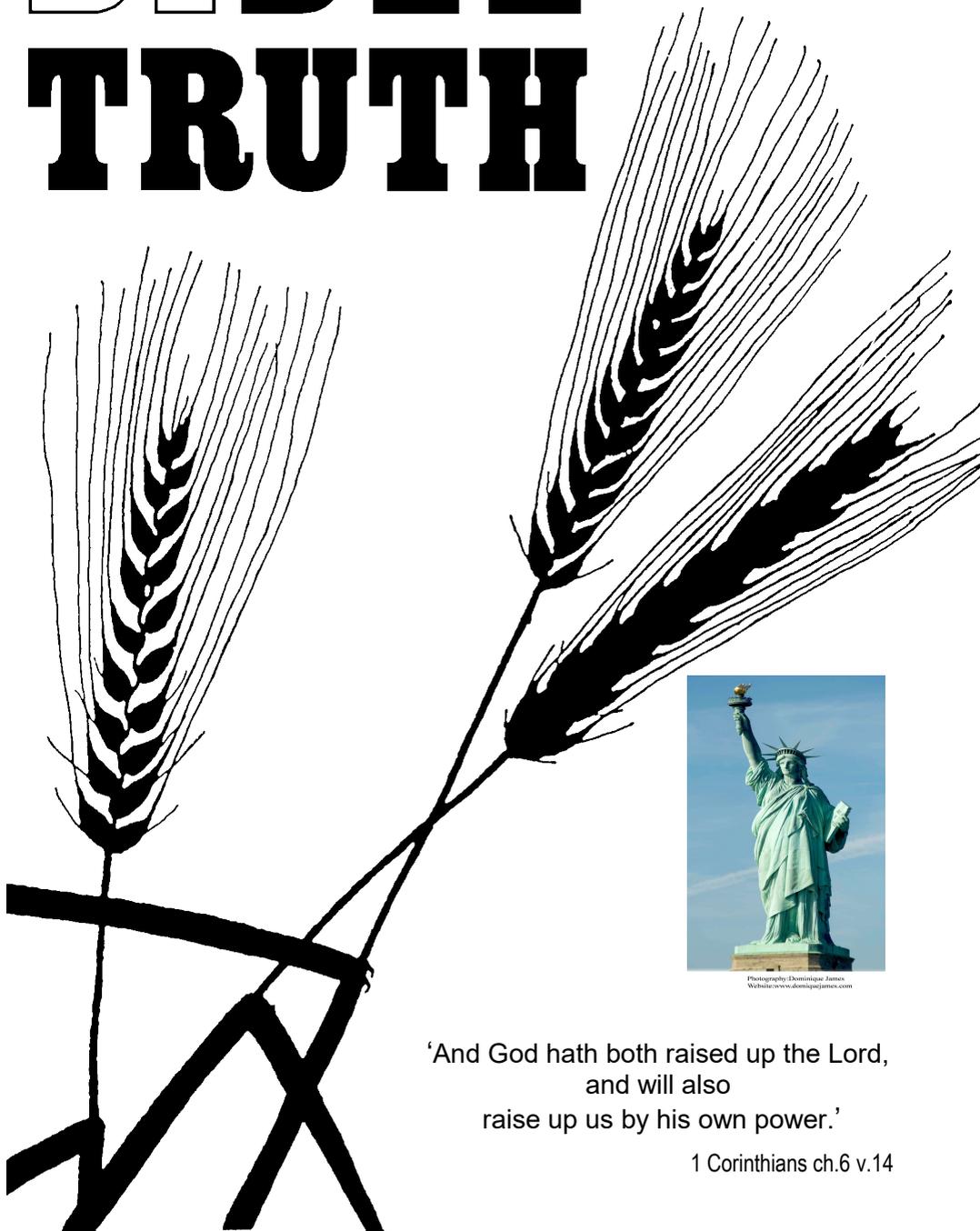


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Photography: Dominique James
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'And God hath both raised up the Lord,
and will also
raise up us by his own power.'

