

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



NO. 50: DECEMBER 7, 2010



**ERIC NELSON** is a professor of government at Harvard University. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before delivering a presentation focused on his latest book, [\*The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought\*](#) (Harvard/Belknap, 2010) at the Boisi Center.

**OWENS:** In your new book, the thrust of your argument is that the traditional account of the relationship between religion and politics in the crucial period of European political thought—the 16th and 17th centuries—is backwards or wrong. Could you give us a short account of that conventional wisdom and what you argue is precisely backwards?

**NELSON:** I take the conventional view to be that Western modernity emerges out of a process of secularization. This story usually attaches enormous importance to the period I study—early modern Europe—particularly the 16th and 17th centuries. The argument is that after centuries in which Europeans thought about moral and political questions by asking what would God like us to do and how does God wish for us to live, a set of simultaneous forces—i.e. the rise of new science, philosophical skepticism, the destruction wrought by the religious wars—supposedly led early modern political theorists and moral philosophers to initiate something which has been called the Great Separation. That is, they decided that it was necessary to sequester political science from theology and to make it autonomous so that it did not have to rely for its foundations on these divisive and dubious religious claims.

My argument in the book is that this characterization of what happened in

the 16th and 17th centuries is virtually backwards. When you look at renaissance political thought, i.e. humanist political thought, it is very secular; it is classicizing and they are all trying to revive Greek and Roman antiquity. Their sources are



the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers and historians. They do not suppose that one needs recourse to revelation in order to think about politics.

In the wake of the Reformation this changes dramatically, particularly in the Protestant world. As Protestants are sent back to the text of the Bible—particularly the Hebrew Bible—to a new and unprecedented degree, they begin to see the

Hebrew Bible as a political constitution that God had designed and which was therefore perfect and authoritative.

Suddenly the task of political science becomes the task of emulating, or even replicating, the crucial sort of institutions and practices of this perfect republic. Political science now has to focus on a divinely authorized constitutional form. This changes the character of the discipline enormously.

The question then becomes, how do you study this thing that they began to call the Hebrew Republic, the *Respublica Hebraeorum*? Since the Bible gives you very fragmented and often contradictory information about it, they found that they had to turn to the rabbis. This is the moment in which the study of Hebrew is exploding in the Protestant world. The Protestant theorists I have in mind turned to the rabbinic corpus for the purpose of illuminating this pristine, perfect, divinely authorized republic.

My book is about the consequences of that encounter for moral and political philosophy.

**OWENS:** What is the relationship between the turn to these Hebraic sources and the revival of Hebrew language in this period? What is the cause and effect?

**NELSON:** I would say that it works in the direction of less to more. That is, the first urgent requirement that is endorsed by every Protestant—including Martin Luther who otherwise takes a very dim view of rabbinic sources, and really has no interest in them, or rather has it out for them—is to learn Hebrew so as to be able to study the Hebrew Bible itself. The need to study the Biblical text in the original language produces the first wave of professorships in Hebrew and makes Hebrew an essential part of the Protestant curriculum.

It is then these Hebraists, once they know Hebrew and are ensconced in their universities, who began looking at the corpus of rabbinic literature. They begin to publish editions, commentaries and translations by the end of the period I am talking about. The entire Mishnah, that is, the central component of the Talmud, had been translated into Latin. Most of the major texts in rabbinic literature had either been translated into Latin entirely, or excerpted in accessible editions: that is, the professors who do this for a living then make the fruits of their erudition available to the wider republic of letters. So you have people who do not know Hebrew very well who are nonetheless fully capable of consulting the rabbis.

**OWENS:** Is it fair to say that the initial wave was a theological undertaking as opposed to a political one?

**NELSON:** Yes, the first and the most urgent kind of motive was the notion that it was a Christian duty to study scripture and that in order to study scripture one had to learn Hebrew.

**OWENS:** The Mishnah was not therefore mined selectively, but rather read and translated for broader purposes?

**NELSON:** I would say it depends. Various tractates of the Talmud were being turned into Latin relatively early and so people were reading them. But the major texts, the ones that clearly got into the bloodstream most directly did so via

commentaries, that is, compendia, which made the material readily available.

One of the most important texts, although virtually unknown today, is this little book published in 1625 by a German Hebraist named Wilhelm Schickard, who has a plausible claim to being the inventor of the computer, in addition to being a very accomplished Hebraist. He writes this book which he calls *Mishpat Hamel-ech*, which in Hebrew is “the law of the king,” or laws pertaining to kingship, and then gives the Latin subtitle, *Jus Regium Hebræorum*.

---

“Hebraism relies in part on Jewish conduits; it relies on Jewish tutors to teach Christians Hebrew...but for the most part, the Christian Hebraists were not very fond of Jews.”

