
Moses and Machiavellism

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“MACHIAVELLISM” REFERS TO THE OUTLOOK and behavior praised by the Florentine political theorist, Niccolo Machiavelli, primarily in his treatises *The Prince* and *The Discourses On Livy*.¹ Sometimes referred to as “civic humanism,” Machiavellism proposes a revisionary morality in which the consolidation of political power in the state is regarded as the highest human good, supplanting all other ethical values and constraints. Ever since its first articulation in the sixteenth century, Machiavellism has generated a vast literature of commentary and controversy. To his detractors, Machiavelli’s works were “written by the finger of Satan.” To his defenders, he “spoke like a saint” (Donaldson: xi).

Machiavelli was one of the first people to read the Bible not as revelation but as a secular text, the same way he read classical histories. Its God was no more or less real to him than the Greek or Roman deities. Such a humanist approach allowed him to recognize a wealth of fact, plot, and character in the Bible’s account of the birth of the Israelite nation. Machiavelli’s abiding concern with the subjects of politics, religion, and war enabled him to perceive the Pentateuch’s central emphasis on these themes. In addition, Machiavelli’s understanding of the role religion plays in political life enabled him to explain much about the Bible’s *Sitz im Leben*, its place in the world, determined locally by the rhetorical motives of its writers and editors.

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¹For studies of Machiavellism, the interpretation and influence of Machiavelli’s thought, see Meinecke, Pocock, and Donaldson.

Connections between Moses and Machiavelli have been observed by students of the Bible and of political theory. However, to my knowledge no one yet has noticed the prominence of these connections nor explored their significance for an overall understanding of both figures, perhaps because Machiavelli never expands upon biblical subjects for more than two or three consecutive sentences.² But his references are frequent enough to create a rich hidden pattern. By exploring that pattern in this essay, I will draw attention to what Machiavelli can teach a modern reader about the Bible and what the Bible can teach a modern reader about Machiavellian thought.

While sceptical toward orthodox interpretations of the Bible, Machiavelli was an avid student of the actual text. He combined what he learned from it about the formation of Israel with what he learned from the classics about the formation of Greece and Rome to arrive at universal theories about the rise and fall of nations and practical prescriptions for political success. In the Bible's often brutal portrayal of authority, rebellion, and war, he found a precedent for his own remorseless value judgements. In the Moses of the Pentateuch, Machiavelli also discovered an ideal hero, a model of the qualities that inhered in those who founded durable institutions: "Of all men that are praised, those are praised most who have played the chief part in founding a religion. Next come those who have founded either republics or kingdoms" (D.I.10.1, 236).³ Moses was the only one in Machiavelli's history who did both.

Early in *The Prince* Machiavelli indicates that he is interested in the founders of new states rather than in established governors. "But to come to those who have become princes by their own virtue and not by fortune, I say that the most excellent are Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus and the like . . ." He expresses some reluctance about classifying the biblical character with the others: "And although one should not reason about Moses, as he was a mere executor of things that had been ordered for him by God . . ." But then he proceeds anyway with gusto: "But let us consider Cyrus and the others who have acquired or founded kingdoms: you will find them all admirable; and if their particular actions and orders are considered, they will appear no different from those of Moses, who had so great a teacher . . ." (P. VI, 22-23).

² Wildavsky makes no mention of Machiavelli; Walzer refers to Machiavelli only briefly in passing. Both of these studies, which have taught me a good deal about the politics of the Pentateuch, have a more benign understanding of Moses that may not be compatible with Machiavelli's. Parel's study of Machiavelli's ideas on religion, gives no attention to Moses, while Pocock and Pitkin touch on Moses only as one of several founder figures.

³ Citations of Machiavelli as follows: D=*The Discourses of Niccolo Machiavelli*; P=*The Prince*.

