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Recovering Moses: The Contribution of Eric Voegelin and Contemporary Political Science



Abstract: This article takes a new look at Moses as a political thinker. Among students of political science, Moses is certainly deserving of serious academic study. Four important contemporary assessments of Moses as a political thinker will be examined. It is argued that these recent studies allow for a more accurate presentation of Moses and his contribution to political thought. The works of Aaron Wildavsky, Michael Walzer, Paul Eidelberg, and Eric Voegelin are critiqued. While all advance existing knowledge, Voegelin's analysis is more central to a restoration of the importance of Moses for political scientists.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to examine the legacy of Moses as a political leader in search of political order. The Mosaic conflict with the Pharaonic world is of great significance to politics, although it has not attracted much interest from political scientists. This field of study demands highly developed research skills in areas usually considered beyond the pale for the contemporary political scientist. There is also the practical consideration that studies in the area of the ancient Near East are usually off-limits for students of politics, who often restrict their analysis to the contemporary world. Robert McAfee Brown, a prominent theologian, humorously introduced his review of Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* in this

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tone: "What, pray tell, is a political philosopher up to, offering judgments on the interpretation of biblical and midrashic texts, events of Protestant church history and contemporary Roman Catholic theologies of liberation?"¹ Brown continued his sardonic review by noting that Walzer's tome could be considered "a brash invasion of his distinctive turf."² We will examine three recent works by contemporary political scientists and compare their efforts to Eric Voegelin's groundbreaking *Israel and Revelation*, published fifty years ago. Our comparisons will concentrate on the theophanic, or revelatory, event and how the recovery of this idea, regardless of how it is manifested, is essential to an understanding of the political order of the ancient Near East. Voegelin remains a prominent figure in the postwar study of political science, especially political theory, and the critical relationship of reason and revelation in his work deserves even more attention than it has received.³ In this survey we will try to present the differences and similarities of these theorists and, finally, argue that Voegelin's approach remains more useful than the others.

The difficulties involved in this type of research have already been elucidated to some degree; they are compounded by the divergent trends that are prominent in contemporary biblical scholarship generally, and in the estimation of Moses in particular. One approach currently in vogue, for example, is "aimed at devaluating the Moses tradition almost to the verge of eliminating him from the magnificent gallery of historic persons described in the Old Testament."⁴ Other approaches, as one might imagine, attempt to preserve the older view of Moses as an integral figure in the history of Israel. The scholarship of Eric Voegelin and the other

¹ Robert McAfee Brown, "A Bible of the Oppressed," *New York Review of Books*, January 20, 1985.

² *Ibid.*

³ There are some notable exceptions to the trend. See Michael P. Federici, *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* (Wilmington, Del.: I.S.I. Books, 2002); David J. Walsh, *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996); Walsh, *Guarded by Mystery* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999); Walsh, *The Third Millennium: Reflections on Faith and Reason* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999); Thomas W. Heilke, *Eric Voegelin: In Quest of Reality* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (Columbia, Miss.: University of Missouri Press, 1999); James Rhodes, "Philosophy, Revelation, and Political Theory," *Journal of Politics* 49:4 (1987), pp. 1036–1060. For the integration of Voegelin's approach to revelation with a critique of the limits of contemporary biblical scholarship's openness to theophanic expression, see Maurice P. Hogan, *The Biblical Vision of the Human Person* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994).

⁴ Eduard Nielsen, "Moses and the Law," *Vetus Testamentum* 32:1 (1982), pp. 87–98.

political scientists we will encounter in the course of this essay lead us toward a more accurate presentation of Moses and offer a portrait of the prophet that is of importance today. In other words, we are no longer forced to side with the historical-critical approach of contemporary biblical scholarship or to reject all critical methodologies; rather, we are free to reassess Moses in a new light.⁵