1 Corinthians ch.6 v.14

The Bible Roots of the American Republic the Christian Republic, a Divine Institution

by Jory Brooks

A common misconception today is to ascribe to early pagan Greece or Rome the origin of the American system of representative government. It will be a surprise to many who are not knowledgeable about early Bible history to learn that its actual roots are in the ancient Hebrew republic in the Old Testament. Biblical scholar Dr Paul Ramsey, informs us,



Statue of Liberty, New York harbour

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‘The Hebrew nation originated in the federation of tribes bound together by their common covenant with Yahweh. The covenant was rather like a constitution voluntarily promulgated by a monarch. Yet it was ratified by the people (see Exodus ch.24 vv 3-8; Deuteronomy ch.27 and Joshua ch.24 vv 1-28), and it is possible that the accounts of its ratification reflect an annual ceremony in which the people solemnly renewed their commitment to the covenant. It is fair to say, therefore, that **the biblical conception of law and government rests primarily on the Divine will but also on popular consent.**’

Basic Christian Ethics p.369

The concept of representative government through popular consent has its foundations in the Old Testament. Hebrew scholar, Ferrar Fenton, in his *Holy Bible in Modern English* states, ‘the kings were clearly elective’ (see Genesis ch.36). Fenton refers to the Mosaic laws as ‘Constitutional Laws’ (Numbers ch.35, etc.), for although they were given by Yahweh, they were ratified by the people of Israel.

‘And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient.’

Exodus ch.24 v.7

Fenton comments,

‘I cannot find that the Hebrews ever had that which is sooner or later a curse to the commonwealth, an elected aristocracy. The views implanted in them by Moses were those of Constitutional Government. Everyone was a farmer and a soldier. Anyone could by patient labour, as Jessai, or by sudden bravery, as David, rise to greatness. There was never ..., a sharp and defined line between the nobles and the commons.’ (See 1 Samuel ch.17).

The *Universal Jewish Encyclopaedia* adds,

‘The institutions of ancient Israel, as portrayed in the Bible, imply an underlying conception of personal and national liberty. The idea of personal liberty appears especially in the legal codes of the Pentateuch. The Ten Commandments, a pivotal point of the entire legislation, is based on the premise that the regimen of good society depends just as much upon respect for the rights of man as for the service of God. Along with injunctions against idolatry and blasphemy, the Decalogue therefore includes prohibitions against destroying a man’s life (murder), home (adultery), reputation (false witness) or property (theft and covetousness).’

(VIJ:34)

It was these biblical laws, underlying the Constitution of the United States, which grant us human liberty.

What about the Chief Executive in ancient Israel? The same article says, ‘The standard example of national liberty in the Bible is the rejection, in the earlier period, of human kingship. The Biblical attitude is summed up in two noteworthy episodes. The first is that of the making of the Covenant between God and Israel on Sinai. This is pictured on essentially democratic lines. The Covenant, which constitutes the charter of Israel’s nationhood, is not imposed by superior power, through the agency of any one authority, but is offered to and accepted by the whole people collectively’.

‘And he (Moses) took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, **All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient.**’

Exodus ch.24 v.7

The second episode is that of Gideon's refusal to become king of Israel, or to allow his family to be turned into a dynastic household. God, he avers, is the only true king (Judges ch.8 vv 22-23 & v.35) This has a direct parallel with early America, where some asked General George Washington to take the title of 'king'. He refused, saying that America already had a king, the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Hebrew origin of American liberty is documented in the same encyclopaedia.

'American ideas of liberty are in a measure indebted to earlier [Hebrew] thinking. In 1636 the Plymouth Colony expressly drew up its constitution on the basis of the system introduced by Nehemiah after the Return from the Babylonian Exile (Nehemiah chs 9 & 10). In 1647, the Massachusetts Colony declared its adherence to Mosaic principles in framing its code of laws. The same was done in Connecticut in 1650, and in New Haven in 1655. In the words of the historian Lecky (*Rationalism in Europe*, vol. 2, p. 168), "The Hebraic mortar cemented the foundations of American Democracy."'

VII:37

The book, *Law in Colonial Massachusetts* tells us that in colonial times, our forefathers often referred to America as 'Zion', and as 'a city set upon a hill', using biblical imagery for the earthly Kingdom of God. (pp. 7, 52, etc.) The colonists referred to each other as Israelites (p.62), and judges frequently based decisions upon Bible law. For example, we are told that in cases of theft, justice John Clark 'invariably ordered that the defendant pay to the victim three times the value of the goods stolen', based upon the principle of restitution in Exodus chapter 22. (ibid. p.117-118). Even the famous Liberty Bell contains an inscription taken from Bible law.

'..., proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: ...'

Leviticus ch.25 v.10

Truly American institutions were based upon biblical principles.

