together, or each by itself, would be the cause of its ruin.”

Given that all states must succumb in the end, Machiavelli prefers the glory of Rome to the temporary tranquility of Venice.

30 See ibid., p. 475.
31 Machiavelli, Prince, p. 54.
32 Machiavelli, Discourses I 6.4.
33 Machiavelli, Discourses I 6.
Taking issue with Machiavelli, Harrington defends the possibility of an immortal commonwealth. Harrington believes that if the ideal ever comes into existence, it need not decay: “a commonwealth rightly ordered may for any internal causes be as immortal, or long-lived, as the world.”

Not only does Harrington intend Oceana to be eternal, he argues (as will be seen later) that Israel, too, could have lasted forever. Unlike Machiavelli, Harrington does not identify the commonwealth of Israel so closely with other historical states as to preclude, as Machiavelli implicitly does, the possibility of its permanent survival. Harrington continues: “But if this be true, those commonwealths that are naturally fallen must have derived their ruin from the rise of them [that is, internal causes].” Harrington then observes that “Israel and Athens died not natural but violent deaths.” But even though Israel ultimately died a violent death, Harrington shows that it was destined to decay because the historical Israel was flawed from its inception. The perfect government instituted by Moses should not have been “by any internal cause… broken or dissolved.” The Mosaic model, though, “was never established in any such part as possibly could be holding.” Harrington looks beyond Machiavelli to find a conceptual framework that can make sense of a permanent commonwealth, including the conceivability of a timeless commonwealth of Israel. He turns to Hobbes for this framework.

3. Hobbes, Harrington, and the Timeless Ideal of Israel

To the degree that he extols Machiavelli, Harrington almost equally criticizes Hobbes. Harrington depicts Hobbes as a skeptic who upholds modern prudence and as such defines government as rule of one or the few in their private interest. Yet, as several writers have argued recently, Harrington is intellectually indebted in no small degree to Hobbes. Jonathan Scott goes so far as to describe Harrington as “the greatest English disciple, not of Machiavelli, but of Hobbes.” And Harrington himself, despite his criticisms, acknowledges that “I have opposed the politics of Mr. Hobbes, to show him what he taught me.” Harrington

34 Harrington, Political Works, p. 321.
35 Ibid.: “Look well unto it, my lords, for if there be a contradiction or inequality in your commonwealth, it must fall; but if it have neither of these, it hath no principle of mortality.”
36 Ibid., p. 635.
37 Ibid., pp. 161–163, 165.
38 Scott, “Rapture of Motion,” p. 162.
considers Hobbes “the best writer at this day in the world; and for his
treatises of human nature and of liberty and necessity, they are the great-
est of new lights, and those which I have followed and shall follow.”39

What Harrington learns from Hobbes is a new metaphysics of nature. Hobbes bases this metaphysics on the assumptions that “the world, or
nature, consisted of material in motion” and that “natural motion was
perpetual unless arrested or diverted by pressure (motion) from a differ-
ent direction: ‘when a thing is in motion, it will eternally be in motion,
unless somewhat els stay it.’”40 In Leviathan, Hobbes expresses this vision
of nature when he identifies “Voluntary Motion” as the source of all hu-
man action and thought, including that species of “Endeavor” called the
passions. It is the passions that, according to Hobbes, motivate human
beings to engage in a “war of all against all” in the state of nature (a con-
dition of motion) and to accept restraints on their motion in instituting
a commonwealth through covenant.41

Harrington thought that Hobbes’ “nature” afforded him an ideal by
which he might transcend the mortality of actual states. “By so copying
[Hobbes’ conception of] nature’s perfection Harrington believed that he
had harnessed for politics its very immortality.”42 Harrington paraphrases
Hobbes’ statement on natural motion, applying it to the commonwealth:
“For neither by reason nor by her experience is it impossible that a com-
monwealth should be immortal, seeing... the form, which is motion, must
without opposition be endless.”43 For Harrington, the commonwealth is
characterized as a whole and in its parts by motion: “for in motion con-
sisteth life, and the motion of a commonwealth will never be current,
unless it be circular.” Harrington compares the government of his ideal
commonwealth to “orbs and spheres,” whose perfect rotation along “pre-
conceived paths” allows these orbs and spheres to move perpetually.44

In Leviathan, Hobbes eschews, with only one exception, the study of
all hitherto existing states—which he perceives as houses whose foun-
dations have been laid on sand—for the study of nature alone, which
posits “certain Rules, as doth Arithmetique and Geometry.” (In contrast,
Harrington studies the constitutions of several actual states to extract the principles of nature found in these constitutions.) Hobbes’ sole exception is Israel, the “Kingdome of God.”

