

Michael Walzer. *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 256 pages. \$28.

What veritable provision for human agency is there for a nation living under the protections of an omnipotent God? Is there anything that remotely resembles a working democracy in Israel? In this volume, American political philosopher Michael Walzer argues that the biblical writers, though engaged in politics, were little interested in politics. In the shadow of an omnipotent God, Israel could, at best, consider itself an “almost-democracy” (200). As Walzer expresses it, *vox populi, vox dei*, is unknown to the biblical writers. As trusted sage, he takes sophisticated readers of sacred literature, world politics, and religious history by the hand, navigating them through the complex terrain of unconsidered details of Jewish religion’s most sacred text. Consciously avoiding “the homiletic style,” to use his words, and refusing to cloak the ideas and intents of the biblical writers in postmodern dress, he organizes his book around an examination of the core creeds, communal traditions, and biblical figures that have shaped and defined Israelite religion. While qualifications to his arguments seem to meet the reader with regularity, he leaves few stones unturned.

This book’s well-reasoned arguments bring two religious doctrines into sharp focus—the doctrine of election and the doctrine of covenant. Israel is depicted as a twice-born chosen people unified by their adherent consent to two covenantal traditions, each covenant carrying its own set of distinctions about what governs and constitutes Israel’s group identity. Walzer outlines the political implications and importance of holding to both birth theories—one based on kinship exclusivity *a la* the patriarch Abraham, with the other based in more open-access and traceable to the legacy of the mixed-multitude who followed the prophet Moses out of Egypt. Holding both as valid, he claims, is essential to obtaining a holistic understanding of Israel’s relationship with God. Guided by these two aspects of covenant, the book’s chapters unfold chronologically.

In God’s Shadow examines Israel’s journey from no nationhood status as freed vassals from Egypt to their loose tribal confederation period under charismatic judges and then to their sense of national independence under the rule of a long succession of good and bad kings. Walzer also examines how Israel’s divine connection is kept vital through the workings of God-appointed prophets, priests, and sages. From a fallen nation landing in exile to their eventual return to vassalhood under foreign rule—a kind of Egypt all over again—we get a remarkably comprehensive picture of Israel’s saga.

Chapters 5 – 6, the heart of Walzer’s exposition, present a particularly insightful portrait of the complex identity of the Hebrew prophet. Through eloquence, prophets were “anti-political” social critics who mediated God’s judgments to local, national, and international audiences in public spaces. Prophets spoke in public with seeming considerable freedom in what they could say on God’s behalf. The freedom to speak in public spaces, as one might expect, is an important identifier of the democratic ideal, he claims (201). All other covenant community members are examined and judged based on their association with the prophets. Also intriguing is his discussion of the inescapable tension between prophecy and kingship.

Chapter 7 depicts Babylonian exile as the decisive period when Israel’s collective identity finds preservation. According to Walzer, Israel’s long interlude in exile inspired a desire to canonize their sacred text, as many of the exiles perhaps perceived their status as a sign of divine abandonment. Out of Babylon emerged near-final editorial revisions to the Pentateuchal narratives, oracles, poems, and chronicles of Israel (122). The process of canonization gave rise to new leadership models in Israel. Scribes, priests, and “wisdom teachers” came to the fore to

help Israel negotiate a politics of existence, specifically, concerning how they would live in light of lost national identity and as a community forced into sociopolitical passivity and accommodation under foreign rule (124). Messianic redemption, he writes, “escapes the historicity and conditionality” of earlier rescues because “it doesn’t occur within a conventional historical narrative.” Rather, redemption will be enacted by God alone as divine gift, without the help of human hands (172, 176). The democracy that Israel did have was a democracy under God.

In the final analysis, this book’s primary drawback is that assumes a high level of biblical and historical literacy from its reader. This expectation perhaps is not a drawback at all, but an opportunity for all Bible readers, especially preachers, to engage more critically the biblical text. Christian preachers will find this a useful book for developing a more robust envisioning of what it means to proclaim words of promise and fulfillment, justice and hope informed by the rich religious and historical canon of Jewish faith—The Hebrew Bible.

Kenyatta R. Gilbert, Howard University School of Divinity, Washington, DC