

Interpretation

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In the preface to his new book on Exodus, Leon Kass begins by recalling his frustration at attempting to teach the text at the Shalem College in Jerusalem. Although struck by the privilege of reading the text in Hebrew in a sovereign Jewish state, Kass admits: “The experience was often frustrating for all of us” (xiv). Part of the frustration was the result of a language barrier, but another set of obstacles emerged from Kass’s unique approach to the Bible as a source of political wisdom: “My primary questions came from political philosophy. I looked for insights into political founding and people formation, freedom and order, law and morality, the leader and the led” (xiii). This approach to the text met with a skepticism rooted in liberalism, on one hand, and a skepticism rooted in a rejection of liberalism, on the other. The liberal approach is rooted in a theological-political project at the outset of modernity. The theological part of the project was to defang the Bible as a source of wisdom or guidance, and therewith as a serious antagonist to reason or science. The Bible, according to these critics, is not a serious source of wisdom; in fact, it is not even a coherent text. In the words of Spinoza, the Bible “is faulty, truncated, adulterated, nor consistent with itself, . . . we have only fragments of it, and finally, . . . the transcript of God’s compact that he compacted with the Jews has perished” (*Theologico-Political Treatise*, chap. 12). Pious readers may wish to sift through the fragments to discover the intended meaning of the text, but they will face a host of insurmountable textual and historical obstacles. Indeed, so extensive is the textual corruption that only biblical scholars well-versed in the languages and civilizations of the ancient Near East can begin to recover its

meaning. Among the ruins, all that they can discover are the prejudices and erroneous beliefs of these ancient, primitive peoples.¹

Joining this formidable objection is another line of attack from readers who concede that the Bible has inspired a coherent political teaching, but maintain that such a teaching obscures or undermines the harsh realities necessary for founding a state. As Spinoza remarks, ironically as an article of faith: "I would absolutely believe that, unless the foundations of their religion make their spirits effeminate, [the Jews] will someday...erect their imperium once more" (*Theologico-Political Treatise*, chap. 3). According to this view, we need to abandon the Bible's teaching, especially its slavish attachment to morality, to create a stable political order. (See also Machiavelli, *Discourses*, book 2, preface).

A more general version of this view presents the claims of biblical religion as mere superstition, that is, the product of fear and hope. Such fundamental passions provide a common basis of experience which, when interpreted by our imaginations, produces a theology to console and control them. The price for this theology is that human beings are ever subject to the control of priests who determine its content. Since there is no basis for verifying such imaginings independently, there are no limits to the fantastic causal relations that these theologians project onto nature. The choice between reason and revelation is no choice at all. To obey revelation is to enslave ourselves to our passions and to the imaginative interpretations of theologians who are interested only in maintaining their hold over us. Reason and science, on the other hand, can provide a full account of nature and our place in it; they can guide us to live well in a world without illusions. The world discovered by reason admittedly destroys our hopes in providence, love, and resurrection along with our profoundest wishes for eternity, but at least we can enjoy the fruits of security and safety in this world.

Such are the objections waiting to meet Leon Kass's interpretation of Exodus in *Founding God's Nation*. His efforts to restore revelation as a guide are sure to be met by a legion of scholars who deny the possibility of finding meaning in scripture and who will see only a defective, mythical history. Whatever meaning Kass does discover will likewise be rejected as at best a result of projecting a moral meaning onto the text, and at worst an effort at

¹ The interpretative traditions built on such a text are likewise defective. Even the rare medieval interpreters who were aware of these issues nonetheless pushed on because the text had already acquired widespread political importance. So, according to liberal critics, rather than defang the text, these shrewd theologians saw the opportunity to bolster their own authority.

advancing covertly a political agenda. Nor is Kass likely to find many supporters among Orthodox believers who are already immersed in an authoritative tradition (cf. 345). As for those struggling to choose between reason and revelation, it is unclear whether we even have a choice. Contemplating such difficulties, Kass asks his readers at the end of the introduction to take a deep breath; he advises us to “adopt the skeptical posture of ‘Let’s wait and see’ instead of the cynical or suspicious posture of ‘What’s the catch?’” (18).