Though certainly innovative, Machiavelli's approach to the Bible was also typical of Renaissance humanism's. For this reason a detailed study of what he found there and how it influenced him may be relevant to other interests in early modern European culture. In addition to providing a model of historiography, the Bible inspired literature, military strategy, and constitutional reform during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At a time regarding itself as an epoch of Rebirth, Reformation, and Revolution, the Pentateuch's account of the revolt against Pharaoh, the founding of a social order, and the conquest of neighboring territory was of lively concern to poets and painters, condottieri and counsellors, clerics and kings. The new state, the successful human effort to create or recreate a commonwealth, was their promised land and to it Moses was one who led the way.

In echoing Freud's title, *Moses and Monotheism*, I mean to suggest some similarities between his approach to the Bible and Machiavelli's. Freud's 1939 work ". . . reduces religion to the status of a neurosis of mankind and explains its grandiose powers in the same way as we should a neurotic obsession in our individual patients . . . as a return of long-forgotten important happenings in the primeval history of the human family . . ." (68). Like Freud, Machiavelli was a sceptical rationalist who sought to demystify religion by reducing it to something else, in his case, politics. Also like Freud, Machiavelli had great respect for religion, especially the religion of the Jews, and for the man he assumed was its founder, Moses. Finally, like Freud, Machiavelli read himself into the Bible, ultimately playing the role of Moses and speaking with the voice of God (Yerushalmi: 60, 74-76, 79).

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Machiavelli observes that the foundation of new states is often preceded by exodus and migration: "Free cities are those which are built by peoples who, either under a prince or of their own accord, are driven by pestilence or famine or war to abandon the land of their birth and to look for new habitations. These may be either cities they find in countries they have occupied and in which they go to dwell, as Moses did; or new cities which they build as Aeneas did" (D.I.1.6, 208). The association between Moses and Aeneas generates a coherent reading of the overall plotline of the Torah, a beginning, middle, and end. It is the story of the transformation of a defeated enslaved people into a victorious conquering army, a metamorphosis of those who take it into those who dish it out: "Peoples . . . quit their own lands when constrained to do so by necessity . . . famine or war or hardships . . . when they are very numerous

and then make a violent incursion into the lands of others, kill the inhabitants, seize their goods, and establish a new kingdom under a new name. This was done by Moses and by the peoples who overran the Roman empire . . . Moses gave the name Judea to that part of Syria which he occupied” (D.II.8.3, 379).

If plot provides an overall framework, the development of character also shapes stories, as for Machiavelli it shapes history. He sees Moses as a heroic liberator and violent conqueror. This is the image of Moses frozen in stone by Machiavelli’s contemporary, Michaelangelo, the vision of Moses we are left with by the narrator at the conclusion of the Torah: “Remember the strong hand of Moses and the terrible deeds which he did in the sight of all Israel” (Deut. 34:12).⁴ Such a heroic personage is truly godlike, and in Deuteronomy its voice is often indistinguishable from Yahweh’s: “If you pay heed to the commandments which I give you this day, and love the Lord your God and serve him with all your heart and soul, then I will send rain for your land in season, both autumn and spring rains, and you will gather your corn and new wine and oil, and I will provide pasture in the fields for your cattle . . .” (11:12-16). This is notably different from the voice and image of the Moses in the earlier books of Exodus and Numbers, where he is portrayed with a problematic and changing all-too-human personality. In some passages he is identified with the conquering God, at others with the slavish and murmuring Israelites, but most of the time he is attempting to mediate between the two or to escape the situation altogether.

Machiavelli’s analysis of the special character of leaders can make sense of some of these inconsistencies. The leader is distinguished by his virtue or “virtu,” a term whose meaning Machiavelli recasts from its familiar sense as ethically principled behavior to its earlier Roman sense of virility, valor, strength, and cleverness. Instead of truth, goodness, and justice, virtue requires efficiency, effectiveness, and daring. It is what drives men toward power, what makes them fight, what brings them fame. Virtue is acquired through overcoming adversity with will and ability. Adversity, for Machiavelli, is transformed into what he calls “occasion,” the opportunity for achievement: “Those who have become princes by their own virtue (virtu) . . . had [no]thing else from fortune than the opportunity, which gave them the matter enabling them to introduce any form they pleased. Without that opportunity their virtue (virtu) of spirit would have been eliminated, and without that virtue (virtu) the opportunity would have come in vain” (P.VI, 23).