Hobbes, followed by Harrington, sees nature as the rational grounding of good government. They each present a secular political theory, which they describe as based on nature, standing independent of any scriptural justifications. After completing his secular theory of state in book two of *Leviathan*, Hobbes begins book three by summarizing his previous efforts: “I have derived the Rights of Sovereign Power, and the duty of Subjects hitherto, from the Principles of Nature onely;... that is to say, from the nature of Men, known to us by Experience, and from Definitions (of such words as are Essentiaall to all Politicall reasoning) universally agreed on.” Although Hobbes affirms these “Dictates of Naturall Reason” as declared by God, he understands the divine role in proclaiming natural political theory to be limited to God’s vesting human beings with right reason, which does not include any beliefs based on revelation or faith.

Harrington attributes humankind’s own uncovering of the principles of nature (separate from and subsequent to God’s own revelation “unto mankind… in the fabric of the commonwealth of Israel”) to the ancient Greeks and Romans, who picked ancient prudence “out of [God’s] footsteps in nature.” Harrington also infers a “sufficient warrant, even from God himself, who confirmed [Jethro’s suggestions to Moses], to make further use of humane prudence wherever I find it bearing a testimony unto itself, whether in heathen commonwealths or others.” By highlighting the significance of Jethro, a heathen using human reason to help found a divine commonwealth, Harrington makes revelation superfluous.

Hobbes argues that ancient Israel’s government is consistent with nature. According to Hobbes, the prophetical government, that is, the kingdom

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45 Hobbes contends that his political conclusions are based on science, which is “the knowledge of consequences” and infallible. He contrasts his political science with what he terms “prudence,” which is “a praesumption of the future, contracted from the experience of time past,” which includes the study of past commonwealths; prudence, however, is but conjecture and, therefore, fallible. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 3, pp. 97–98; ch. 5, pp. 115–117; ch. 21, p. 261. As a Christian, albeit an unorthodox one, Hobbes sees the continuation of Israel in the eventual kingdom of Christ. Israel, however, remains the only historical state that Hobbes examines in *Leviathan*.


48 Ibid., p. 177. See also pp. 47, 91–92.
of Israel, is governed “not onely by naturall Reason, but by Positive Lawes, which he gave them by the mouths of his holy Prophets.”

Harrington echoes Hobbes but goes even further, emphasizing the role that nature or human reason played in the establishment of Israel: “For the courts… and the triumvirates of [Israel’s] judges constituted almost in every village, which were parts of the executive magistracy,” were not institutions revealed by God, but were “that part of this commonwealth which was instituted by Moses upon the advice of Jethro the priest of Midian (Exodus 18),… an heathen.” For Harrington, reason (or nature) alone is sufficient to teach the principles of good government; “the commonwealth of Israel in her main orders, that is to say, the senate, the people, and the magistracy, [was]… erected by the same rules of human prudence, with other commonwealths.”

Hobbes is unwilling to justify Israel’s government, however, on nature alone. He states his intention to base his political vision not only on the principles of nature, but “upon Supernaturall Revelations of the Will of God,” that is, on Holy Writ. Hobbes dedicates approximately half of Leviathan (part 3, “Of a Christian Commonwealth”—the longest of the four parts of Leviathan—and part 4, “Of the Kingdome of Darknesse”) to justifying, scripturally, his main political ideas. Hobbes’ analysis of the Hebrews’ political condition concentrates on God’s covenant with the Hebrews and the absolute power of the sovereign. God was the Hebrews’ first sovereign, making his first covenant with Abraham (“by which Abraham obligeth himself and his posterity… to be subject to God’s positive law”) and then renewing his covenant with Moses on Mount Sinai. The form of government created in this covenant was a kingship, with God as absolute sovereign and, subsequently, when renewed at Mount Sinai, with Moses as lieutenant during his lifetime and, afterward, with the high priests acting as God’s vicegerents. Warren Zev Harvey calls attention to the inconsistency in Hobbes’ discussion of sovereignty in ancient Israel. At times, Hobbes presents Moses, the high priest, and Samuel as no more than spokesmen who “declared God’s Commandments to the people.” At other times, they are submitted as de facto sovereigns under