THE NAIVE READER: KASS’S HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

Kass approaches the Bible as a “naive” reader of the text, that is, as if he were encountering it for the first time as it presents itself, without first turning to a particular tradition: “I try where possible to picture the events described as if I were a living witness, seeing them for the first time. I do not assume that everything done by the people, by the elders, or even by Moses himself is good and wise or in accord with God’s will or plan” (434). For readers in the West, the Bible is so well known that it is difficult to see the stories as they present themselves. That is not to say that Kass ignores the tradition—the book is replete with hundreds of footnotes and references, but these are not allowed to dominate or overwhelm the reader’s natural curiosity at the events described in Exodus. He notes what is odd or surprising, and does so in the spirit of a student “committed to learning from the account...and thinking with the account” (452).

At the same time, Kass claims to approach the text as a “philosophical reader,” a claim which at first appears to be at odds with his claim to be a naive reader. By invoking philosophy, Kass does not mean to ignore the tension between reason and revelation, nor does he wish to approach the text in the spirit of Maimonides, “a supremely philosophical reader [who insisted that] anyone wishing to truly appreciate the Glory of God must take up natural science” (603). Kass’s reading is also philosophical in the sense that he interprets the Bible mindful of the interpretations offered in the subsequent history of political philosophy. Some of these are reflections on the nature of a political founding, while others are glosses on the Bible itself. To see how this enriches his interpretation, consider the following passage on the moment that the Israelites are liberated from Egypt and saved from starvation in the desert by the blessing of manna:

It returns the Israelites to a gathering society, pre-agricultural and egalitarian, not unlike the bountiful Garden of Eden—before the division of labor, before property, before the emergence of inequality. The

community can thus be founded not out of organic economic growth, with households giving rise to village and then cities, attaining economic self-sufficiency (Aristotle); not on conquest of plunder by the strong or an act of patricide or fratricide (Machiavelli, and the biblical example of Cain and the Roman example of Romulus); not on a social contract entered into by fearful individuals who wish to escape from the war-of-all-against-all (Hobbes), who wish to protect private property (Locke) or who wish to ratify a swindle pulled off by the weaker rich against the stronger poor (Rousseau)—but through a covenant based on human dignity, made with the Lord their God by free, equal, and well-provided-for human beings. (234–35)

By reading the Bible as a significant political teaching, Kass illuminates a critical yet neglected political dimension of the account and begins making the case for its compelling wisdom.

Because he wishes to approach the text as a naive reader, albeit one who also knows the history of political philosophy, he does not begin by proposing a formal set of hermeneutical guidelines; instead, he allows these principles to emerge with his reading. Nonetheless, a few general principles of interpretation become evident: the first, borrowed from Leo Strauss, is that “it is safer to try to understand the low in the light of the high than the high in the light of the low.”² This means, in the first place, to avoid interpretations which reduce noble actions and intentions to base motives such as materialism, crass economic considerations (e.g., 381), or utilitarianism (e.g., 406). Further, Kass generally follows the work of Umberto Cassuto, who saw the documentary hypothesis as an exercise in question begging that presumed the incoherence of the text and “discovered” a theory to prove it. More generally, interpreting the low in the light of the high means that we take seriously the aspiration toward holiness with its concomitant insistence on the distinction between the sacred and the profane (294–95). To be holy (*qedushah* in Hebrew) means primarily to distinguish the divine from the human and the merely natural; holiness presumes a hierarchal ranking of being. That is not to say that the Torah ignores the profane; to the contrary: “unlike Machiavelli, [the Torah] refuses to treat ugly political deeds as if their necessity could whitewash their ugliness” (549). The text, like nature, is replete with sin and violence so that justice involves punishment and even harm. Rather than ignore or downplay this inevitability, the text teaches us how to see that such things do not exhaust our understanding of the world.

² See Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 2.

