Is Judaism Democratic?
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Theocracy as Monarchy and Anarchy
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INTRODUCTION: THEOCRACY 101

Since the time of Josephus, it has been argued that the only appropriate regime for the people Israel is the one described by the term theocracy, the rule of God.¹ The force of this argument is nearly tautological. It starts from the basic definition of “Israel” as that people formed through its election by God to be partner to a covenantal relationship. Until the most recent centuries, it made no sense to speak of a people Israel without reference to this relationship, and so by the same token it seemed to many to make little sense to ask what would constitute the best regime for the people Israel. There could only be one.

All that seems simple enough, and yet it is only true if we consider theocracy, as Josephus did when he coined the term, as an alternative to the traditional list of types of politeia [polity] that was passed down from Greek political thought. Aristotle’s list is defined by first counting the number of people who hold the sovereign power and then determining whether they are ruling in the public interest. So you have monarchy, the rule of one, and its negative counterpart, tyranny; you have aristocracy, the rule of the excellent (usually rendered as “the few”), and its negative counterpart, oligarchy; and you have polity, the rule of the many, of which the negative counterpart is democracy. (The distinction between polity and democracy seems to depend, in the Aristotelian tradition, primarily on which economic class is in charge. If it’s those in the middle, between rich and poor, that has the potential to be a good constitution; if it’s the poor, however, the city is in trouble.) Josephus took one look at this list and immediately intuited what they all had in common: the sovereign power is held by human beings, regardless of how many of them there are. So he added “theocracy” to the list, in order to show how his own people, the Jews or Judeans, couldn’t be accounted for in the seemingly exhaustive list of Greek types.

It is not easy for most of us, however, who live in a world in which humans rule other humans, to imagine what it might be like not to be ruled by humans, let alone to be ruled by God. As a result, thinkers of theocracy have most frequently imagined it not as an alternative to the typical forms of human rule, but rather as compatible with one or another of those forms. In this view,
it is sufficient for the human rulers to declare that it is not indeed they who rule, but rather God; and that they are merely the stewards, interpreters, or representatives of God’s will. Once the possibility of this is granted, any regime on the list, in pure form or mixed, can be interpreted as theocratic. And these varying types and forms can be maintained with more or less seriousness. Over the course of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim history alike, for example, monarchical regimes have based themselves on theocratic rationales almost without exception. However, when it was felt that these rationales were adhered to with insufficient honesty, or that theocracy was being abused as a post facto rationalization for naked human power, monarchies have faced challenges from both aristocratic and democratic quarters. In particular, when grievances are rooted in a sense of insufficient adherence to divine will, the aristocracy of religious specialists—whether priests, prophets, or sages—has claimed the right, minimally, to challenge monarchy in the name of God’s rule and, maximally, to establish their own rule in the place of the monarch.

Despite this common-sense understanding of theocracy, however, I want to focus here on the original sense of the term, in which it is considered a free-standing, independent alternative to all the types of human politeia. In this strong sense, God is not seen as merely the source of authority—an interpretation that, again, could render theocracy compatible with almost any human arrangement, whether monarchical, aristocratic, or democratic—but literally as ruler. God rules now, and not in some distant future; in this reality, and not in some ideal world. God rules us, human beings, and not just the angels or the other heavenly beings; he rules the earth, and not the “cosmos” in some grand, metaphorical sense. This is God as our actual, present political leader, not as “king of the gods,” or object of cultic worship, or origin of everything that happens, or metaphysical substrate of Being.