50 Harrington, Political Works, pp. 496, 614–615.
God, the de jure sovereign. Hobbes’ position on sovereignty, however, shows no ambiguity after the covenant was abrogated, when the people, “with the consent of God himselfe,” requested of Samuel (I Samuel 8:5) to “make us a King to judge us, like all the Nations.” In seeking an earthly king, Hobbes views the Israelites as “deposing the High Priest of Royall authority,” and consequently deposing “the peculiar Government of God.” Henceforth, the people would be ruled by mortal kings, not God or his lieutenants, with “all authority, both in Religion, and in Policy,” belonging to their new monarchs.

Like Hobbes, Harrington seeks scriptural support for his new modes and orders. Harrington follows Hobbes’ distinction between political proof based on nature alone and that supported with the direct word of God. He concludes book one of The Art of Lawgiving by first “observing that the principles of human prudence, being good without proof out of Scripture, are nevertheless, such as are provable out of Scripture”; then he agrees to confirm his “entire frame of popular government, in the ensuing book, by the same authority and undeniable evidence” of holy Scripture.

Harrington’s mirroring of Hobbes’ political use of Scripture, however, is not reflected in the political conclusions the author of Oceana derives from Hebrew Scripture. While Hobbes finds in ancient Israel confirmation of his secular political theory, where the people institute an absolute sovereign through a covenant, Harrington sees in the Israeliite commonwealth a republic, much like Oceana, with a proper “balance of dominion or property in land” and a governmental superstructure that requires a division between debating and decision-making. Hobbes is not only blind to Israel’s specifically republican institutions; he ignores, thus implicitly denying the need for, any of Israel’s detailed constitutional orders—and it is precisely the constitutional arrangements that are at the heart of Harrington’s secular political theory in general and biblical political theory in particular. Hobbes refuses to hamstring the sovereign with the specific sort of regulations that Harrington elaborates in Oceana. Further, not only does Hobbes contend that the Bible places all the power in the sovereign, but he also argues that Scripture itself has no authority without the order of the present sovereign. Hobbes states that without any personal supernatural revelations, we are not obliged to obey God’s

55 Ibid., ch. 40, p. 507.
56 Harrington, Political Works, pp. 613–614; see also p. 174.
57 Ibid., pp. 163, 172; introduction, pp. 78–81.
written laws “by any Authority, but his, whose Commands have already 
the force of Laws; that is to say, by any other Authority, than that of the 
Common-wealth, residing in the Soveraign.” For Hobbes, Scripture's 
force and meaning derive from the sovereign's word. Harrington, though 
he subordinates church to state (which I do not discuss in this essay), 
ever negates the independent validity of Scripture.  

Although Harrington disagrees with Hobbes on the political charac 
ter of ancient Israel, he discovers in Hobbes a conception of nature that 
allows him to imagine an immortal commonwealth which Harrington 
claims the commonwealth of Israel could have been. The possibility of a 
commonwealth based on the ideal principles of nature enables Harrington 
to distinguish between the historic Israel, which fell short of nature's per 
fection, and the imaginary Israel, a timeless commonwealth in accord 
with nature, laid down in God's laws. By speaking of “Hobbesian” nature 
in relation to Israel (and not only regarding secular states), Harrington 
implicitly extends nature's characteristic of “perpetual motion” to Israel. 
But Harrington reserves the language, especially the metaphors, of nature 
mostly for Oceana.  

In analyzing the commonwealth of Israel, Harrington seeks a nomen 
clature that will capture Israel's special status as both historical and ideal. 
(Oceana is only imaginary; it never was an actual state.) Plato's doctrine 
of forms provides Harrington with the appropriate language. Like Plato 
in The Republic, Harrington differentiates theory from practice. In Plato's 


59 On Harrington's subordination of church to state, see Harrington, Political Works, 
introduction, pp. 77–99. 

60 Harrington connects Israel to nature, for example, when discussing Israel's 
foundations in ancient prudence and Jethro's reason-based contributions to Israel's 
constitution. 