The other essential element of Kass's interpretation is the presumption that reason alone cannot fully explain the Torah. This is not to say that he eschews reason and embraces superstition. To the contrary, Kass presents the law as eminently reasonable. Referring to Deuteronomy 4:6, he observes that the wisdom replete in the law will inspire nonbelievers to admit that "surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." Nonetheless, the Torah unambiguously outlines the limits of reason so that the "intellectual desire to learn the truth about the divine" must always fall short (555, citing Exod. 33). "The human mind—even the very best human mind—cannot comprehend—'see'—what is indefinable, unlimited, unfathomable, and incomprehensible" (559; cf. 505). Philosophy cannot see beyond nature, and thus for example cannot recognize or command grace with its knowledge. This means that not everything in the text can be grasped by reason, and an honest, not to say pious, interpreter should concede as much and "be content to acknowledge our ignorance and declare the matter a mystery. Perhaps it is fitting that the mysterious Author of these ordinances should conclude with an injunction that leaves us would-be rationalizers in the dark" (416).³ Kass allows room for mystery and the limits of our intellect, but it is, as Fr. James Schall has put it, "a mystery bathed in light and not confusion."⁴

APPROACHING EXODUS THROUGH GENESIS

Kass's analysis divides naturally into three sections: the dramatic story of Exodus, the giving of the law, and the building of the tabernacle. The story of the liberation of the Israelites and their wandering in the desert is well known, but Kass's philosophical reading yields fresh insights. His account of Exodus stands on its own, but the Bible of course does not begin with Exodus. It is useful therefore to note some of the main points from Kass's earlier study of Genesis, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, where the creation account reveals that man is "incomplete or indeterminate; what he becomes depends always (in part) on what he freely chooses to be" (593).⁵ In the absence of moral instruction or law, Genesis presents two mutually reinforcing, destructive proclivities: on one hand, to use reason to dominate and transform nature and elevate men into gods; on the other, to "surrender human reason and will

³ This remark is particularly striking in light of the fact that it refers to the dietary laws, which Kass had described in terms of their rational and human basis in *The Hungry Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴ James Schall, "On the Point of Medieval Political Philosophy," *Perspectives on Political Science* 28, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 189. See also Kass, 505, 514.

⁵ Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

to wildness and chaos, not only in the effacing of distinctions and the destroying of life...but also in yielding to our souls' wildness and voracity in matters of eating, sex, and sacrifice" (165). The stories in Genesis present a humbling catalog of human perversity: "wounded pride leading to murder and mayhem; rebellion against paternal authority leading to patricide; unrestrained sexual desire leading to licentious behavior, rape, and incest; xenophobia leading to brutal oppression and chattel slavery; hubristic pride leading to self-worship; and despair leading to superstition and idol worship" (342–43).

The initial solution to these evils is what Robert Sacks has called "the New Way," that is, a life based on divine wisdom and connected first to Noah and later to Abraham through a covenant and a foundational law (596). The study of Genesis gives an account of why these universal and familial presentations of the New Way fall short. The study of Exodus shows how God's "plan takes shape on a *national* plane" (596). In Egypt, Kass notes, the Israelites form a nation with no laws or customs and only a vague notion of a shared past. Indeed, the most compelling citizen of their nation, Joseph, is notable for his complete assimilation into Egyptian political and social life.

The book begins by dramatizing the conflict between the Lord's way and the Egyptian way of politics. For Kass, Egypt embodies the perennial political alternative to Israel, particularly the attempt to master nature and deify man's power. "So what, then, is Egypt?... A coherent worldview in which the cosmic powers appear to be hospitable but are finally indifferent to human life; in which human beings are orphans lacking special standing or purpose; and in which, finally, only man—only the *strongest* man—can be a god (that is, an awesome benefactor) to men" (139; cf. 145). Pharaoh represents the ultimate tyrant, who is self-sufficient and immortal (159): "the deep truth of Pharaonic politics: to be Pharaoh means being certain of your own wisdom, means being indifferent to your own people's dignity and well-being, and ultimately to their very existence. Adhering to his own wisdom, and seeking ultimate control—and immortality—for himself, the resolute and self-sufficing Pharaoh is in fact an angel of death" (147). The dramatic and prolonged attack on this way of life is achieved with a relentless set of plagues that remind us of our limits, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities (cf. 155–56).

The source of the pharaoh's claim to wisdom is a hidden knowledge of nature, which allows his magicians to turn one thing into another. The boundaries and distinctions of the natural world can be altered and overcome. In their place, the ultimate tyrant can impose his own order on things. But the power to manipulate nature is not accompanied by the wisdom to

improve it. Instead, as the technological mastery of nature increases, the order of things becomes confused and humanity's well-being declines. Moreover, "as the plague episodes showed, the sorcerers' secret arts were limited, and they could not reverse the changes they had made. Their practices led not to a superior order but to greater disorder, pathologically superabundant yet unsupportive of life. Their attempt at re-creation proved to be anti-creation, restorative of the primordial chaos" (384). The desire to overcome nature unwittingly allows for the dehumanization and degradation of humanity.

