
“The history of Western political theory,” writes George Klosko, “begins with the ancient Greeks”: this is a common view among historians of political science.[1] The volume under review seeks to challenge this widely held position. The author, Geoffrey P. Miller, is a distinguished lawyer and academic, the Stuyvesant P. Comfort Professor of Law at New York University. Coming from this particular milieu, Miller’s work benefits from a field of knowledge with which many biblical scholars, including this reviewer, are only superficially acquainted. Many of his readings of well-worn texts, therefore, are fresh and insightful; biblical scholarship has gained much from Miller’s work. However, defending his overarching thesis, which seeks to situate the Hebrew Bible within the history of systematic political thought, is a tall task indeed.

Miller aims to show that the books of Genesis through 2 Kings present a “coherent, logical, and sophisticated analysis of the problem of authority” (p. 16), that is, a systematic political theory. The Bible’s political theory or philosophy,[2] he argues, is “hiding in plain sight, within its narrative” (p. 16). Miller’s ultimate claim is that the Bible “reveals a thoughtful and well-structured investigation of political obligation and a sustained argument in favor of an effective but limited government” (p. 25). The Bible’s “author” has intentionally encoded this theory in the texts, utilizing the mnemonic, stylistic, and communicative benefits of the narrative form so the audience might decode and remember its theoretical content. One should note, Miller uses the term “author” throughout the volume for convenience; he recognizes and accepts the complex (and largely unknown) compositional history of the Bible’s books. He elects to take a historically informed synchronic approach, locating the “final versions” of Genesis through 2 Kings in the “exilic or postexilic” period (p. 24), but he avoids difficult questions concerning the compositional interrelationship of these books within this context, which is either a strength or a weakness, depending on one’s stance toward these issues.

The analysis begins in chapter 2 with a discussion of the Eden narrative in Gen 2–3. This passage, which Miller calls the prolegomenon to the Bible’s political theory, presents the reader with a simple model of human society, a political entity that consists of ruler, subjects, territory, and a system of law. This narrative setup raises a fundamental question of political theory: What is the nature of the subjects’ obligation to the ruler? Why must Adam and Eve obey the deity? Miller argues that, within this text, the biblical author identifies a number of specific aspects of political obligation that are essential to the author’s understanding of politics, e.g., the absolute power of divine revelation and the importance of cosmic order (i.e., natural law). In this initial analysis one finds the exemplar of Miller’s narratological method.[3] He identifies major figures, thematic topoi, and plot developments in the text, and then he proceeds to outline, in very systematic fashion, the contributions that the narrative setup apparently makes to the author’s political theory. Miller clearly states his own understanding of the hermeneutical relationship between “author” and “reader” of text, noting that, while interpretation is the task of the reader, the author controls “the setup—the frame in time and space and the cast of characters—the author can exclude irrelevant factors and focus attention on what is fundamental” (p. 9). Miller’s discussion of the Eden narrative along these lines is interesting and convincing. The
text does seem to be concerned with the political questions Miller brings to the fore. In particular, his discussion of Gen 3 and political subversion is especially insightful. But at other places in Miller's work this methodological approach becomes problematic, an issue to which I will return below.