2. WILDAVSKY AND MOSES AS POLITICAL SCIENTIST

Aaron Wildavsky's *Moses as Political Leader* is the most important recent work on Moses by a political scientist.⁶ It is even more fascinating when we consider that Wildavsky's reputation as a student of politics was based on his work in the field of public policy, where his accomplishments were significant. His text *The Politics of the Budgetary Process* (1964) remains a seminal work in the fields of public administration and public policy. Wildavsky's impetus to pursue a study of Moses was based on religious concerns;⁷ as an American Jew, he was attempting to trace his patrimony. The student riots of the 1960s exhibited for Wildavsky an extreme example of political fanaticism, and he wondered if this energy could have been directed toward a greater, moral good. He wanted a "fanaticism of insistence, of reiteration, of pure will,"⁸ and he found what he believed was the greatest example of such a force in Moses. The Mosaic tradition, for Wildavsky, centered on the historical figure of Moses. Moses' errors are as important as his successes, and the processes involved in his decision-making become the basis for this study. His work *Moses as Political Leader* stresses the experiential element as the ground for all political knowledge, but, ironically, the author argues that Moses may not be so different from many individuals who assume positions of leadership in contemporary society. Wildavsky's Moses becomes a specimen of general leadership instead of a model of a unique leader responding

⁵ The standard criticism of the texts involving Moses went as follows. There are four sources: J (ninth century B.C.—half a chapter of text), E (eighth century B.C.), D (seventh century B.C.), and P (sixth to fifth centuries B.C.—the largest source). Voegelin's reliance upon historical-critical scholarship is a subject worthy of additional scholarly analysis. See Maurice P. Hogan, "Editor's Introduction," in Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume 1: Israel and Revelation* (Columbia, Miss.: University of Missouri Press, 2001), pp. 1–14 (hereafter cited as *Israel and Revelation*).

⁶ Aaron Wildavsky, *Moses as Political Leader* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2005).

⁷ Wildavsky's grandfather was a rabbi who was killed in the Nazi invasion of the Ukraine. Both his paternal and maternal grandparents were Orthodox Jews.

⁸ Wildavsky, *Moses as Political Leader*, p. 6.

to a particular crisis. Initially, we must question the presentation of the mundane Moses, removed from the *Kosmos* of the ancient Near East and transposed on a larger world, no longer as a leader of a people inspired by a theophanic experience, but as an archetype of how leadership can be improved.

To evaluate the leadership qualities of Moses, Wildavsky assumes the methodology of the structural anthropologist. He states his indifference to dissimilarities in chronology and stresses his desire to understand the “inner coherence” of Moses. Wildavsky’s structural analysis, which is centered upon understanding society as a whole, becomes the model for the book. His initial distillation of his research design would also suggest some potential compatibility with Voegelin.⁹

Barry Cooper has argued convincingly for a separation of the two approaches: “there are no insuperable barriers arising from his [Voegelin’s] broad interpretative strategy that would serve as effective means to prevent more focused and specialized corrections of fact or emphasis.”¹⁰ Voegelin’s interpretative method, in other words, is less vulnerable to contradiction and more empirical in scope. Wildavsky’s reliance upon structural criticism and the related limitations of the *middot*, the basis for rabbinical interpretation, prohibit him from thoroughly coming to terms with the biblical text. The Moses of the book of Exodus is interpreted as a personal chronicle, not as a collection of traditions that must be sorted and analyzed. The Moses of the Deuteronomic Torah now becomes a less convincing figure.

Wildavsky proceeds to point to the four periods of Mosaic leadership: slavery, anarchy, equity, and hierarchy. The central element of Wildavsky’s study becomes an effort to present Moses as a model for leadership. The challenges to Moses are political in nature, and these four periods also refer to the crises he must encounter. In the first period of Mosaic leadership, slavery, we are introduced to Wildavsky’s use of contemporary political science methods to make his argument. He refers to Moses in this period as the passive leader of a passive people, borrowing in part from James David Barber’s analysis of contemporary American presidential leadership.¹¹ Moses becomes a mirror of his people and exudes a passivity in all affairs, and this personality type is connected to a level of

⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁰ Barry Cooper, *The Political Theory of Eric Voegelin* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), p. 154.

¹¹ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character*, 4th ed. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1992). Barber’s model is based on a “psychology of adaptation,” through which

performance.¹² The thorn bush incident is construed as a threat to Moses from the divine. This account unfortunately disregards Moses' response to the revelatory act. When the literary situation is examined, Moses' noticeable openness to the message is revealed; his reluctance to participate dissipates, and he realizes the seriousness of the challenge presented to him.¹³ Wildavsky's diffident approach to biblical criticism makes his scholarly enterprise more problematic, but it is his reluctance to appreciate the centrality of the theophanic experience in the life of Moses that is the most profound weakness of his work.

