



Ofri Ilany. *In Search of the Hebrew People: Bible and Nation in the German Enlightenment.* German Jewish Cultures Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. 224 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-03351-2.

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A particularly striking passage in Ofri Ilany's important new book, *In Search of the Hebrew People: Bible and Nation in the German Enlightenment*, calls attention to an act of exegetico-political innovation: the suggestion by the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) that key biblical psalms should be read as "national" or "patriotic hymns" designed to rally the ancient Hebrews during times of war. This was, in part, a claim about the biblical past: according to Herder, these hymns stood at the heart of festive national rituals that instilled a sense of collective solidarity and pride. But more important, Ilany continues, this was also a claim about eighteenth-century Germans, whom Herder accused of failing to appreciate the poetically and religiously inflected mode of politics central to ancient Israelite life. Ilany quotes the following passage from Herder's *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782): "When we [Germans] use the words, sacred feast, temple, festivals, Psalms, we either form no clear conception, or at least, a cold cheerless and lifeless one, because we have ourselves no national festivals and songs of public rejoicing, no temple associated with the glory of our fathers, no law for the universal security of our national freedom. Hence, the [biblical] Psalms, which are filled with this spirit, are so often contemplated by us without emotion or sympathy. No people can have

a national poetry that has not objects of general pride and rejoicing, in which all have a community of interest" (p. 98). For Herder, what the biblical Hebrews had long ago achieved is what eighteenth-century Germans had yet to emulate: a communal life in which a nation could coalesce politically and culturally by means of shared rituals, objects of worship, and—most especially—poetry.

Herder's argument is one instance of the wide-ranging yet neglected historical phenomenon that Ilany's book recovers: the attempt by diverse thinkers during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to draw on the biblical account of the ancient Israelites to establish a distinctively German national identity. Originally published in Hebrew in 2014, Ilany's study argues that Enlightenment German biblical scholarship played a central role in these efforts through a far-reaching hermeneutical revolution. While earlier ecclesiastical traditions often read the Hebrew Bible in allegorical terms as prefiguring the events of the New Testament, German scholars insisted that the Hebrew Bible should be seen as a historical document describing the events of a distant past. This revolution allowed readers to view the Bible's account of the ancient Hebrews less as a collection of symbols pointing to the subsequent course of salvation history and more as a record of the emergence

and development of a particular nation. Far from possessing a merely antiquarian orientation, Ilany shows, such readings played a central role in efforts “to formulate an aesthetic and political blueprint for German culture,” providing a space for thinkers to explore politically charged concepts, such as ethnicity, war, and patriotism, and enabling these authors to formulate a vision of German nationality that remained tied to religion (p. 1). These readings were also highly polemical, competing with attempts by other German intellectuals to privilege Greek rather than Hebrew models and serving as responses to religious and political ideals rooted in very different perspectives—most notably, those associated with deism and rationalism.

Ilany’s opening chapters explore attempts by the groundbreaking historical-critical Bible scholar Johann David Michaelis (1717-91), Herder, and a host of lesser-known figures to reconstruct the character and development of the Hebrews. Chapter 1 examines efforts to situate this nation’s emergence against the backdrop of broader patterns of societal evolution. Rather than focusing on the Israelites’ role in an ongoing saga of divine revelation and redemption, Michaelis and Herder cast the history of the Hebrews as an example of the transition from “a nomadic herding people ... to a settled civil society” (p. 36). Chapter 2 turns to jurisprudence, reading Michaelis’s monumental study of biblical legislation, *Mosaic Law* (1775), as “a historical-ethnographic description of ancient Israel” (p. 46)—as an account of how biblical law built on pre-Mosaic custom to develop a legal regime uniquely adapted to the character of the ancient Hebrews. Chapter 3 takes up questions of violence, exploring German responses to anticlerical attacks on the Israelites’ conquest of Canaan and the divine command to exterminate its inhabitants. Breaking with inherited religious models that justified this military campaign by invoking such factors as Canaanite idolatry, Michaelis and Herder developed novel—and profoundly disturbing—arguments defending this violence on the ba-

sis of the Hebrews’ legal right to the territory in question, need for a place of refuge after Egyptian slavery, and cultural superiority over their enemies.

Throughout, Ilany shows how these new approaches to biblical history were tied to broader debates about German national life. When Michaelis cast biblical law as a system that was adapted to its nation’s character and took custom seriously, he was reflecting on questions of great urgency in his own context—questions, for instance, about the status of biblical law in German society and about the possibility of regulating practices (such as dueling) that were rooted in long-standing custom and seemed resistant to legal reform. Similarly, when Michaelis and his contemporaries invoked concepts like juridical rights to defend the conquest of Canaan and extermination of its inhabitants, these authors were wrestling with the nature and justification of war in an era when religiously inspired violence was increasingly perceived as illegitimate and often tied to brutal colonial projects.