61 He speaks of “the resemblance of... [its] government to orbs and spheres” in cir 
cular motion. Similarly, he describes the founder-legislator of Oceana, the Lord Archon, 
abdicating his magistracy after beholding “not only the rapture of motion, but of joy 
and harmony, in which his spheres without any manner of obstruction or interfering, 
but as it had been naturally, were cast.” Harrington again joins nature and motion when 
depicting Oceana's “parliament [as] the heart, which, consisting of two ventricles, the 
one greater and replenished with a grosser store, the other less and full of a purer, suck 
eth in and gusheth forth the life blood of Oceana by a perpetual motion.” Harrington, 
Political Works, pp. 248, 287, 342. 

62 Although Israel is the only example of a commonwealth that existed as a con 
crete state and as an ideal, Harrington sometimes contrasts the ideal, immortal Oceana 
with actual, mortal states of the past. In this distinction, Harrington also uses Platonic 
language. 

63 “Can theory ever be fully realized in practice? Is it not in the nature of things 
that action should come less close to truth than thought?” Plato, Republic 6:472.
Republic, theory is linked to the doctrine of Forms, “the doctrine that what we should call universals has a permanent and substantial existence independent of our minds and the particulars which are called by the same names.” Harrington’s language echoes Plato’s doctrine of the Forms. He characterizes his ideal government as “a notional account of the whole frame,” and he contrasts this notional account, which exists in the realm of ideas, with a practical account, which is based on past examples. Responding to a critic who compares Oceana to “a fiction the several members [being] so contrived,” where “the whole remain without the least syllable of truth,” Harrington states: “For the model is not proposed to show the truth of fact, or that there hath been any such exactly in practice.” He concedes that his proposed government has never existed.

Because theory and practice are forever separate for Plato, the Athenian philosopher recognizes, as George Klosko states, “that the ideal state as described in theory can never exist precisely in practice. And so the reformer of an actual state must necessarily settle for some approximation of the ideal.” In contrast to Plato, however, Harrington desires to show that his “model is practicable,” even if it has never existed. Yet even Plato himself shows some ambivalence about the unachievable nature of his model when he has Socrates claim that “our plan is difficult—we have admitted as much—but not impossible.”

Harrington applies the Platonic doctrine of the Forms to distinguish the ideal commonwealth of Israel from the earthly Israel. He writes of the “model” of Israel, “the frame... instituted by Moses”—an ideal like the Platonic form of the republic that was never established:

Moses died in the wilderness; and though Joshua, bringing the people into the promised land, did what he could during his life towards the establishment of the form [emphasis added] designed


65 Harrington, Political Works, p. 181. Harrington illustrates how the classical commonwealths, as well as Venice, were all imperfect. See ibid., pp. 62–63, 68–70, 161, 164, 168, 181, 206, 438, 238–239, 260; Blitzer, An Immortal Commonwealth, pp. 299–300.

66 George Klosko, “Implementing the Ideal State,” The Journal of Politics 43 (1981), p. 380. Klosko acknowledges that the kalipolis can never be fully realized, even though he defends Plato against the charges (of those he terms “revisionists”) that he was never serious about implementing the ideal state sketched in his Republic.


68 Plato, Republic 6:499.
by Moses, yet the hands of the people, especially after the death of Joshua, grew slack, and they rooted not out the Canaanites, which they were so often commanded to, and without which it was impossible that their commonwealth should take any root. Nevertheless, settled as it could be, it was in parts longer lived than any other government hath yet been; as having continued in some sort from Moses unto the dispersion of the Jews in the reign of the emperor Hadrian, being about one thousand seven hundred years. But that it was never established according unto the necessity of the form, or the true intent of Moses, is that which must be made farther apparent.... [emphasis added]

Harrington also differs with Plato on the question of the permanence of the ideal state. Because the republic would exist in the material world—a world of mortality and change—it could not last forever. Therefore, Plato, through Socrates, recounts the hypothetical degeneration of the republic, from ideal to timocracy, followed, in turn, by oligarchy, democracy, and despotism. 