This sense of theocracy might be hard to understand at first. How can God rule, after all, except through the intermediary of some human or group of humans? Doesn’t someone have to tell us what God’s will is, and doesn’t whoever does so automatically become the de facto holder of sovereign power? Aren’t we then inevitably led back to either the divine right of kings or the rule of some clerical class? The answer, for defenders of the strong sense of theocracy, has to be no. Monarchy is always and simply mere human rule, and the rule of the clergy would be better called “ecclesiocracy” or “hierocracy.” The idea of true theocracy is direct, and not mediated by any human authority permanently enshrined for the purpose. But how can this be any more than an insistence, an assertion of an ideal against all common sense and the evidence of reality?
In order to illuminate some possibilities for understanding theocracy in this way, I turn to a twentieth century Jewish thinker who dealt with it extensively: Martin Buber. Buber is more commonly studied for his philosophical anthropology, conception of dialogue and the interhuman, and his Chasidic writings, but in his many writings on the Bible he showed a consistent and intense concern to develop the potential meanings of theocracy for both the ancient Israelites and the contemporary world. For various reasons, he did not always make these connections explicitly himself. I therefore take on the task of showing how what he says about the biblical authors and editors, and about the ancient Israelite world of faith in which they lived, is intended also for the twentieth century and for the modern Jewish world, including the Zionist movement of which he was a vocal part.

INTERLUDE ON NATIONALISM, STATISM, AND THE NATION-STATE

As noted above, it made no sense to speak of a people Israel separately from the covenant with God until recent centuries. Modern Jewish nationalism takes its starting point from just such a conception. The social, political, and intellectual factors that made this new conception of Jewishness possible are well known, and there is no need to repeat them here. Suffice it to say that by the late nineteenth century, when the various branches of the Zionist movement emerged in Russia and in Central Europe, the premise that Jews constituted a nation, independent of the religious beliefs of the individual members of that nation, was integral to its project. And according to the theory of nationalism, as it was elaborated from the Balkans to Italy and beyond, each nation was entitled to autonomy and self-determination. The vehicle for achieving such self-determination was most frequently imagined to be the state.

This was not universally true, however. Although nationalist groups living within broad, multinational empires such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire, the British Empire, and the Ottoman Empire often envisioned the radical destruction of imperial rule and its replacement with an array of individual national states, each sovereign over its own territory within which its own nation would form a numerical majority, this was not the only way of expressing nationalist aims. The experience of cosmopolitan coexistence in cities like Prague, as well as the experience of communal autonomy within the imperial framework, gave rise to many other proposals for securing local and national self-determination without necessarily seeking
statehood. As such, it was possible to combine nationalism with ideologies that might seem at first to make odd bedfellows, including communism—supposedly internationalist and class-based rather than ethnic in orientation, although in practice this was heavily contested—and even anarchism, which sought the destruction of all states in addition to the end of capitalism. An anarchist nationalism could be premised on the idealization of the dispersion of power across a plurality of networks, of small-scale, communal mechanisms for conflict resolution, as well as of the warm intimacy of local life (something left-anarchists shared with romantic conservatives).

I mention this rather exotic alignment of orientations because it was precisely this combination that was at work in the thought of Gustav Landauer (1870–1919), Martin Buber’s best friend of two decades and a man whom the Kaiser’s secret police gave the honor of “most significant agitator of the radical-revolutionary movement in all of Germany.” Although he was indeed an anarchist and a revolutionary, and by no means a German nationalist, Landauer also believed that the trends of political thought descending from the Enlightenment and grouped together under the banner of the “left” made a mistake when they placed the brotherhood of all humanity too far above the intimate ties of particular individuals and groups. Even the identity of the working class, to which he swore allegiance and on behalf of which he opposed private property and wage labor, was too abstract to sustain itself and could not hope to replace the bonds formed by common language and culture. Therefore, Landauer thought, it should not aim to do so. Perhaps anticipating late-century multiculturalism, he once wrote an article called, “Do Not Learn Esperanto!”

For all these reasons, Landauer was a more congenial intellectual friend and mentor to Buber than your run-of-the-mill anarchist communist of the turn of the twentieth century. Like Buber, his primary interest was in community: what was conducive to it, what was detrimental to it, and what distinguished “true” community, Gemeinschaft, from the artificiality and mechanical impersonality of Gesellschaft [society]. My argument is that Buber eventually adopted a Landauer-style anarchism himself—except that what Landauer interpreted as autonomy, or self-rule, Buber reinterpreted as theocracy, divine rule. His name for this type of anarcho-theocratic tendency, which he uses primarily in his biblical writings, is “theopolitics.”