Having presented the Eden narrative as a prolegomenon, the volume then offers a series of analyses that follow the narrative trajectory of Genesis through 2 Kings. Chapter 3 looks at Gen 4–11 and the issue of anarchy. Can human society function without government? The answer is no. Chapter 4 offers an analysis of the patriarchal stories. Here the narrative explores the problem of authority in the basic social unit, the family (the matriarchs, though, hardly make an appearance in Miller's analysis). Chapters 5 and 6 examine Exod 1–15, in which, Miller argues, the biblical author takes on the issue of authority outside the family unit. Miller reads the narrative as a series of case studies: What is the appropriate polity for Israelite society? Nomadism? Dependency? Slavery? Nationhood? The biblical author, obviously, settles on nationhood and uses the narrative of Israel's exodus from Egypt to explore the essential elements of self-governance. Chapters 7 through 10 explore Israel's transition to self-governance and its establishment of sovereign nationhood in the promised land, focusing on the issues of divine revelation, the "social compact" between deity and people, the giving of law, and finally the nation's external and internal geopolitical relationships. Once sovereignty has been established in the land, the biblical author again uses narrative as a means to test the effectiveness of various types of government. Should the new nation operate under: military rule (cf. Joshua), confederacy (cf. Judges), theocracy (cf. 1 Sam 1–7), monarchy (cf. 1 Sam 8–2 Kgs 25)? Chapters 11 and 12 present these case studies and conclude that the biblical author sees monarchy as the best option for national government—it is a legitimate and highly effective form of rule to which the people have consented. Perhaps anticipating some scholarly resistance to this conclusion, chapter 12 closes with an analysis of the so-called "anti-monarchic" texts (chiefly Judg 8–9 and 1 Sam 8), hoping to show that these texts are actually not unfavorable towards monarchy. Chapter 13 wraps up the volume with a brief summary of Miller's argument. The volume also includes a bibliography, scripture index, and an appendix that highlights important prior scholarship (biblical and otherwise).

Miller's work is clearly structured, well-written, and interesting. His strongest arguments emerge when he is able to demonstrate clearly that the narrative is concerned with the sociopolitical issues he explores, and from instances where he is able to use political or legal theory to shed new light on difficult passages. His discussions of competing patriarchal authority (e.g., Jacob and Laban), Israel's consent and Yahweh's giving of law at Sinai, as well as geopolitical claims on the promised land, stand out and deserve special mention. Also, his narratological approach to the text is commendable.

At times, however, Miller's narratological analysis suffers from cases of *petitio principii*. Not infrequently he assumes that the author is interested in systematically exploring sociopolitical questions, when the narrative itself lacks clear markers to indicate these specific interests. For example, regarding the discussion in chapter 5 there is no doubt that the book of Exodus deals with politics on some level—the narrative depicts Yahweh/Moses rescuing an enslaved people from the most powerful kingdom on earth. But what exactly in the opening passages of Exodus suggests that the author is exploring the pros and cons of various types of human political organization? Here, Miller's analysis of the narrative setup does not fully justify the political theory he attempts to read in the text. A more pressing political issue in the narrative, it seems to me, is the political struggle between Yahweh and Pharaoh, between the deity of a seemingly
inconsequential people and an imperial power, an issue that the volume does not treat in depth.

Sometimes, too, Miller's reading of the narrative is overly selective. To be sure, one cannot treat every line of text, but too often the analysis omits crucial texts, or fails to spot essential political texts in the narrative. For instance, the book of Deuteronomy is mostly left out of the picture. If, in Joshua through 2 Kings, the author is philosophically testing various forms of political organization, what is the *narratological* significance of Deut 17:14–20, given to Moses as part of Yahweh's law, which suggests that monarchy is inevitable anyway? And what does it mean that Moses seemingly knew from the start that the nation and its monarchy would fail to keep the covenant (cf. Deut 28:36–37)? Other sociopolitical Deuteronomic texts that have import in the larger narrative are simply not mentioned (e.g., 16:18–20; 17:8–13). Also, not enough attention is given to instances where the narrative itself offers explanatory comments (e.g., Judg 2:10–23). The point is, in several places the volume inadequately addresses key sociopolitical aspects of the overarching narrative, or misses interpretive markers that might guide the reader in developing political thoughts from these complex and multivocal texts. These problems ultimately undermine Miller's central thesis that the biblical author intentionally argues for a systematic political theory.

In sum, there is no doubt that the Bible contains political *thought* (cf. the volume's subtitle, Legal and Political *Ideas* in the Bible), and Miller's work does a fine job of illuminating much of this thinking. But this reviewer remains unconvinced that the narrative of Genesis through 2 Kings contains a coherent, logical, and sophisticated political *theory*.

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[2] Miller uses these terms interchangeably, though he employs “theory” throughout most of the book.

[3] Miller does not use the term “narratology.” However, his method, which seeks to find sociopolitical content inherent in the text's narrativity, is expressly narratological.