There appears to be a conscious effort on Wildavsky's part to devalue the manifestation of a radical transcendence among the people of Israel. He suggests the revelatory force may be counterproductive: "The importance of divine intervention diminishes throughout the Bible. Only when Moses frees himself from it and accepts the human need to wrestle with history can he begin to free his people from the moral and mental fetters of slavery."¹⁴ Throughout two of the four periods in which Moses must lead, revelation is either reduced to a personal experience with the divine or relegated to a conflict among various gods. The appropriate response—for Wildavsky's Moses—is to resist outside intervention, especially during the period the author calls the anarchy model. If pushed to its logical extreme, this version of Moses resembles a modern-day congressman, amassing support from various interests but remaining aloof so as not to become attached to one source of power. He must constantly change his positions because the world around him is adjusting to different types of political regimes. Moses becomes a commonplace figure, and, as we have demonstrated, this cannot be reconciled with the Moses who serves as the mediator of the divine word as it has been communicated through history.

Wildavsky's Moses is a product of late-twentieth-century political science and its approach to political leadership. As a defense of the biblical "view" of leadership, the work is an enlightening enterprise, perhaps the best example of a study of a political personality to be presented in years. But the search for Moses must go beyond a depiction of him as the political scientist who spends his time "discovering new coalitions of interests,

presidents adjust to changing political situations. The desire for progress, action, and legitimacy becomes the major concern of leadership.

¹² Wildavsky, *Moses as Political Leader*, pp. 34–35.

¹³ Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, pp. 448–459.

¹⁴ Wildavsky, *Moses as Political Leader*, p. 204.

arranging mutually advantageous trades, and otherwise expanding the bargaining network.”¹⁵

3. WALZER AND MOSES AS REVOLUTIONARY LEADER

For a political theorist who has spent most of his life pleading the case for democracy, Michael Walzer has an unusual predilection for reinterpreting people and events he believes are revolutionary. Most of his research has involved what he considers to be revolutionary movements in religion. *The Revolution of the Saints*,¹⁶ a critique of the “radical” political theory of the Puritans,¹⁷ and *Just and Unjust Wars*,¹⁸ a historical survey and commentary on the problems of war, are examples of this tendency. In the latter work, Walzer develops a theory of “immeasurable evil” that argues for a limitation of the just-war theory as an element of strategic thinking. In his scholarship involving the Hebrew Bible, especially *Exodus and Revolution*, Walzer posits that the book of Exodus is a revolutionary document and that Moses is a reluctant revolutionary. Liberation is presented as a continual process to be perpetuated even in the promised land. To draw such a conclusion, Walzer is forced to present the Sinaitic experience as an individualistic exercise. Yahweh is, of course, speaking to a people, but he is most importantly speaking to each person in the community. The *brit* (covenant) is not for eternity but is an agreement that must be ratified regularly if it is to be maintained. The accessibility and interpretation of sacred texts must be widespread, because these works are for all the people; Walzer refutes the claim made on behalf of esoteric writing by some political scientists and seeks to defend the Torah as a common document. The reading of the document is so crucial to the survival of the community that individuals are required to discuss it publicly.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 242.

¹⁶ Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).

¹⁷ For a different assessment related to the concerns of this paper, one should consult Eric Voegelin’s “Eine Formverwandtschaft mit der puritanischen Mystik,” in *Über Die Form des Amerikanischen Geistes* (Tübingen: Mohr Verlag, 1928), pp. 120–171, or the more recent English translation of this work in Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 1 (Columbia, Miss.: University of Missouri Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

¹⁹ Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 74–75.

Unlike the account of Moses in Wildavsky's study of Exodus, Walzer's characterization presents him as a man with "a reluctant sense of duty."²⁰ As with Wildavsky, Moses becomes divorced from the revelatory component of the biblical narrative:

Moses, after all, is not a messiah; he is a political leader who succeeds in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt but is unable to bring them to the promised land. Nor is the promised land the same thing as the messianic kingdom.²¹

Walzer's Moses must relinquish any religious significance he might have earned, because it is incidental. The spiritual and revelatory persona of Moses is subjugated to the idea of Moses the political leader. When Moses is mediating the cause of his people before God, he is for Walzer acting as a political figure, not as a religious authority. The ramifications are obvious: the book of Exodus can no longer be seen as an account of deliverance; it is a work of political history. Walzer sees the great leader of the Israelites as a Christlike figure, but he resembles the Messiah only to the degree that he seeks political objectives. Moses, who traditionally is presented as an idealist, usually dreaming of the spiritual, surrenders to Moses the ancient insurgent. Walzer is most impressed by the revolutionary's ability to succeed in all endeavors. Regardless of the controversy, Moses always prevails.