In early America, near the close of the Revolutionary War, the Articles of Confederation for the new republic was adopted, again based upon biblical principles. On the day of adoption, October 25, 1780, the Continental Congress gathered, with John Hancock presiding over the House of Representatives and Senate, to hear a leading minister expound upon the meaning of the event from the

Word of God. The man chosen for the honour was Dr Samuel Cooper, D.D, to whom the presidency of Harvard University had been offered and declined. Dr Cooper's message on the biblical parallels between Israel and America are as important and timely as when first given. Following to the end is a condensed transcription of that original address by Dr Samuel Cooper in 1780.

ABRAHAM'S BLESSING IS COME UPON US

'Their children also shall be as aforetime, and their congregation shall be established before me, and I will punish all that oppress them. And their nobles shall be of themselves, and their governor shall proceed from the midst of them; and I will cause him to draw near, and he shall approach unto me: for who is this that engaged his heart to approach unto me? saith the LORD. And ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.'

Jeremiah ch.30 vv 20-22

Nothing can be more applicable to the solemnity in which we are engaged, than this passage of Sacred Writ. The prophecy seems to have been made for ourselves, it is so exactly descriptive of that important, that comprehensive, that essential civil blessing, which kindles the lustre, and diffuses the joy of the present day. Nor is this the only passage of Holy Scripture that holds up to our view a striking resemblance between our own circumstances and those of the ancient Israelites, a nation chosen by God, a theatre for the display of some of the most astonishing dispensations of His providence. Like that nation we rose from oppression, and emerged 'from the house of bondage' (Joshua ch.24 v.17). Like that nation we were led into the wilderness, as a refuge from tyranny, and a preparation for the enjoyment of our civil and religious rights. Like that nation we have been pursued through the sea, by the armed hand of power, which, but for the signal interposition of Heaven, must before now have totally defeated the noble purpose of our emigration. And, to omit many other instances of similarity, like that nation we have been ungrateful to the Supreme Ruler of the world and too 'lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation' (Deuteronomy ch.32 v.15).

Accordingly, we have been corrected by His justice, and at the same time remarkably supported and defended by His mercy, so that we may discern our own picture in the figure of the ancient church divinely exhibited to Moses in vision, 'a bush burning and not consumed'. This day, this remarkable day, is a witness, that the Lord,

He whose hand maketh great, and giveth strength unto all, hath not forsaken us, nor our God forgotten us. This day, which forms a new era in our annals, exhibits a testimony to all the world, that contrary to our deserts, and amidst all our troubles, the blessing promised in our text to the afflicted seed of Abraham is come upon us. 'their nobles shall be of themselves, and their governor shall proceed from the midst of them' (see Jeremiah ch.30 v.21).

The form of government originally established in the Hebrew nation by a charter from Heaven, was that of a free republic, over which God Himself in particular favour to that people, was pleased to preside. It consisted of three parts: a chief magistrate who was called judge or leader, such as Joshua and others; a council of 70 chosen men, and the general assemblies of the people. Of these, the two last were the most essential and permanent, and the first more occasional, according to the particular circumstances of the nation. Their council or Sanhedrin, remained with but little suspension, through all the vicissitudes they experienced, till after the commencement of the Christian era. And as to the assemblies of the people, that they were frequently held by divine appointment, and considered as the fountain of civil power, which they exerted by their own decrees, or distributed into various channels, as they judged most conducive to their own security, order, and happiness, is evident beyond contradiction from the sacred history. Even the law of Moses, though framed by God Himself, was not imposed upon that people against their will, it was laid open before the whole congregation of Israel; they freely adopted it, and it became their law, not only by Divine appointment, but by their own voluntary and express consent. Upon this account it is called in the Sacred Writings a covenant, compact, or mutual stipulation.

A solemn renewal of the covenant was the very last public act of Joshua their renowned leader. He 'gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel, and for their heads and for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God' (Joshua ch.24 v.1). The occasion was great and important, being nothing less than to renew their acceptance of the constitution they had received from Heaven, and solemnly to confirm the national compact. How august was this assembly of a great nation, its representatives and magistrates of every order, with their brave and faithful leader at their head: he

who had been foremost to face the dangers of their cause, who had fought so many battles for their happy settlement, and rendered such various and important services to his country. In a short but nervous and pathetic address to the assembly, he reminded them of their small origin, of the peculiar favours granted by Heaven to their progenitors, of their remarkable deliverance from the slavery of Egypt, of the wonders wrought for them by a divine hand in their progress through the wilderness, in their conquests on the border of Canaan, and their firm possession of that promised land. Deeply impressed with this interesting recollection, he warmly declares his own resolution to abide by that noble cause for which they had been led by Heaven from an ignominious and servile dependence, and formed into a distinct and respectable nation. But as the memorable act of the day depended entirely on the consent of the people, he accordingly refers the matter to their own free determination, 'choose you this day whom you will serve' (Joshua ch.24 v.15). It was impossible for the people not to be moved by such an address; not to discern the excellency of the Mosaic constitutions; how well they were adapted to the particular circumstances of the nation, and the noble purposes they were designed to promote. The people replied, 'The LORD our God will we serve; and his voice will we obey.' They were determined to be governed by the laws and the statutes he has been so graciously pleased to afford us. 'And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the LORD, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses' (Joshua ch.24 v.22).