---

It is a compendium of all of the material that he can find in the corpus of rabbinic literature on kingship and on the laws and obligations of kingship. But before he gets into all that, he first asks what did the rabbis think about kingship per se? Did they think it was a good idea or bad idea? He acknowledges that, although he throws in his lot with the Talmudic tradition—that is, the tradition that regards kingship as a requirement for Israel—he acknowledges that there is another side to the debate. He excerpts all of these ma-

terials and then turns them into Latin so that they are now available to everybody.

**OWENS:** Was there a conversation in that period among Jewish scholars and the Protestants you are speaking of?

**NELSON:** It is a fascinating question. The answer is sometimes yes and sometimes no. Jews—often converted Jews, but not exclusively—were extremely important in this story insofar as they were the ones initially teaching Hebrew to the Christians in question. From the point of view of a Christian Hebraist, the best thing was to have a converted Jew teaching you this material. But particularly when you are talking about, for example, Amsterdam after the 1590s when the Portuguese Jews settled, very learned Jews were consulted even though they had not converted to Christianity. This was a very fraught issue. Hebraism relies in part on Jewish conduits; it relies on Jewish tutors to teach Christians Hebrew. It also relies on Jewish printing of the rabbinic Bible, which contains all these commentaries and so on. But for the most part, the Christian Hebraists were not very fond of Jews. They were studying this material while, as it were, holding their noses.

**OWENS:** Before I circle back around to contemporary scholarly understandings of this period, which I want to get back to, could you lay out what you argue in your book is the upshot of this Hebrew revival? You offer three thrusts that are crucial to understanding the shift of the modern world.

**NELSON:** I focus on three transformations that take place in the 17th century that I regard as being extremely important and straightforwardly motivated by this encounter, although in different ways.

The first is the emergence of what I call “republican exclusivism.” That is the idea that republics are the only legitimate regimes and that monarchy is an illicit constitutional form. This argument

emerges for the first time in the middle of the 17th century, straightforwardly as a reflection of Protestant immersion in a particular tradition of rabbinic commentary that understood the famous instance in 1st Samuel where the people ask for a king as a sin. Not as any sin, but as an instance of the sin of idolatry, in that they were choosing to bow down to flesh and blood rather than God. They were replacing God with a human being. This is a sin and monarchy, per se, in all its forms, is therefore illicit.

The Christian scholars whom I am talking about gain access to this view via the compendia of rabbinic material that I have been talking about, chiefly Schickard. The first person to make this argument, so far as I can see, is Milton. He makes it clear that he is arguing on the basis of this tradition of exegesis and for exactly these reasons. He credits the rabbis for his view; it is not mysterious at all. As soon as Milton makes this argument, it becomes a constituent part of modern republicanism and obviously gives us something like our view in the modern world. Although very few people, I think, would recognize the pedigree.

The second is to do with the emergence of defenses of the redistribution of wealth. That is, the idea that the state should coercively redistribute property for civic purposes. Again, before the middle 17th century, this was virtually anathema in European political thought. Theorists tended to see redistribution through the lens of a particular historical example, namely the Roman agrarian laws. These were laws proposed by Roman tribunes to redistribute patrician land among the plebs.

The Roman sources—chiefly Cicero, but also a whole range of other authors, philosophers and historians—took the view that these were unjust measures that had provoked the civil war, and eventually led to the collapse of the republic. It was just a rule of thumb in republican political theory that you should have no interest



in redistributing wealth. There were a few people that wanted to abolish private property, but most people thought a republic should be incredibly deferential to private property rights and that defending private property was an essential part of defending liberty.

What everyone agreed on was that you did not redistribute property. You either had private property or not, but you did not try to play around with it. It was, again, a meditation on the Hebrew Republic, in this case a text by an important Dutch theorist named Peter Cunaeus, who in 1617 wrote his study of the Hebrew Republic. Using Maimonides, he looks at the land laws in ancient Israel, chiefly the Jubilee, and he says that these are agrarian laws. Well, if they are agrarian laws, then that means God endorses them. If God endorsed them, that means Cicero is wrong and suddenly you need to reconsider the whole question.

The third is toleration. The standard view of toleration is that it emerges out of secularization. That is, it becomes possible at the level of theory to tolerate religious non-conformity only when you stop taking religious claims very seriously. Secondly, the standard view is that the form in which toleration emerges is that of the separation of church and state,

which is our familiar perspective on the question.

My argument in the book is that both of these claims are largely mistaken. First of all, most early modern defenders of toleration defended it on explicitly religious grounds. Second, they were quite opposed to the separation of church and state. They saw the path to toleration via what tends to be called Erastianism, that is the fusion of church and state—the creation of the state church—under the control of the civil sovereign.