Walzer's account of Moses and Exodus appeals to secular political activists who would like to have divine sanction for their positions and activities without having to carry the spiritual and theological baggage that must accompany it, but the separation cannot be made so easily. The most vexatious aspect of Walzer's study lies in his tendency to divorce his Moses the liberator from the biblical Moses. The account of Moses contained in Exodus, one that witnesses the theophanic experiences of Moses and his brutality as a political leader, cannot be reconciled with Walzer's version. As Voegelin reminds us, it is to the memory of the people of Israel that we must turn: "And in the continuity of Israel's memory these events are inseparable from Moses, as the human instrument of Yahweh, as the *nabi* (prophet) from the midst of the brethren to whom the people shall hearken (Deuteronomy 18:15)."²²

²⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

²¹ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 17.

²² Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 432.

4. EIDELBERG AND THE GREAT TURN

Paul Eidelberg's *Jerusalem versus Athens* is a work of personal discovery.²³ Eidelberg taught political science for many years in the United States, and his *Philosophy of the American Constitution* and *A Discourse on Statesmanship* are recognized as pioneering works.²⁴ Over two decades ago he moved to Israel, and he currently teaches at Bar-Ilan University. Eidelberg's early scholarship evinces the influence of his teacher, Leo Strauss. His critique of the American Constitution stressed that the document was a reaffirmation of the classical approach to excellence and moderation.

Like his mentor Strauss (and Tertullian centuries earlier), Eidelberg believes Athens and Jerusalem are the two great centers of civilization; however, the theophanic event for Strauss, as well as the role of reason, was to be understood as something superior to mere self-reflection. The Bible and the contribution of the Greeks can justly claim to be true wisdom, but only at the cost of each denying the validity of the other. Strauss believed that such a conflict between reason and revelation was good and served as the fundamental equalizing notion between the two sources of insight.²⁵

Jerusalem versus Athens serves as Eidelberg's departure from the "Straussian" approach to revelation and the Hebrew Bible. Eidelberg asserts that true revelation is the most rational expression possible, but to fully understand the distinction between reason and revelation one must disregard the old dichotomy of Jerusalem, the defender of revelation, in conflict with Athens, the defender of reason. For Eidelberg, the force of *Elohim* (God of nature and creation) and *Hashem* (tetragrammatic God of revelation) must be combined to unite humanity. Existence becomes a product of ratiocination and the grace of God.²⁶ The "pernicious"²⁷ reason-revelation division that was defended by Strauss must be overcome. Strauss' divisions are "not only superficial; they are a distortion of

²³ Paul Eidelberg, *Jerusalem versus Athens: In Quest of a General Theory of Existence* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983).

²⁴ Paul Eidelberg, *The Philosophy of the American Constitution* (New York: Free Press, 1968); Eidelberg, *A Discourse on Statesmanship* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1974).

²⁵ Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1979), p. 113.

²⁶ Eidelberg, *Jerusalem versus Athens*, p. 61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

the truth... the Athenian tree of knowledge, with the tree of life, yields madness and death.”²⁸ Revelation becomes for Eidelberg the greatest force in history, superior to the abilities of modern science as a means of improving the status of man. The greatest man, the exemplar of Eidelberg’s philosopher-king, is Moses:

The greatest figure in human history... a man who was at once a founder, legislator, and educator—combining wisdom, and power—is Moses.²⁹

Consider, too, Moses’ other admirable qualities, for example, his indomitable courage, his unequaled perseverance. Not only was he the educator of his people, but he was their leader and defender.³⁰

Moses represents a transcendence of the mundane because he has been chosen by God and is given a special knowledge of humankind so he can understand “all men and all conditions of human life.”³¹ Moses is allowed to approach the Tree of Knowledge and observe the unity of humanity, and his view of the human condition is a “uniform perspective of the *Hashem* as crystalized.”³² For we moderns to approach this understanding of life, we also must approach the tree—what Eidelberg describes as his General Theory of Existence—and the only source for this standard is the Torah. If properly assimilated, this allows anyone to determine the adequacy of any doctrine.