Harrington specifies Israel as a commonwealth equal in its agrarian order, where the people own the preponderance of the land. This stands in contrast to Rome, which Harrington offers as an example of a commonwealth destroyed from within by inequality. But while Israel's agrarian balance was equal compared to that of Rome, Harrington demonstrates that the division of land in historical Israel never met the ideal set forth by Moses. He explains that "the use of the lot in the division of the land of Canaan... [as implying the foundation, or balance, of the government] ought to have been the first in order, but happeneth here to come last, for that these orders were instituted in the wilderness, and so before the people had any lands to divide." Once the Israelites entered Canaan, however, they never fully apportioned the land by lot. Thus, Harrington states, "It is true that in the whole, this law of Moses for the division of the land was never executed."

69 Harrington, Political Works, pp. 635–636. Harrington's use of the concept "form" is discussed in Luc Borot, "Form Is the Life of the Commonwealth," in Borot, ed., James Harrington and the Notion of Commonwealth, pp. 151–174. Borot, however, does not link Harrington's discussion of form to the Platonic doctrine of forms, analyzing instead how "form" is to be understood in biological terms as "life." In addition, Borot does not discuss form in its connection to the commonwealth of Israel.


71 Harrington, Political Works, pp. 184, 321, 604–605.

72 Ibid., pp. 631–632.
The Israelites did not fully divide their lands by lot because they refused to dislodge the Canaanites, contrary to God’s command. As Harrington writes, “Now supposing this law [of dividing the land by lot] to have been in the whole and methodically executed, the Canaanites must first have been totally rooted out of the land of Canaan.” (With the Canaanites still remaining in areas that God promised to the Israelites, there was less land to be divided than envisioned in the Mosaic law). Although the Canaanites’ continued occupation of parts of the land prevented the agrarian ideal from being fully realized, it did not totally negate the division of the land: “in the parts” that the Israelites conquered from the Canaanites, “some like course,” similar to Moses’ law for the division of the land, was taken, “for example, in the division unto seven tribes.”

Sparing the Canaanites, however, also undermined Israel’s political institutions.

Harrington describes Israel “during the life of Joshua, and the elders of the Sanhedrin that outlived him,” as “without any sufficient root for the possible support of it... or with such roots as were full of worms.” The source for this groundlessness, he explains, was “the Canaanites not being destroyed.” Harrington supports this claim by citing the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius (ca. 37–95 C.E). Josephus recounts that after the Israelites had settled in the land of Canaan, “God, being moved unto anger, admonished them by a prophet that in sparing the Canaanites they had disobeyed him.” The Israelites, however, “both because they were bribed by the Canaanites and through luxury,” did not heed God’s word. The result was that their commonwealth became “depraved”; institutions like the senate or Sanhedrin, which were once popularly elected, were now “neglected by the people.” Commenting on Josephus, Harrington states that “this commonwealth which, through the not rooting out of the Canaanites, had never any foundation, came now also to fail in her superstructures.” Presumably, Harrington’s comment about the lack of any foundation in Israel refers to the incomplete agrarian; the observation about Israel’s failed superstructures refers to the demise of the Sanhedrin. Deprived of “her natural superstructures” and “her necessary foundation,” Israel declined further. Under the judges, the Israelites, when weak, “served the Philistines.... Which, as it was contrary unto the command of God, so was it point-blank against all prudence.”

73 Ibid., p. 632.
74 Ibid., p. 637.
Israelites at the time neither made friends “nor ruined they their enemies; which proceeding, as it fared with this commonwealth..., is to the certain perdition of a people.’’

When Harrington turns to the period of the kings, he emphasizes the concrete commonwealth’s still-greater distance from the Mosaic ideal. Kingship was not God’s desired government; popular rule was. As seen in Samuel, God perceived the people’s request for a king as a rejection of his “personal” rule. Harrington quotes God’s words to Samuel: “They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.” Although in calling for a king, the Israelites rejected not only God but also their republican government, Harrington contends that, paradoxically, the establishment of the Israelite monarchy confirms the unique legitimacy God accords popular government. For while God “deservedly blame[s] the ingratitude of the people” for deposing him in favor of a human king, he commands Samuel, “being next under himself supreme magistrate,” to listen to the people. God and Samuel must obey the popular decision, even when that decision is in favor of monarchy.