The term theopolitics is important. In the context of Zionism, Jews tried to innovate new forms of Jewish polity while also rooting these radical novelties in tradition. Because the Zionist movement conceived itself as rebelling against diaspora Judaism, it reached back beyond the rabbis and Talmud,
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searching for precedents in biblical times. However, while the Bible offered the examples of the glorious reigns of David and Solomon, it seemed to lack anything that could be used as a blueprint for those interested in modern democratic representation.

Secular Zionists, who dominated the movement prior to the 1970s, often reacted to this dilemma by prioritizing liberalism, socialism, or democracy, and demoting the Bible to the status of literary creation, one that could nevertheless serve as useful evidence for Jewish historical connections to Zion. Religious Zionists, however, even non-Orthodox ones like Buber, did not have this option. Thus they had to envision the messianic restoration of the Davidic monarchy—which meant giving up on democracy—or they had to get creative. This is where theopolitics comes in.

THEOPOLITICS AND THE BIBLE

Although Paul Mendes-Flohr’s argument for Landauer’s influence on Buber has been widely accepted, the sphere of this influence has generally been restricted to its impact on Buber’s movement “from mysticism to dialogue” around the end of World War I. In this narrative, Landauer is the spark that snaps Buber out of his youthful, neo-Romantic reverie, leading him to understand the problematic nature of his support for the war and thereby of the whole mystical worldview underlying his early projects, from the first collections of Chasidic tales to the famous Prague lectures, and on to Daniel (1913). Spurred by this revelation, Buber sets out to rectify the problem by allotting an increasing place in his thought to encounter and to the position of the Other; this process culminates in the writing of I and Thou (1923) and the development of the dialogic philosophy.

I offer two modifications to this narrative. First, we should consider the positive influence of Landauer on Buber, and not merely the negative. That is, Buber doesn’t merely take Landauer’s criticism as a sign that he needs to probe what he had previously gotten wrong—there is a positive impact as well, as he turns to a deeper examination of his friend’s thought in order to understand what resources it contains that enabled Landauer to get World War I right. Second, I extend the narrative of this impact into the 1920s, beyond the publication of I and Thou, so that it encompasses Buber’s work with Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) on a new Bible translation and the adventure of the Frankfurt Lehrhaus [adult education school], and Buber’s increasing engagement with Religious Socialism and with the burgeoning kibbutz idea.
This approach allows me to consider *Kingship of God* (1932) as a different kind of culmination: one that expresses neither Buber’s prewar mystical neo-Romanticism, nor a narrowly construed philosophy of dialogue, but rather a synthetic and idiosyncratic combination of all these interests as Buber worked them out from 1916 to 1932.

In *Kingship of God*, as well as in Buber’s later biblical writings, we read of a hierarchical, covenantal relation between a transcendent God enthroned as king and a people who continually struggle to answer his call, to measure up to their sense of being commanded. There is “content” to this call, and not merely “presence” as in Buber’s dialogical thought—they are elected to form the first decent society on earth, to become a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Although Buber adheres to the most current trends in biblical criticism as he sees them and although he does not enumerate the rabbinic 613 commandments as the nature of the revelational content, nonetheless we find such institutions as the Sabbath and Jubilee sketched out in terms of how they serve the purpose of the divine election. The divine purpose alluded to, in almost every case in which Buber allows for the expression of some content to revelation, can best be understood as “conducive to true community,” in a Landauerian sense. In other words, whenever Buber allows “content” to revelation in his biblical writings, this “content” is theopolitical in nature, which means anarchistic.

In line with Leonhard Ragaz and the Religious Socialists, Buber holds that a transcendent vision of a kingly God does not underwrite an authoritarian political theology but rather undermines it, together with all unjustified human hierarchies, instead lending support to a radical vision of human equality—perhaps even more dependably than the *I-Thou* relation, which is powerful but also fleeting. This has implications for his Zionism, since it casts fundamental doubt on the goal of statehood and sovereignty, or to be more precise, it casts fundamental doubt on the idea that a Jewish polity is best constituted according to ordinary ideas about sovereignty and security. In line with this doubt, Buber refrains from having recourse to the great tales about Jewish kingdoms of the past, in the manner of David Ben-Gurion and other Zionist leaders. Instead, he looks to the period before the establishment of the monarchy, resisting the notion that the monarchy represented the glory of Jewish sovereignty and asserting God’s kingship against it.