Eidelberg’s work is a remarkable piece of erudition and a convincing defense of Moses as the greatest person who ever lived. Moses is, after all, the only human who has conversed with *Hashem* “mouth to mouth.”³³ The historical Moses is a great figure, but Eidelberg’s Moses cannot really be human. Eidelberg accepts the talmudic descriptions without reservation and extends them beyond their logical limit. Moses was not, as Eidelberg suggests, the founder of a religion. The proper assessment of Moses must include some limitations, as Voegelin notes: “historical substance has been formed by the biblical narrative quite frequently for the very purpose of heightening paradigmatically its essential meaning.”³⁴ The methodological consequences of accepting Eidelberg’s Moses are

²⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 48.

³¹ Ibid., p. 157.

³² Ibid., p. 156.

³³ Ibid., p. 323.

³⁴ Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, pp. 433–434.

tremendous and costly. At the minimum, one must disregard any “stratification of forms” in the biblical account. Eidelberg’s Moses helps us appreciate the right order of political existence, but he also serves as a mild distraction and is the byproduct of a grafted tradition. When we remove the Moses who serves as the speaker of the Deuteronomic Torah, which, as Voegelin argues, is the product of a mythical imagination, we again have Moses as the source of mediation—a Moses unacceptable to Eidelberg.

5. VOEGELIN’S MOSES

Eric Voegelin’s work represents one of the most ambitious scholarly undertakings of the twentieth century: Voegelin’s mission, a civilizing one, is in part an effort to show us moderns a path whereby we might overcome the chaos of our current existence. Through his research, Voegelin addressed many of the most essential questions of political experience. The first three volumes of his magnum opus, *Order and History*, began as a search for order in history. These volumes stressed the ongoing “leaps in being” and the influences these leaps have had on humankind’s “new life.” History, while not reduced to the single straight line of the Hegelian *Weltgeist*, was presented as a “progression of tension.”³⁵ Voegelin intended *Order and History* to include a study of Christianity, but at an early juncture he realized that “one could not properly understand the Christian beginnings without going into the Jewish background.”³⁶ Voegelin soon began studying Hebrew while he was teaching at the University of Alabama and acquired a propensity for translating the language.³⁷ His philological abilities are unique for a political scientist, and they provide the basis for much of the intricacy of his work. But Voegelin’s approach to biblical studies has attracted some criticism. A capricious reviewer has argued that Voegelin “takes for granted that he understands the biblical authors better than they understood themselves.”³⁸ Such attacks are balanced by the praise his approach to the Hebrew Bible has won from eminent biblical scholars like Bernhard Anderson, who compared *Israel*

³⁵ See Gerhart Niemeyer, “Eric Voegelin’s Philosophy and the Drama of Mankind,” *Modern Age* 20:1 (Winter 1976), p. 29, for a discussion of this tension.

³⁶ Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 63.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Raymond Weiss, “Voegelin’s Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5:6 (1988), p. 82.

and Revelation's "grappling with the problematic interrelation of the divine and human order" with Augustine's *The City of God*.³⁹

Voegelin's Moses is a transitional figure, connecting the relatively compact world of Memphite theology with Christianity. This new, differentiated field of experience is the most important break with the older order, but the role of Moses is epochal:

The unique position of Moses has resisted classification by type concepts, as well as articulation through the symbols of the biblical tradition. He moves in a peculiar empty space between the old Pharaonic and the new collective sons of God, between the Egyptian empire and the Israelite theopolity. On the obscurities surrounding the position of Moses now falls a flood rather than a ray of light, if we recognize in him the man who, in the order of revelation, pre-figured, but did not figurate himself, the Son of God.⁴⁰

Voegelin argued that this symbolization could be understood as an effort to "overcome" the compactness of the Egyptian order and advance the movement toward the more highly developed Christian period. Through Moses and the messianic symbolism attached to him, we have the beginning of the "divine order" that results in Jesus. Moses embodies the characteristics of the "Son of God," although he is reluctant to accept the challenge of the charge. The "Son of God" is represented not by the figure of Moses, but rather by Moses and the movement from Egypt which he leads. Moses must also organize and guide a group of people who have refrained from making the necessary sacrifices and commitments for the sojourn out of Egypt. At one juncture, Moses' followers accuse him of attempting to kill them on the journey and ask him to return them to Egypt.⁴¹ Moses perseveres and regains his control of a skeptical lot. So we find in Moses, the seeker of order, the basis for a transformation of a clan of Hebrews into the divinely inspired nation. Moses can undertake such a mission precisely because he experienced the theophanic reality, and Israel as the "Son of God" may never have existed had it not been for Moses. As Voegelin notes: "There never would have been a first-born son of Yahweh if the God had had to rely on the people alone;... it had its origin in... Moses."⁴² The

³⁹ Bernhard W. Anderson, "Politics and the Transcendent: Voegelin's Philosophical and Theological Exposition of the Old Testament in the Context of the Ancient Near East," in Stephen A. McKnight, ed., *Eric Voegelin's Search for Order in History* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987), p. 64.