THE LAW

The center of Kass's account is the giving of the law. Schooled in political oppression and suffering, the Israelites are prepared for an alternative to slavery even while in Egypt. But their true transformation comes with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (cf. 392). Kass emphasizes the gulf between the law and philosophy. The law implies a rational order to the world, but obedience to the law does not require rational consent. It is, in Kass's memorable phrase, "logos with teeth," that is, divine speech backed by the threat of punishment (597). The law is embedded in a story and a historical experience so that its meaning is readily perceived by the nation: "the political instruction of this collection of ex-slaves requires something more personal and experiential. The explicit reason the Lord gives for treating strangers [for example] decently appeals not to theology and the Creation but to historical memory and sympathetic identification: you know what it was like to be a despised and oppressed stranger in a strange land; remember it, for God's sake, and do not impose such a fate on others" (391).

The advantages of the law also are made clear in Exodus. For one thing, the law is comprehensive and covers all areas of life in great detail with specific instructions on living a flourishing and good life (283). As a divine law, its authority does not rest on the authority of a ruler, or the wisdom of a philosopher-king; "This is not the Platonic model of the rule of the good and wise man, who understands justice from a god's eye view" (273). "The proper way is not rule of man but rule of law—not just any law, but divinely ordained law—equally applicable to the leaders and led alike and administered by human beings for the benefit of all members of the community. Only this approach can hope to bring justice and civil peace" (274–75; see also 336–37).

The law rules the public order, and because it is reasonable, it allows rational individuals to consider and investigate its goodness. As in Islamic medieval political philosophy, this allows us a measure of freedom, if not

a science of the law, to speculate on the goodness of law. Such speculation is a lost art in modern political thought and Kass performs a great service by helping us to rediscover it. His treatment of the Ten Commandments, which he presents as the preamble to the law “embodying the core principles of the Israelite way of life,” is particularly illustrative (306). He interprets the beginning of the Decalogue, “I am the Lord your God,” in political rather than theological terms, to identify God in terms of liberation from slavery (cf. 347). The (subsequently stated) corollary of this declaration is negative, discouraging the worship of other gods and the fashioning of images and idols. The law advances our knowledge of God through the commands to be righteous and holy rather than through theological discussion.

Kass focuses on two commandments in particular, the keeping holy of the Sabbath and the honor due to parents. The Sabbath commemorates the creation by God, and our unique place in it. It partially restores our original state in the Garden of Eden, which was destroyed by “the human attempt to become like gods and know good and bad, undertaken in an act of disobedience. According to that account, our prideful human penchant for independence, self-sufficiency, and the rule of autonomous reason led us into a life that, ironically, turned out to be nasty, brutish, and short” (320). To observe the Sabbath day is to appreciate God’s blessings to man. The law is a response to the ineffectual efforts of man to create a lasting foundation for human freedom and dignity. “Where men do not acknowledge the bountiful and blessed character of the world, as well as the special relationship of all human beings to the source of that world, they will lapse into worship either of powerful but indifferent natural forces or of clever but amoral human masters” (321). Like the law against coveting, the Sabbath is an attempt to “direct the soul away from its natural preoccupation with and desire for material things and to direct it toward the shareable goods of ‘knowledge of the Lord and what he requires of us, participation in His grace and the bounty of creation, and the opportunity to live a life of blessing and holiness, despite our frailty and penchant for error and iniquity’” (409).

As for the commandment to honor one’s father and mother, Kass argues that the intent is to elevate the status of the monogamous family, whether the parents are worthy of such honor or not. That parents rather than heroes or rulers should be accorded honor is done to elevate them. But, Kass notes, children are not commanded to obey or love their parents in order to prevent parental authority from becoming tyrannical. Still, the open-ended nature of honor forces us “to be ever attentive” to what honoring might require (323).

Taken together, the Sabbath and the honoring of parents provide a curriculum and perpetual set of teachers to rear the next generation. By establishing a reverential distance between parents and children, the Ten Commandments deal directly with potential catastrophes, such as incest and patricide, which threaten the family. The Sabbath in turn checks our desire for mastery over nature and the pride that attends it. In its place, it teaches gratitude toward something higher and nobler (cf. 328).