Kingship distanced Israel even further from the agrarian balance. While Moses’ law dictated an equal division of land, the “balance necessary unto kingly government, even where it was regulated or not absolute,” required that property be taken from the people for [the king] and “his servants or creatures.” To create a stable monarchy, which requires that a preponderance of the land be in the hands of the king and nobility, David was compelled to take “part of the land given unto the people by God, and which was by the law of Moses to have been divided by lot unto them.” And even though the land had not yet been divided fully, so that David “took not from the people anything whereof they were in actual possession, yet, as to their legal right, took he from them” the lands that were properly theirs and gave them to the nobility. David’s successors, though given short shrift in Harrington’s discussion, only moved the historical Israel further from the model Israelite commonwealth. Instead of a single commonwealth, Israel was rent (during the reign of Rehoboam, David’s grandson) into two monarchies, Judah and Israel. “For which time this people, thus divided, had little or no rest from the flame of that civil war which, once kindled between two realms or factions, could

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76 Harrington, Political Works, p. 639.
77 1 Samuel 8:7.
78 Harrington, Political Works, p. 175.
79 Ibid., p. 640.
never be extinguished but in the destruction of both."\textsuperscript{80} The two monarchies continued on a downward spiral until first Israel was destroyed when the Assyrians took its people into captivity, and later Judah was led away captive to Babylonia.

The destruction of the two monarchies, for Harrington, was only the coup de grâce for a commonwealth that was flawed from its earthly inception. Because Harrington has clearly divorced the historical polity from its Form, he can defend his position without dealing with the parts of Scripture that would appear to weaken his argument. For example, he can judge the Israelite monarchy as a deviation from true Mosaic law. Thus, that Scripture sometimes tells a story different from Harrington's political theory does not diminish Scripture or his plan in any way; it only diminishes the commonwealth of Israel as it had actually developed.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that James Harrington finds in Machiavelli the method of historical example by which the latter seeks to distill the practical wisdom to be gained from classical, particularly Roman, and contemporary political experience. Harrington follows suit in studying the commonwealth of Israel as a political exemplar, which both he and Machiavelli analyze in secular terms, and as a prototype of Harrington's own ideal, Oceana. Harrington also follows Machiavelli's republicanism, which Harrington reflects in his analysis of Israel as a kind of republic. He parts company with Machiavelli, however, on the question of whether states can last forever. Machiavelli contends all political communities must eventually perish. In contrast, Harrington affirms the possibility of an immortal commonwealth in his ideal Oceana. Harrington also claims that, while the actual commonwealth of Israel was not immortal, Israel's constitution, if it had been faithfully followed, would have granted eternal life to the divinely ordained republic.

Harrington takes from Hobbes a conception of nature as material in perpetual motion. Harrington believes that this view of nature, when applied to politics, demonstrates the ability of states (constructed according to nature) to themselves remain in perpetual motion. But while he believes that nature is the foundation of all good governments, he offers only two examples of immortal commonwealths—the imaginary Oceana and the commonwealth of Israel as God intended it to be. Israel is unique, however, in that it was not only grounded in nature, but divinely confirmed.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p. 642.
in the laws of Hebrew Scripture. First Hobbes, then Harrington, identifies the fundamentals of his secular political theories in Scripture. However, they derive opposing conclusions from Scripture, with Hobbes finding support for absolute monarchy and Harrington corroborating the agrarian balance and republican political institutions he delineates in *Oceana*. These political differences, however, do not diminish Harrington’s need for Hobbesian “nature” to justify the idea of a perpetual commonwealth. Harrington relies more directly on Plato than Hobbes, though, in choosing a language to express the difference between the historical Israelite commonwealth and the ideal Israelite commonwealth, as laid down in Mosaic law. Plato, in explicating his doctrine of the Forms, distinguishes between the ideal world of theory and the transitory world of practice. Harrington echoes this Platonic usage when referring to the Mosaic ideal of Israel as “the form” that “was never established” and the historic Israel as the commonwealth “that was never established according to the necessity of the form.”

Harrington has been analyzed both for his originality—referred to as “idiosyncratic” and “atypical”—and his intellectual provenance, especially found in the ideas of Machiavelli and Hobbes. I have endeavored to demonstrate that Harrington is indebted to Machiavelli and Hobbes, but not so much that he should be defined as either Machiavellian or Hobbesian. My examination of Harrington in relation to Machiavelli and Hobbes, particularly in relation to their views on ancient Israel, shows that Harrington is indebted to both but not reducible to either.

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81 Scott, “Rapture of Motion,” p. 141; Scott, *Commonwealth Principles*, p. x.