⁴⁰ Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 450.

⁴¹ Exodus 14:11-12.

⁴² Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, pp. 443-444.

creation of Israel is the experience of Moses' "leap in being," his extraordinary advance in perception that he shares with the Israelites. This presence allows the people of Israel to understand the human condition more thoroughly than any previous civilization.

The expatriation of the Israelites marks the decline of the Pharaonic order. Egypt is no longer the most favored empire, and it must surrender its status in the world. Yahweh forces the pharaoh to relinquish his title of the "Son of God," and it is assumed by Israel; therefore, it is no longer bestowed on a single individual. Egypt can never again exert the control it possessed in the past. The pharaoh, in an effort to save his kingdom, appeals to Moses and Aaron to depart quickly and promises not to attempt to follow the émigrés.⁴³ For Voegelin, "The Egypt after the Exodus will not be the same as before, for now a greater power than the Pharaonic will have been recognized."⁴⁴

The new "Son of God" is a coherent social movement, but the group is again unable to provide the necessary leadership to make the departure from Egypt. It is at this point that we notice a more differentiated symbolism making its appearance: the revelation to Moses in Exodus 2 and 3. In Exodus 2:15–25, the pharaoh dies, and people of Israel remain in bondage and continue to pray for deliverance. Moses has fled Egypt and is in the land of Midian. In Midian, the God of the fathers reveals himself and tells Moses he will serve as the leader for the removal of the people of Israel from Egypt. In verse 25, the condition of the people of Israel is acknowledged by God as a reaffirmation of the Mosaic call. Voegelin argues that Yahweh was already a recognized deity, thereby affirming a procession of symbols that were in the process of change. Yahweh's entrusting of the fate of Israel to Moses indicates the importance of the revelation. The procession of tension through Exodus 2 marks the awakening of Moses to his competition with the Egyptian regime. He has no alternative except to assume the mantle of leadership and suffer the consequences of his decision.⁴⁵ The divinity expresses himself through his actions, and these events are evidenced by the instances where we are told "God knew" of the situation of the Israelites. God is presented as always participating in human history and maintaining a desire to improve humanity, though he does not always take an active role in these activities.

The revelatory acts are the most prominent example of the continuation of the brit that can be found in the Old Testament. The covenant is

⁴³ Exodus 12.

⁴⁴ Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 442.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 452–454.

renewed and ratified by the thorn bush experience of Exodus 3:14; the “mutual presence of God and Moses in the thornbush dialogue will then have expanded into the mutual presence of God and his people.”⁴⁶ A troublesome aspect of the encounter, neglected by Voegelin, is the manifestation of the divine to Moses—it is *ehyeh*, not Yahweh. When Moses returns to the Israelites he tells his people, “Ehyeh has sent me to you.”⁴⁷ The patrimony of Yahweh’s name is not a major concern of this essay, but it explains why one can be inconclusive about the different representations of the divine in the thorn bush pericope. Voegelin argues that the meaning of the name Yahweh is unknown, and he asserts that its relationship might actually be closer to *ehyeh* than most contemporary biblical scholars are willing to admit. The most important consideration is the outburst, which indicates that it is not an unintelligible act but a remnant of the compactness of the older order. The hidden God in the thorn bush reveals the connection of God, through Moses, and the new constitution of being. The people and the divine can no longer be separated, and their historical constitution is revived through this event.

We are confronted by a hidden *Adonai* who shatters the older perception so completely as to suggest the need for a reappraisal: “The tension between the hidden depth in God and his manifestations has been transposed, by the thorn bush episode, from the form of cosmological myth to the form of revealed presence in history.”⁴⁸ Moses, as the medium for the divine word as it was revealed to him, becomes a historical figure, and the perpetuity of the sacred text is established.

Above all, a certain sense of balance prevails, and the continuity advances our understanding of the figure of Moses, according to Voegelin:

Moreover, the parallel is accentuated through the climactic episodes: The declaration of Israel as the Son of God balances the destruction of the first-born of Egypt; the enigmatic night scene, in which Moses is almost killed by Yahweh, balances the Red Sea disaster in which the strength of the Egyptian Son of God is actually engulfed. Only through the overlaying construction of the whole narrative can we find the great issue that would disappear if the component episodes were taken in isolation—that is, the transition of historical order from the Empire to the Chosen People.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 459.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 466.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 470.