The rest of the book turns to arguments that explicitly presented the Hebrews as a cultural and political model for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germans. Chapter 4 examines the importance of biblical poetry for Herder and the poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803). Seeking to forge a distinctively German identity through the creation of a new national literature, such figures confronted a challenge: while they hoped to root German culture in ancient models, they could not turn to classical Latin poetry, since such material was closely associated with French literature. But while some authors responded by elevating the Greeks, Klopstock embraced biblical poetry, touting its “naturalness, sublimity, and emotionality” and incorporating elements derived from this material into his own poetic compositions (p. 90). This move, Ilany argues, had the effect of creating a new form of German identity that remained tied to religion: by embracing Hebrew poetry, Germans

could link their literary life to material that was rooted in the Bible and reflected Protestant Pietist ideals, for example, the importance of emotion. Moreover, Ilany continues, biblical poetry could serve as a political model, for (as noted above) this literature was presented by such figures as Herder as playing a crucial civic role in ancient Israelite life—as standing at the heart of a repertoire of rituals, festivals, and other religious devices that fostered national solidarity and pride.

Chapter 5 explores the decades following Michaelis and Herder. While many figures resisted the embrace of the Israelites, others sought to affirm the Hebrew Bible's importance through endeavors like translations of biblical texts, political interpretations of biblical prophecy, and efforts to cast biblical material as mythology worth of study. These efforts even extended beyond German Christians and contributed to “the origins of modern Hebrew literature” (p. 134). According to Ilany, German-Jewish *maskilim*—adherents of the movement of Jewish cultural and intellectual renewal known as the Haskalah (sometimes translated as “the Jewish Enlightenment”)—took up the broader German embrace of the Hebrews by creating their own poetic celebrations of biblical themes.

Ilany's study is a significant, deeply erudite contribution to our understanding of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German culture and politics. By recovering the often neglected German embrace of Hebrew models of nationality, he brings to the fore a wide range of episodes forgotten by most contemporary readers—eighteenth-century attempts, for instance, to reconstruct conflicts between nomadic, sheep-herding Israelites and “troglodyte” Canaanite cave dwellers and to portray biblical prophets, for example, Jeremiah, as “noble patriots” and “patriotic demagogues” (p. 122). Ilany also succeeds in casting better-known figures in a strikingly new light. While Herder and (to a lesser extent) Michaelis will be familiar to many of the book's readers, I suspect that few of us are accustomed to thinking of these figures in the

manner they are presented here—as authors whose defense of the extermination of the Canaanites constituted “one of the earliest justifications for genocide on ethnic grounds” (p. 82).

Also worthy of note is Ilany's nuanced treatment of religion. It is not difficult to imagine an alternate version of his argument that would have attempted to frame the German embrace of the Hebrews as a relatively simplistic narrative of secularization—as a story in which the Bible was emptied of religious significance and infused, instead, with national and political import. Again and again, however, Ilany resists this temptation and highlights the enduring centrality of religion to German constructions of nationality. He insightfully suggests, in fact, that we should view many of the arguments advanced by Michaelis, Herder, and their contemporaries as refigured versions of religious claims. Ilany reads narratives about the Israelites progressing from nomadism to civil society as reimagined versions of traditional theological periodizations of history going back to late antiquity, just as he frames Michaelis's claim that Mosaic law built on pre-Mosaic customs as an adaptation of earlier Jewish and Christian claims about how Sinaitic legislation expanded on earlier sets of norms and practices. Herder's insistence on the political relevance of Hebrew poetry, too, is read as an attempt to reimagine the theological idea that ancient Israel played a role in the education of humanity: for Ilany, Herder's point is that what the Hebrews bequeathed to the world was not simply universal monotheism (as was often claimed) but a vision of “*national* religion and *national* culture” (p. 106).

The significance of Ilany's study, moreover, lies not only in the arguments it presents but also in the further questions it allows us to ask (albeit without explicitly raising them itself). I conclude by proposing two potential avenues of inquiry: questions about modern Jewish history and questions about broader developments extending from the seventeenth century to our own era.

