Hazony, Yoram

The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture


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This book tackles the reason versus revelation debate as it pertains to the Hebrew Bible to make the case that the Bible can be interpreted as a work of reason and that, when viewed this way, it becomes more relevant to modern readers. Hazony emphasizes that by reading the Hebrew Bible as a work of reason we can come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of its content and meaning. Hazony is provost of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, where he serves as a Senior Fellow in the Department of Philosophy, Political Theory, and Religion; he holds a B.A. in East Asian studies from Princeton and a Ph.D. in Political Theory from Rutgers. The book is divided into three parts, with an appendix on “reason” and extensive endnotes.

Hazony sets out his argument in the introduction by providing a concise history of the reason-revelation debate, an overview of important contributions from Greek philosophy, and an illuminating evaluation of historical biases against the Hebrew Bible in the academy (1–20). Tracing the development in Germany of the research university as “an international engine for the dissemination of the Enlightenment philosophy,” which became the American model, he deftly shows the bias and canonization of Greek thought as superior to the supposed inferior thought of the Hebrew Bible. He examines the Christian biases of several prominent historians and philosophers. This leads to his thesis
and purpose: to provide an introductory work providing a new and more relevant approach to the Hebrew Bible by seeking out its “philosophical content” to bring these ideas into dialogue with the Western philosophical tradition (21–22).

Chapter 1, “The Structure of the Hebrew Bible,” provides a survey of the Hebrew Bible and Hazony’s view of its structure from a philosophical perspective. Reading the Hebrew Bible as a work of reason elucidates the various authors’ worldviews, ethics, and concepts of life and meaning. This framework makes the Bible more accessible and attractive to diverse readers. Hazony’s division of the Bible includes Genesis–2 Kings, “The History of Israel,” followed by “The Orations of the Prophets” and “The Writings” (33–34). Hazony views these three divisions hierarchically: History at the top, Prophets as the “second tier,” and Writings at the bottom (35). Key to this structure is the exile experience, with Jeremiah as someone who witnessed these events as a primary writer, compiler, and redactor, along with perhaps his students (38). Hazony views the History as having pride of place, “the defining statement of ancient Israelite thought,” a foundation with the Prophets and Writings as a type of commentary (42–43; hereafter I will use Tanak). He lays out ten examples of parallels between Genesis and Exodus with Judges, Samuel, and Kings (44).

“What Is the Purpose of the Hebrew Bible?” (ch. 2) asserts that, for proper understanding, the Tanak must be “carefully disentangled from the concerns of New Testament texts” (47). Centuries of reading the Tanak as foreshadowing the New Testament have obscured its original contexts and meaning. Hazony claims the New Testament is primarily concerned with witnessing to certain revelatory events, whereas the Tanak is essentially concerned with making sense of the experience of the exile and how to live in light of those events (56–57). The history was written for the political purpose of maintaining and restoring the exiles’ Jewish identity, their city and kingdom; it includes a general account of the moral and political order, focusing on how to live properly in this world.

“How Does the Hebrew Bible Make Arguments of a General Nature?” (ch. 3) examines narratives and prophetic texts to demonstrate how they make arguments reflecting general human experience that make them applicable outside the confines of revelatory religious experiences. Hazony demonstrates how the prophets use metaphor to connect to the lived experiences of diverse audiences as a means to make moral teaching relevant and accessible. The prophets are primarily concerned with contemporary issues with the goal of overcoming sin and promoting obedience, often using warnings to motivate change in behavior. Laws are likened to a king’s commands to enforce order in society; at the level of torah, however, laws represent a father’s love and concern for a child’s well-being. Law and teaching in turn relate to the metaphor of covenant, viewed as a royal alliance or marriage relationship.
Chapter 4, “The Ethics of a Shepherd,” uses the contrast between shepherds and farmers to demonstrate a philosophy of living. The shepherd takes risks, refusing submission but seeking the good life, while the farmer submits to tilling the soil as a consequence of sin (108). Hazony contrasts city dwellers who evolved from Cain and their concern for materialism with the nomadic freedom represented by the shepherd as a paradigm for independence. God prefers Abel’s offering because God loves those who “disobey” for that which is right; Jacob wrestles with God because, like Abel, he seeks what reflects God’s true will (138). The Mosaic law conforms to but does not supersede the natural law.

“The History of Israel, Genesis–Kings” (ch. 5) presents “a political philosophy” that describes the role of individuals in the state, the dangers of imperialism, anarchy, the role and proper functions of government and leadership, and the reasons for the decline of the state. Moses delivers Israel from imperial oppression; Samuel and David overcome the anarchy represented by Judges, while Solomon’s kingdom ultimately fails due to his excesses. The ideal state will have constraints and be rooted in God’s love and justice, modeled by their ancestral “herdsmen” (160).

Chapter 6, “Jeremiah and the Problem of Knowing,” provides a detailed examination and assessment of the person and writings of Jeremiah, viewing him as similar to Plato in terms of how humans are influenced by “illusions.” Jeremiah focuses on human deceit and arbitrary behavior as the source of sin and destruction; however, experience will overcome illusions and reveal truth (191).

Chapter 7, “Truth and Being in the Hebrew Bible,” focuses on the meaning of the terms 'emet and dābār to demonstrate the biblical conception of truth as “reliability” and the broad range of meaning ascribed to dābār as an object of understanding (111). In contrast to Greek dualism, the biblical authors understood objects of experience as “true” in the course of time and experience (117).

“Jerusalem and Carthage” (ch. 8) challenges the common presentation of these two locative terms as representing a dichotomy between faith and reason. Using examples from Tertullian and other Christian authors, Hazony demonstrates this dichotomy and then offers a convincing rebuttal by showing how the Tanak engages reality in this world to present ideals for “wisdom” as spoken by God and to be pursued throughout life.

Chapter 9, “Speech after Reason and Revelation,” summarizes Hazony’s arguments and calls for a jettisoning of the “reason-revelation dichotomy” in interpreting the Tanak; a goal should be to understand the worldviews of the prophets before the reason-revelation distinction appeared.
Hazony provides a unique and useful perspective that will be of interest to all who research, interpret, and teach the Bible. He offers a strong challenge to those who dismiss the Bible as simply a religious work based on revelation by showing how the Tanak engages human experience and offers ethical teachings and interpretations of life that remain relevant to diverse audiences beyond specifically religious contexts. I recommend this book as a way to engage the biblical text within the wider secular realm of academics and politics and for Christian scholars and seminary students as a challenge to biases in interpreting the Tanak. To make Hazony's arguments more accessible to a wider audience, I recommend an abridged version that would set out his basic arguments more concisely. As a proposed “introductory work,” this book is very dense, and at times I found redundancies in the arguments. I would also encourage Hazony to consider a stronger focus on the wisdom literature in any future editions or companion volumes, as the works of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes offer rich and diverse interpretations of ethics and meaning that often transcend narrow religious contexts.