If ever we renounce the constitution and happy settlements granted to us by Heaven, if ever we break the sacred compact; this day, and all the public and voluntary transactions of it, must be a witness against us. Thus Joshua made a covenant with the people at Shechem, which, we are afterwards told, he recorded in a book and at the same time erected a monumental stone upon the spot, as a memorial of their sacred stipulation, and as a perpetual testimony, that the Supreme Ruler Himself had not established their policy without their own free concurrence, and that the Hebrew nation, lately redeemed from tyranny, had now a civil and religious constitution of their own choice, and were governed by laws to which they had given their consent.

To mention all the passages in Sacred Writ which prove that the Hebrew government, though a theocracy, was yet as to the outward part of it, a free republic, and that the sovereignty resided in the people, would be to recite a large part of its history. I will therefore only add a single instance from Joshua chapter 22. When the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh had erected a separate altar, though it afterwards appeared with no bad intention, all the other tribes were extremely alarmed, and being met in General Assembly, determined to make war on their offending brethren. But previous to the intended assault they agreed to send an embassy to expostulate with them on the occasion. Phineas and ten princes, or principal men, were appointed for this purpose. Here was an act of sovereignty, and an act of the highest importance to the interest of any nation, involving in it nothing less than the power of making peace or war. It was not done by Joshua, though he was then alive; it was an act of the congregation of Israel. The embassy upon this momentous matter was chosen, commissioned, and instructed by them. 'As it was democratically sent', says a great author who wrote conclusively, who fought bravely, and died gloriously in the cause of liberty, Algernon Sidney, in his tract, *Upon Government*, 'it was democratically received. It was not directed to one man, but to all the children of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, and the answer was sent by them all'. The report was made to the congregation, who finally determined the grand question, and decided for peace.

Such was the civil constitution of the Hebrew nation, till growing weary of the gift of Heaven, they demanded a king. After being admonished by the prophet Samuel of the ingratitude and folly of their request, they were punished in the grant of it. Impiety, corruption and disorder of every kind afterwards increasing among them, they grew ripe for the judgments of Heaven in their desolation and captivity. Taught by these judgments the value of those blessings they had before despised, and groaning under the hand of tyranny more heavy than that of death, they felt the worth of their former civil and religious privileges, and were prepared to receive with gratitude and joy a restoration not barely to the land of milk and honey, but to the most precious advantage they ever enjoyed in that land, their original constitution of government. They were prepared to welcome with the voice of mirth and thanksgiving the re-establishment of their congregations; nobles chosen from among themselves, and a governor proceeding from the midst of them.

Such a constitution, twice established by the Hand of Heaven in that nation, so far as it respects civil and religious liberty in general, ought to be regarded as a solemn recognition from the Supreme Ruler Himself of the rights of human nature. It is, we believe, 'an happy foundation for many generations,' and the framers of it are indeed the fathers of their country, since nothing is so essential to the increase, and universal prosperity of a community, as a constitution of government founded in justice, and friendly to liberty. Such men have a monument of glory more durable than brass or marble. Behold the man, whose name as President of Congress, authenticates that immortal act, which in form constitutes the independence of these United States, and by which 'a nation' was literally 'born in a day [born at once]!' (see Isaiah ch.66 v.8). 'Righteousness exalteth a nation', says one of the greatest politicians and wisest princes that ever lived (Proverbs ch.14 v.34). This maxim does not barely rest upon his own but also on a Divine authority, and the truth of it has been verified by the experience of all ages.

May the Heavenly Flame animate all orders of men in the State! May it catch from bosom to bosom, and the glow be universal! May a double portion of it inhabit the breasts of our civil rulers, and impart a lustre to them like that which sat upon the face of Moses, when he came down from the holy mountain with the tables of the Hebrew constitution in his hand. Thus will they sustain with true dignity the first honours, the first marks of esteem and confidence, the first public employment bestowed by this new commonwealth, and in which they this day appear. Such men must naturally care for our State.