It should not be surprising that a book appearing in Indiana University Press's German Jewish Cultures series includes a discussion of how *maskilim* built on the broader German embrace of the Hebrew nation to create their own poetic compositions. What may be more surprising is that this discussion—which comprises less than three pages—constitutes the *only* sustained treatment of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jews in the book. In fact, aside from scattered references to Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86) and the anti-Jewish attitudes of such figures as Michaelis, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jews are almost entirely absent from Ilany's study. I do not intend this as a criticism—either of Ilany's book or of the series in which it appears. On the contrary, it seems to me that this study raises questions that matter a great deal for scholars concerned with German Jewish—and, in fact, not just German Jewish—history. What should we make of the maskilic endeavor to appropriate the German Christian project of creating poetic compositions celebrating the Hebrews? To what extent was this an attempt to forge common ground between Jews and Christians, and to what extent did it constitute a more subversive project, a project of subtly (or not so subtly) suggesting that the Jews' ancestors had already attained literary and political heights that contemporary Christians were only beginning to approximate? How did perceptions of contemporary Jews shape the work of Michaelis and Herder? Should we see the embrace of Hebrew models of nationality as a refigured version of Christian supersessionism—as an attempt to suggest that the true cultural and political heirs of the Israelites were German Christians rather than their Jewish neighbors? Finally, what impact did these German thinkers have beyond German-speaking lands? The maskilic movement that Ilany takes to have been shaped by Herder and Michaelis was not only, or even primarily, a German Jewish phenomenon; on the contrary, many of its adherents were eastern European Jews from Galicia and Russia, and some of these individuals, most notably, the eastern Gali-

cian intellectual Nachman Krochmal (1785-1840), were familiar with the work of Herder and deeply concerned with the nexus between national identity, religious life, and biblical material, such as the psalms. Did the German Hebraism recovered by Ilany shape diverse trajectories of Jewish modernity across not only western but also eastern Europe?

I would suggest that Ilany's monograph also raises questions that extend well beyond Jewish history—beyond, in fact, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He presents Michaelis and Herder, in part, as attempting to reassess and defend the Bible's importance in the face of attacks from anticlerical writers, and he identifies the seventeenth-century philosopher and heretic Baruch or Benedict Spinoza (1632-77) as a primary progenitor of these attacks. Yet for all the differences between Michaelis and Herder on the one hand and a thinker such as Spinoza on the other, there were also profound similarities. Just as Herder insisted that nonrational resources, for example, poetry (and other religious texts), sacred festivals, and common objects of worship, are crucial to politics, Spinoza (on at least some readings) held that non-rational means, including imaginative resources, such as narratives, accounts of rewards and punishments, and shared objects of religious reverence, are crucial to sustaining any polity whose population includes non-philosophers (which is to say, any polity). Just as Herder identified the ancient Hebrew nation as a blueprint for a poetic mode of politics, Spinoza (according to at least some interpretations) viewed the biblical Hebrew commonwealth as a model—albeit flawed in many ways—for how a polity might mobilize imaginative, religious means for worthy civic ends.[1]

The questions posed by Michaelis, Herder, and their contemporaries resonate today, as well. We, too, struggle with the political implications of problematic biblical texts, especially those that command horrific violence.[2] We, too, struggle with how to deploy song, narrative, and emotional ap-

peals in order to instill a sense of civic commitment.[3] And as Ilany notes in the opening lines of his introduction, we, too, find ourselves confronting attempts to imagine our political present in terms of the biblical past: “As someone who grew up in the State of Israel and experienced firsthand its ideologically laden educational system, I absorbed the imagery of a place where the Bible and its characters have a palpable, at times almost inescapable, presence. In this place, covenants, calamities, and wars recorded thousands of years ago still, sometimes tragically, seem to decide people’s fates. Deeds of the deepest past are reflected in and reverberate through the most contemporary of developments. A chilling example is Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, who claimed that the 1948 Arab-Israeli war was the ultimate acting out of the Book of Joshua, providing an ultimate exegesis next to which all other interpretation pales. The Bible-centered ideology marks the boundaries of the Israeli worldview, so that those born and raised there sometimes have to journey as far as the universities of eighteenth-century Germany to understand the way the biblical past appears to their eyes” (p. ix).

If Ilany’s study raises questions about Jewish history, then, it also raises questions about broader developments extending from the seventeenth century to our own era. To what extent are such figures as Herder part of a much longer tradition, encompassing even staunch defenders of reason, that seeks to ground political life in imaginative resources, such as poetry? In what ways do many of us still find ourselves caught up in attempts to construct national identities out of biblical sources? And does the history of these efforts in the German past have anything to teach us about the nature of these types of endeavors in the present?

No one book can answer all of these questions. One of the many virtues of Ilany’s study, however, is that it allows us to confront such issues. By recovering a neglected feature of the Enlightenment

era, he provides us with resources to reassess our own.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Heidi M. Ravven, “Spinoza’s Rupture with Tradition—His Hints of a Jewish Modernity,” in *Jewish Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy*, ed. Heidi M. Ravven and Lenn E. Goodman (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 187-223; and Michael A. Rosenthal, “Why Spinoza Chose the Hebrews: The Exemplary Function of Prophecy in the *Theological-Political Treatise*,” in Ravven, *Jewish Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy*, 225-60.

[2]. See, for example, Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[3]. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 204-56.

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