Again, they found authorization or support for this strategy in the model of the Hebrew Republic, as described by Josephus and then illuminated by the writings of the rabbis. The argument is that if the civil sovereign is the exclusive source of law, both civil and religious, then the question you ask about a religious law is why would a civil sovereign make it? The answer is: for civil reasons. But what counts as a civil reason? In order to answer that question you turn back to the Hebrew Republic and to the writings of the rabbis. You ask: when God was civil sovereign, which religious matters did he criminalize? You extrapolate from that set in order to get to a view of what counts as a legitimate civil reason. Using these rabbinic sources they concluded that God had actually understood civic

purposes very narrowly and that ancient Israel had practiced widespread toleration.

**OWENS:** I have two other thematic questions for you. One involves what I am hearing as a struggle between a Biblicist political understanding and a classicist understanding. The way you are describing it makes it seem as if there is a return of Biblicisms of a certain sort and that it is overcoming a classicist view, a pagan sort of understanding. Is that a fair generalization in this period and, if not, why not? If so, what happens later when classicism reemerges?

**NELSON:** In some cases that is a better characterization than in others. When we are talking about, for example, republican exclusivism, there is a sense in which the classical understanding of political science is being upended. That is, classical political science, first of all, gets by without recourse to revelation. Once you start turning to revelation for the principles of your politics, you have left the classical tradition behind.

But there are also particular points of consensus among classical authors in respect of how to think about political science and political constitutions that are set aside during this period. Classical political thought is characterized first and foremost by what you might call “constitutional pluralism.” This is the idea that there are several correct constitutional forms. Aristotle famously tells you there are six forms, the rule of the one, the few, the many, each having a correct and a degenerate form. Any of the good forms is legitimate. You might take the view, as certainly people did, that one was better than the others, or that one was even the best, either the best absolutely or the best under particular circumstances. But this basic pluralism was a constitutive part of classical political thought. It is the crucial commitment that is set aside in the rise of republican exclusivism. This marks a leap from the early modern into the modern world; we are not constitu-

tional pluralists anymore. This is a very important shift.

When it comes to something like redistribution, it is a much more complicated story. It is not so much the rejection of the classical tradition outright, as the rejection of a part of it in favor of another part. Once you have said that you have used your understanding of the Hebrew Republic to vindicate redistribution, that means you have to part with the Roman tradition, with the Ciceronian tradition. To this degree, we have a rejection of

---

“Constitutional pluralism... is the crucial commitment that is set aside in the rise of republican exclusivism. This marks a leap from the early modern into the modern world.”

---

at least part of the classical corpus. But these Hebraizing authors immediately turned to Greek sources, and particularly to Greeks who wrote Roman history, like Plutarch (who was after all a Platonist). Plutarch gives you a story of Roman decline that makes sense in light of your new commitment to redistribution. That is, because Plutarch is a Platonist, he disagrees with Cicero, Livy, Lucan and all the others. Plutarch tells you that Rome fell because it failed to enforce agrarian laws and institute the equality that Lycurgus would have recommended.

It turns out that there is a way of retelling the story of Roman decline such that is consistent with the principles of a divine political science. In that case, it is not a rejection of the classical tradition. It is just a shift from Roman to Greek sources.

**OWENS:** That actually leads to my other thematic question: What is the relationship of the republican exclusivism that you are talking about here as anti-monarchical and the Greek model, specifically the Greek model of republicanism as an understanding of the necessary linkage between individual virtue and goodness to the common good? Where does your story fit in that transmission in relation to Machiavelli or whomever else?

**NELSON:** It is a very big question. In general, the way to approach it is this. When we talk about the term *respublica*, or republic—and I should say my colleague Jim Hankins at Harvard has done some very important work on this earlier part of the story—the term *respublica* in the Roman sources and in early modern Europe before the 15th century did not have the connotation of non-monarchical constitution. *Respublica* did not carry that meaning. *Respublica* meant state, or in the highly charged sense of the term, the good state, the virtuous state, the state virtuously governed. For example, talking about Rome in terms of republic and then empire is not present in the ancient Roman sources at all, nor is it present in Europe until really the end of the 15th century and so on. The Romans still talked about the *Respublica Romana* even after Actium, including people like Tacitus, whom you would not necessarily expect to talk that way.

The key point is that *respublica* in this earlier period is not restricted to non-monarchical forms. It can apply to any virtuous constitution. In a sense, they were reading this Roman idea back into Aristotelian categories. Any of Aristotle’s correct forms could be described as *respublica*.



What changes this is actually the new translation of Aristotle's *Politics*, the humanist, Ciceronian translations by people like Leonardo Bruni, who departed from the first Aristotelian translators. In the first Latin translations of Aristotle, people tended to just transliterate the Greek titles of the different regimes. You would talk about, in Aristotle's typology, the good rule of one as "monarchy." The good of the few is "aristocracy." The good rule of the many they just called *politeia*, because Aristotle uses the term *politeia* in two senses. On the one hand, it means constitution in general, and on the other it is this specific kind of constitution which is the virtuous form of the rule of the many.