I will give an example of what I mean. In December 1918, Buber seems to have delivered an address in Munich. One month earlier, Kurt Eisner had declared Bavaria an independent republic, effectively ending hundreds of years of monarchy, and he had invited Gustav Landauer to come to Munich to help
him in his work. Landauer, in turn, invited Buber to Munich, writing that “collaboration with Eisner functions very well. I am sure you have seen from his proclamations how ‘anarchist’ his understanding of democracy is: he favors the active participation of the people in all social bodies, not bleak parliamentarism. . . .”

The lecture that Buber gave in Munich was originally titled “Judaism and True Community,” and was eventually published as “Der Heilige Weg” [The Holy Way]. By the time it was published, the revolution was over. Landauer had been martyred, murdered by the counterrevolutionary Freikorps militias hired by the social-democratic government in Berlin (a crime for which no one would ever face charges). And Buber dedicated the essay to his friend.

Of interest in this text is the significant shift that has occurred in Buber’s thinking in contrast to his famous Prague “Lectures on Judaism,” delivered only seven years earlier but on the other side of the war, the revolution, and the British conquest of Palestine. In those lectures, Buber offered a powerful but also fairly typical cultural-Zionist reading of Jewish history: once, the Jewish people were vital and creative in their land; then, they were exiled and lost their vitality, which appeared only occasionally in subterranean movements outside the mainstream; now, the Jews return to Zion and to the land and so restore their original creative genius. In “The Holy Way,” however, the loss of the Jewish commonwealth is no longer the event that “split Judaism’s history in two.” Rather, “the true turning point in Jewish history” is declared to be the moment of the establishment of the Israelite monarchy. It is the idolatrous turn toward institutional human authority, not the loss of sovereignty over the land, that rends the mundane from the spiritual and creates the very idea of the political sphere as something separate from religion (by restricting God’s rule to “spiritual” matters). Over the course of the 1920s, Buber hones and fine-tunes his understanding of the Bible, so that by 1932 when he publishes Kingship of God, he has developed his understanding of philology and biblical history much more deeply. But the basic theopolitical claim remains the same as in the 1918 text dedicated to Landauer.

Buber’s position is more or less consistent, too, between Kingship of God and his other biblical writings published later: the unfinished sequel Der Gesalbte [The Anointed] (1936), Moshe [Moses] (1945), and Torat Hanevi‘im [The Prophetic Faith] (1950). Together, these works narrate a theopolitical history of Israel from the moment of the election of the people in the revelation at Sinai down to the Babylonian Exile. The book on Moses describes a charismatic leader who denies the role of institutional leadership for himself lest he end up imitating the Pharaoh against whom he rebelled. He passes
leadership onto Joshua for a limited task, the conquest of Canaan, and Joshua passes leadership on to no one, not seeing any need to do so. The period of the Judges, according to *Kingship of God*, is one in which the political system vacillates between rule by a specially chosen charismatic leader, who performs only a limited task before fading back into the body of the people or serving as an arbitrator of disputes on the basis of earned authority, and what we might call anarcho-theocracy, when there is no human ruler at all and the people live under the direct kingship of God. Ultimately, however, the people fail here: only some of them, the most faithful, recognize this anarchy as an opportunity to exercise the highest responsibility; others succumb to fear of external military threats and demand the institution of a human monarchy. The aftermath of this, as described in *The Anointed* and *The Prophetic Faith*, is a decline that could have been avoided. God continues, through the prophets, to exhort the people to obedience of the original covenant; the kings suppress and ignore the prophets and the people pivot wildly between obedience and idolatry.