The ordinances that follow the Decalogue establish the fundamental principles of the biblical view, including concern for the socially vulnerable (such as the widow and the orphan), the demotion of honor as a motive for violence, and the emphasis on equality: “the law teaches us how to rank and prioritize the human goods it is striving to protect and promote: first human freedom; then, human life and respect for parents; then, bodily wholeness—suffused throughout with a concern for everyone’s dignity, including respect for the life and limb of servant and slave and special care for pregnant women and their unborn children, and informed by a desire to promote civil peace” (366). Kass’s careful attention to the details of the law gradually exposes an account of our place in the world and our relation to God. The realization that we are superior to other creatures because we are inferior to God is the basis of our humanity and our humane treatment of others: “the superior dignity of the human, in relation to the Lord, becomes the basis of humane and respectful treatment of the animals in our midst—just as the same relation to the Lord is the basis for humane and respectful treatment of the stranger living among us” (411).

THE TABERNACLE

The law, however, is not the last word either of Exodus or of Kass’s account. The third and final section of the book is devoted to what might first appear as an afterthought, namely, the detailed instructions on the building of a sanctuary for the Lord. This impression hides what is, according to Kass, the culmination of the narrative and completion of the law. The law resolves our most pressing political and moral issues, but offers “virtually no positive instruction about approaching and worshipping the divine” (453). Obedience to the law alone cannot satisfy our deepest needs and highest aspirations, that is, our spiritual or intellectual quest to know God. This exposes the fact that politics cannot be the highest science: “something is missing [in the Law], an answer to the longings of human beings to be in touch with what is

highest and best. . . . Once they have experienced His power and beneficence, the people seek communion with the Lord” (597).

The price for ignoring these aspirations will become clear enough in the story of the golden calf. While Moses is on top of Mount Sinai communing with God for forty days, the people are below renouncing the covenant in an act of mass idolatry (532). For Kass, this enormous disparity suggests a defect in Moses’s leadership insofar as the people seem to have mistaken him for a sort of God: “the law is one thing, personally ruling the people is another. The people have demonstrated their inability to live under the law in the absence of a visible leader” (543). The rebellion against Moses and the law also shows the chaos that can ensue when people’s aspirations for the divine are frustrated. Simply put, political authority and law are no substitute for divine authority. The quest for the divine takes place with a freedom that is necessary and potentially disastrous. “God’s purpose,” according to Exodus, is “to make Himself known by His human creatures and to be *known in the right way*—not only as a mighty power or a wise lawgiver but also as a ‘Presence’” (502).

There must be some place for a meeting between God and man so that man can acknowledge and give thanks to God and seek forgiveness for sin. At the same time, God “‘needs’ for human beings to recognize His presence in order to be Himself fully present in His world” (500). The Tabernacle is meant to be that place of communion. It must therefore be a joint project: God provides the instructions, but man builds a place where God can dwell in the world with man. The Hebrew word for Tabernacle, Kass points out, is *mishkan* (dwelling). It is not a house where God lives but a place where man can acknowledge his dependence on God and come to know him (461). As a sanctuary, it answers our longings for the divine even as it educates and elevates them (527). A flourishing political order points to an end beyond politics, beyond safety and security.

CONCLUSION

These observations cannot do justice to the breadth and depth of Kass’s analysis in *Founding God’s Nation*. In his earlier study of Genesis, Kass observed:

We of the Western tradition have the blessing and the curse of finding ourselves heir to two quite different ways of life and hence to two quite different ways of thought. Although they sit uneasily together, the struggle between them has formed much of the life behind the growth of both our daily language and of our highest contemplations. They

are, then, the foundation of both our deepest insights and our deepest prejudices. As such they have given rise to that particular horizon within which we live, and beyond which we constantly strive to peer.⁶

Modern political philosophy has largely lost sight of Jerusalem and more generally of the challenge that revelation poses to reason. As a result, it never grasps the full scope of (and limits of) reason—it fails to understand human rationality in light of the higher, divine intellect. We can be grateful to Kass for helping us to see both Jerusalem and its philosophical alternatives in their full profundity and depth.

⁶ Ibid., xi.