Bruni swaps in the term *respublica* in both senses so that *respublica* can mean constitution in general, but it can also mean the virtuous form of the rule of the many. In that sense it excludes monarchy, and particularly the Florentines, as they are having their debate with monarchial Milan, begin exploiting that sense of the term and arguing that they are the only true *respublica*. Although other people argued that you could perfectly well have a prince in a *respublica*, the Florentines said that is not true. *Respublica* is a kingless form.

It is that story that Machiavelli comes into because he makes this famous claim at the beginning of *The Prince* that there are two forms of constitution: there are principalities and there are republics, and they are mutually exclusive. He is not the first to have said that, but this tradition, which is about 100 years old at that point, is reflected in *The Prince*. But the important thing to remember is even once you have said that, you are not a republican exclusivist. You have just said that "republic" is a term that refers to a constitutional form without a king. It might be the constitutional form we ought to prefer. It might be the best. It might be always the best, it might be the best under most circumstances or some circumstances, and so on.

By making that move you are not committing yourself at all to the view that republics are the only legitimate regimes and that principalities are illicit. No one in the 16th century says that. This is an artifact of the moment I am talking about in the 17th century.

**OWENS:** How did most scholars who put a lot of elbow grease into this story—historians and contemporary thinkers about contemporary separation of church and state alike—get it wrong? And where did they go wrong?

**NELSON:** I think there are a number of answers to that question. The first thing that I should make clear is that I would want very much *not* to be understood as saying that everybody who has written on the subject before me has been completely wrong. I think my work builds in lots of different ways on excellent scholarship by other people. To the extent, though, that the dominant view is the dominant view, the question is why? I think there are a number of reasons for that. One is that we live, in some sense, in a secular age, and I think people have an interest in establishing a secular provenance for the philosophical and moral commitments that they take most seriously. I think there is a real interest in trying to insist on a kind of respectably secular pedigree for ideas that secular theorists do not want to relinquish and take very, very seriously.

The thought that these ideas might have been justified in the first instance on religious grounds, not on secular grounds, does not of course show at all that they cannot be defended on secular grounds, but it raises the question. It insists that we think about the grounding of these claims once we recognize that a particular commitment of ours has a religious provenance and depended in the first instance on a set of religious claims that people in the here and now might not want to accept. Then we have to ask new questions. We have to say well, all right, that being the case, can we substitute a different foundation for the same claim? Or, do we have to relinquish the claim?

That is a tough business. I think that people who understand the great achievement of western modernity to consist in secularization and in the cluster of moral and philosophical commitments that we take most seriously have an interest in seeing a secular route to these commitments.

Another part of it is that not a lot of people know Hebrew. We no longer live in the world of the 16th and 17th century

in which it was just expected that people doing political science would know their Hebrew, or at least know people who knew their Hebrew or had meditated on these sources. We train a lot of people in Latin, we train some people in Greek. We do not train a lot of people who do this kind of work to think about Hebrew sources, or to be able to read them.

I remember when I was working on this book, I had this very funny experience. I was working in my office and my computer went on strike. After I tried unplugging it and smacking it and doing all of those things, I called down to technical support. This very nice man in a yarmul-

ke came to my office. He came in and he sat down at my computer, he started to play around with it. He looked down on my desk and he saw that I had a copy of a Talmudic tractate sitting there. He looked at me and he said, “oh, you’re Jewish?” Because my name is not a Jewish sounding name, he had not supposed that I was Jewish. But when he looked down and saw this book, that convinced him that I must be Jewish. I thought, well, gosh, this is exactly the point. In the 17th century, this conversation would never have happened. The most natural object to find in the study of a respectably orthodox Protestant scholar named Nelson in

the 17th century would have been some bit of rabbinica.

In a sense, I think this is partly a casualty of the intense compartmentalization of the modern academy and also just an example of the degree to which the study of Jewish text has been restricted to Jewish studies, as if it is a kind of hermetically sealed discipline that does not impinge on the others.

Those are just two reasons. I think you can talk about a lot of others.

[END]



Visit [bc.edu/boisi-resources](http://bc.edu/boisi-resources) for a complete set of the **Boisi Center Interviews** and audio, video, photographs, and transcripts from our events.

The Boisi Center for  
Religion and American  
Public Life


Boston College  
24 Quincy Road  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860

fax 617-552-1863

[publife@bc.edu](mailto:publife@bc.edu)

 [boisicenter](https://www.facebook.com/boisicenter)

 [@boisi\\_center](https://twitter.com/boisi_center)