THEOPOLITICS AND ZIONISM

All this is deeply relevant to Buber’s Zionism. A survey of the range of Buber’s editorials and occasional writing on Zionism, together with a consideration of his major statement in *Ben Am Le-Artzo* [Between a People and Its Land, published in English as *On Zion*] (1944), shows that the post–World War I Buber understands the contemporary Zionist project as nothing less than a renewal of the original attempt of the people Israel to fulfill the terms of its election and covenant. As such, it remains subject to the same specific dangers that inhered in this attempt the first time around. Buber thus assumes the role of the contemporary inheritor of the prophetic, anarcho-theocratic tradition, urging his Zionist fellow-travelers not to succumb once again to the monarchical, statist temptation. In this picture, the ancient tribal system with its clans and sheikhs is updated by modern familial and productive associations, while the contemporary equivalent for ancient anarchy would be something like a network of kibbutz councils. The modern equivalent of the ancient monarchy, of course, is the nation-state, which represents the principles of human sovereignty and domination whether or not it includes a parliament and elections.

The fact that these themes, along with the first appearance in his writings of warnings against capitalist exploitation and imperialist domination, show up in 1917 and 1918 is no coincidence. Buber tried many times to enlist Landauer in the defense of Zionism and was rebuffed just as many times.
Landauer saw Germany as the place to realize his dreams of a nonhierarchical, directly democratic society made up of a network of nested workers’, peasants’, and soldiers’ councils. He worried, further, that the growing British interest in Palestine meant that it would become yet another site of colonial oppression and that this agenda would override whatever independent projects small groups of idealistic Zionists might attempt to realize there. Nonetheless, after his death, Buber mourned the man he called Zionism’s “hidden leader,” the man who should have eventually realized his place at the side of the new Jewish spirit had history not stolen him away. In the early 1920s, Buber was not the only one to think this way—other, more powerful and influential Zionist figures, such as Chaim Arlosoroff and Nahum Goldmann, spoke similarly about Landauer and his ideas.

This brings us to perhaps the most important thing to realize about the Landauerian anarchist position as it realizes itself in Buber’s theopolitics: it is at no time a “utopian” project, in the sense of an abstract ideal to be realized only in fiction or in the far future. From the moment Landauer went to work by Eisner’s side in Bavaria, through his declaration of the Bavarian Council Republic, to the growth of the kibbutz movement during the years of the Third Aliyah, there were significant groups of people working to actually put these ideas into practice. To be sure, Buber criticizes Landauer’s role in the Bavarian Revolution, but not simply because it was political action—rather, Buber fears that Landauer has badly misjudged the forces arrayed against him and thus acts on the basis of an incorrect political diagnosis, which fear turned out to be correct. This fear was perhaps the mirror image of Landauer’s own fear, that Buber was signing on to a Zionist project of which he was not in control and in which he was doomed to be little more than a dissenting minority voice. This fear also turned out to be correct, but given the strength of Labor ideology and of the kibbutz movement in the 1920s, it was hardly completely romantic for Buber to see the cells of a new type of society in the kibbutzim. From the anarchist standpoint, in fact, what happened in Palestine was a mirror of what happened in Germany—a labor-oriented but statist party (Ebert and the SPD in Germany, Ben-Gurion and the Achdut Ha’avoda [Labor Unity] party in Palestine) crowds out those committed to nonhierarchical organization, dominates the scene for a while, then in turn succumbs to forces to its own political right.

It is also important to clarify that we are worlds away here from the “religious anarchism” attributed to Buber by Gershom Scholem in his critique of Buber’s writings on Chasidism. When Scholem speaks of “religious anarchism,” he means anarchism with respect to the category or particular sphere
called “religion,” which is to say that he means antinomianism. Scholem identifies this, in turn, with messianism, since the chaotic wind of eschatology blows through the orderly house of religion. But Landauerian anarchism, which I am arguing is manifest in Buberian theopolitics, is antimessianic and highly “nomian.” To be sure, it does not accept that the demands upon us are equivalent to what the institutions of the state or the rabbinate say that they are, but this hardly leads straight to nihilism. On the contrary, the demands of divine rule are total; Israel is never free from the need to do teshuva [repent] and to become what it was always meant to be. Such a realization must also strive to avoid the temptation of adopting an “anarchist constitution”—a specific form of society, however nonhierarchical, that endures from one generation to another in such a way that future generations are prohibited from altering it. But it is nonetheless, despite being theopolitics, an achievable goal in the mundane world.