The new order consists of the people of God and the revelatory act involving Moses, which has been shared with his people. Moses' struggles are the struggles of the people of Israel. The more multifaceted the conflict Moses encounters, the more multifaceted the existence of the Chosen People becomes. The *Sitz in Leben* of the leader translates into the actual setting of his people. Voegelin's critique refutes the claims of his critics, who describe him as a textual scholar who usually "tends to agree with the skepticism inherent in the modern historical consciousness concerning the reliability of the account of the events in the Pentateuch."⁵⁰ On the contrary, Voegelin is presenting the problem of Moses with clarity and sympathy.

Lynn Clapham's critique of Voegelin's Moses suggests the weaknesses of Voegelin's approach may be that he simply did not elucidate his insights to the fullest degree possible. For example, the thorn bush incident is the beginning of the relationship between the divine and Moses, but Voegelin should have stressed the continuity between Yahweh and the "God of your fathers" as it appears in Exodus 3 and 6. This is, in other words, a promulgation of the promises of the deity in the past.⁵¹ The weakness of Clapham's criticism lies in a refusal to assimilate Voegelin's depiction of the continuity of experience among the Israelites. When the Yahwistic order is threatened by the Omride policy of alliances, the need for a new leader becomes imminent.⁵² The problematic element of this situation that Clapham does exclude from consideration is not Moses as the successor, but Mosaic succession. Voegelin alludes to the potential dilemma: "...Moses is the man who has freed Israel from the polytheism and superstition and brought it into the presence of the one God. The function of his prophetic successors is less clear."⁵³ Clapham's criticism of Voegelin's portrayal of the Sinai brit deserves more attention. Clapham also notes that the recent scholarship of Mendenhall and Baltzer presents a view of the brit that is not so different from the contemporary approach to and understanding of the term today.⁵⁴ This form, as Clapham observes, "uses

⁵⁰ Weiss, "Voegelin's Biblical Hermeneutics," p. 82.

⁵¹ Lynn Clapham, "Voegelin and Hebrew Scripture: *Israel and Revelation* in Retrospect," in John Kirby and William Thompson, eds., *Voegelin and the Theologian: Ten Studies in Interpretation* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), pp. 104–137.

⁵² Voegelin, "The Deuteronomic Torah," in Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, pp. 405–430.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

⁵⁴ See George Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), esp. ch. 7, "Tribe and State in the Ancient World."

a history of benevolence as the basis for vassal obligation to the apodictic law.”⁵⁵ The discovery of this form unites many of Voegelin’s concerns with legal and cultic procedures identified in Exodus 19–24. Clapham’s observations are an endorsement of Voegelin’s analysis of the Mosaic era and augment his description of the changing symbolization of the period.⁵⁶ Voegelin’s Moses remains the most accurate account we have to work with, and our sources are again limited to the biblical narrative.

It should be mentioned that Voegelin’s account of Moses contains some noteworthy limitations. His characterization is, as the reader may have already understood, very different from most accounts, even those Voegelin praises in *Israel and Revelation*. He did not succumb to the temptation to reconstruct Moses as a paradigmatic figure in the fashion of Martin Buber. Voegelin also recognizes the textual limitations of his work: “Of the man who has created history as the present under God no ‘historical’ image can be drawn, as no sources in the conventional sense are extant.”⁵⁷

Voegelin seeks to delineate a more accurate assessment of Moses by questioning some of the material usually attributed to him. He finds the tradition of ascribing Mosaic authorship to the Deuteronomic code troublesome and suggests: “They [sixth-century Israelites] must have known that what they held in hand was not the ‘Torah of Moses,’ but a literary production conceived and written by one or more members of their own group no longer than a generation ago.”⁵⁸ As a result, much of the early accounts of Moses in the J and E narratives are inaccurate according to Voegelin. So the presentation of Moses as the historian and speaker of the Deuteronomic discourses is a product of a “mythical imagination,” and the problem is increased when one considers the claims made for Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuchal Torah.⁵⁹ If Voegelin’s commentary is correct, the ramifications are substantial. The Moses of Deuteronomy 11:26–29, the nearly Godlike figure who presents the Israelites with the prospects of a blessing and a curse, can be dismissed. Moses is, after all,

⁵⁵ Clapham, “Voegelin and Hebrew Scripture,” p. 124.