To return, then, to the context of Palestine, Buber saw clearly that the so-called Arab question posed a threat to the viability of the only kind of Zionism he believed worth the name, not just because it raised general and fuzzy ethical quandaries about the use of power or the ability to live with others, but because the fear of an external threat called Philistines was the very factor that first gave rise to the temptation of idolatrous human authority in Israel, undermining the rule of God and severing the political sphere from a now-impotent realm of the “spiritual,” leading eventually to destruction and exile. Buber’s binationalism is, as he put it, “only a temporary adaptation of our path to the concrete, historical situation—it is not necessarily the path itself.” He does not arrive at it by taking the generally current ideas about liberal self-governance and nation-state structures and then adding one plus one, nor can it really be understood as some kind of extrapolation or generalization of the teachings of I and Thou and Dialogue. Rather, the task of finding a modus vivendi for living with, not above, and not merely alongside, the Palestinians is a necessary prerequisite for preventing the reemergence of the kind of fear and hyperconsciousness of security that is conducive to the deformation of a Jewish anarchistic theopolitics into a Jewish authoritarian political theology.

CONCLUSION: THEOPOLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

I want to conclude by restating the connection between this type of anarchist theopolitics and theocracy and then asking how democracy fits into the picture. The relationship between God and Israel in Buber’s biblical writings is
presented as both hierarchical and covenantal, laying insistent demands on the collectivity of Israel even if those demands are not crystallized in the form of the rabbinic commandments. Instead, this demand requires teshuva, a turning to God that manifests in the organization of society according to a theopolitical impulse, which tends to map onto a Landauerian vision of anarchism: a society containing only nonhierarchical forms of organization, in which authority is granted only to those who earn it and only to do particular things. It is this theopolitical vision that Buber deploys against traditional notions of political theology and hierocracy, and it is this vision that manifests in Buber’s commitment to the kibbutz as the potential core of a new Jewish society in Palestine. In this context, binationalism should be seen as a pragmatic compromise, not with an ideal of full Jewish sovereignty in a homogeneous society, but with any idea of statehood at all. Binationalism, through establishing clear conduits for cooperation between Palestinians and Zionists, counters the fear-security resonance machine that conduces to the idolatrous recourse to an authoritarian human power.

Of course, Buber and his friends did not win the argument about what form the Jewish polity in Palestine should take. And despite his radical idealism, Buber also had a practical side. He thus accepted the existence of the State of Israel as a liberal, representative democratic state that had resulted from the Zionist project, even though it did not embody what he saw as the true goal of Zionism. Nonetheless, because he believed that his version of Zionism was intimately bound up with the divine calling and commandment to the Jewish people to create a holy nation, he could not give up on his ideal. Thus he spent the last decades of his life trying to push the new State of Israel in the direction he thought it needed to go. This meant taking part in the democratic give-and-take that characterizes the politics of that country, in which relevant voices include the religious and secular Jewish publics, the Arab and Palestinian publics, and the arenas of global politics.

Because of this, I think Buber offers contemporary Jews and Israelis an interesting example of a theopolitics that takes it as axiomatic that God’s rule is the end goal of Jewish public life, but at the same time does not assume that this means creating a coercive apparatus that will enforce rabbinic halachah, create facts on the ground in the West Bank, emphasize and stand on Jewish rights to the Temple Mount, and so on. From this standpoint, in fact, even the adoption of laws intended to regulate or enforce a Jewish demographic majority appears extremely problematic. As Buber puts it, the Jewish covenant operates as a dialogue between “a world which does not want to be God’s,
and a God that does not want to compel the world to become His.”  

If God refrains from dominating the world, then imitators of God must themselves so refrain, even if they think they can glorify God through their domination.

NOTES