⁵⁶ In the prophetic period, Clapham again attempts to enhance Voegelin’s approach by offering a more elaborate definition of the new symbolization. Clapham believes the impetus for the articulation of the new symbols is more diverse than Voegelin’s account—namely, Clapham would include the “ambassadors” from Yahweh’s court, the witnesses to Yahweh’s acts, and the members of the divine council.

⁵⁷ Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 431.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

one of the people, and they are *ammi*, “my people.” The separation is surely imposed, and Voegelin correctly attributes this to later sources.⁶⁰

Voegelin’s Moses is the result of a thorough and scientific exegesis of source materials from many areas.⁶¹ Moses is not the historian of Deuteronomy, but he is a spiritual founder—although Voegelin suggests Moses is not the founder of a religion. The author has offset the criticisms Clapham presented and reaffirmed his “terse” formula: “Yahweh brought Israel, through Moses, up from Egypt.”⁶² Most profoundly, Moses serves as the *nabi* (prophet) and the man in whose heart and mind the “leap of being” occurs. Moses is no longer for Voegelin a messenger of the bit, but the medium for the message. Moses is the stimulus for the sign of the divine as he unites the order of the people in the present with the divine rhythm of existence. Man must continue to profess his devotion to the divine to preserve his relationship with it, and through Moses the presentation of this reverence is permitted.

Voegelin’s Moses also shares a legislative quality. He frequently presents decisions for the welfare of his people and through personal persuasion demonstrates a propensity for solving disputes. Moses serves as an arbitrator, attempting to settle quarrels within the people of Israel. Moses is depicted in *Israel and Revelation* as the recorder of memorable events but not as the historian of his people.⁶³ Voegelin ascribes a fourth classification to Moses—that of a liberator. He brought his people out of a state of slavery into a condition of political freedom, but in Voegelin’s account, Moses “was not an Israelite Garibaldi, for the people, in order to be freed by him from the bondage of Pharaoh, had to enter the service of Yahweh.”⁶⁴ Moses must be distinguished from the modern proponents of liberation theology, who seek to expand the political and limit the role of the sacred in social life. Voegelin’s limited “liberator” is a reformer, although he possesses an element of restraint. He is also able to translate

⁶⁰ Moses’ efforts could also be diminished by the activities of his people. In other words, a defection of sorts from the instructions of Yahweh could destroy the nation before it is really established. See Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, pp. 406–407.

⁶¹ Voegelin considered himself a scientist and kept abreast of developments in all the fields of study related to his work. In his *Autobiographical Reflections*, he noted, after reflecting on his lifelong interest in science, that “Biological theory has remained one of my permanent interests, just as physics has so remained from my initial start on the problems in my last years of high school” (p. 25).

⁶² Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 440.

⁶³ For Voegelin, Moses is more than the prophet one encounters in contemporary biblical scholarship; he is a significant participant in the world around him and has much influence on that environment.

⁶⁴ Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 440.

the transcendental tension in the life of the nation of Israel into a triumph in this world in the form of a kingdom in Canaan. Moses' soul has been awakened to the pneumatic differentiation—a sense of the divine apart from creation—and it is able to discern the emerging transcendent element between the divine and the earthly realms.⁶⁵ Voegelin summarizes his critique of Moses by suggesting, “[Moses] has given Israel its constitution as the people under God in historical existence.”⁶⁶

6. THE REDISCOVERY OF MOSES

We have assumed a critical position in regard to the three images of Moses that we have compared to Voegelin's account. Wildavsky, Walzer, and Eidelberg all contributed to our understanding and are to be commended for their achievement in moving beyond the standard parochialism that dominates many academic disciplines in America. All the works examined in this essay are attempts to reclaim Holy Scripture and the figure of Moses as appropriate subjects for political scientists to study.

If there is to be a revival of interest in the Hebrew Bible in general and Moses specifically, it must be guided by an ontological understanding of the political order, and it should also include a philosophy of being that will allow a more thorough understanding of the role of theophanic events in the life of Israel. Voegelin's *Israel and Revelation* can continue to serve as the starting point for such an enterprise.

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⁶⁵ See Eugene Webb, “Eric Voegelin's Theory of Revelation,” *The Thomist* 42 (1978), which expands upon the brief assessment presented here.

⁶⁶ Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 480.