⁴ Bible translations are from *The New English Bible, Oxford Study Edition*.

The biblical character of Jacob embodies the personal qualities of virtue. He is a younger brother, an underdog who insists on getting to the top. After wrestling all night with an angel, he is renamed Israel, meaning "you have striven with God and Man" (Gen. 32:28). But fortune does not provide him with the occasion, to realize those qualities fully. Moses, on the other hand, is provided with the occasion, but he alternates between heeding and resisting the call. Temperamentally a mixture of Jacob and his brother Esau, of the scrapper and the self-abnegating servant, he resembles Aeneas, the founder of Rome, who reluctantly carries out the will of the gods, torn between inclination and destiny.

Moses' strengths and weaknesses in respect to virtue are displayed in his first action, recounted at the beginning of Exodus: "One day when Moses was grown up he went out to his own kinsmen and saw them at their heavy labour. He saw an Egyptian strike one of his fellow Hebrews. He looked this way and that, and seeing there was no one about, he struck the Egyptian down and hid his body in the sand" (2:11-12). When the occasion arises, he has the strength, initiative, and courage to defeat the enemies of his people. But when he tries to govern them, they fail to recognize and value his virtue: "When he went out next day, two Hebrews were fighting together. He asked the man who was in the wrong, 'Why are you striking him?' 'Who set you up as an officer and judge over us?' the man replied. 'Do you mean to murder me as you murdered the Egyptian?'" (Exod. 2:13-14) Rather than retaining the opportunity, Moses becomes alarmed and flees to the land of Midian where he takes up the pastoral vocation of shepherd.

For Machiavelli a successful leader must "... contrive that greatness, spiritedness, gravity and strength are recognized in his actions," whereas it will make him "contemptible . . . to be held variable, light, effeminate, pusillanimous, irresolute . . ." (P. XIX, 72). These are the negative qualities that make Moses repeatedly resist the call to take charge: "But who am I, Moses said to God, 'that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' (Exod. 3:11-12) . . . 'But they will never believe me or listen to me; they will say "The Lord did not appear to you"' (Exod. 4.1) . . . 'O Lord I have never been a man of ready speech, never in my life, not even now that thou hast spoken to me' (Exod. 4.10) . . . The Lord said . . . : 'Go now; I will help your speech and tell you what to say.' But Moses still protested, 'No Lord send whom thou wilt'" (Exod. 4:13-14).

Like those he is meant to lead, Moses lacks confidence, faith, and persistence: "'Why O Lord hast thou brought misfortune on this people? And why didst thou ever send me? Since I first went to Pharaoh to speak in thy name he has heaped misfortune on thy people and thou hast done nothing at all to rescue them'" (Exod. 5:22-3). When they murmur and

complain, so does he: “Why hast thou brought trouble on thy servant? How have I displeased the lord that I am burdened with the care of this whole people? Am I their mother? . . . They pester me with their wailing. . . This whole people is a burden too heavy for me; I cannot carry it alone” (Num. 11:10-15). On these occasions, he lacks the distinction that qualifies a man of virtue to rise to the top and be in control. The narrator of Numbers admiringly describes Moses as “a man of great humility, the most humble man on earth . . .” (12:3). But to Machiavelli this is further evidence of the weakness that has been falsely treasured by the Christian religion: “The old religion did not beatify men unless they were replete with worldly glory: army commanders for instance, and rulers of republics. Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative men, rather than men of action. It has assigned as man’s highest good humility, abnegation and contempt for mundane things, whereas the other identifies it with magnanimity, bodily strength, and everything else that tends to make men very bold” (D II.2.6-7, 364).

To cultivate virtue and to eradicate humility and the other traits that “make men contemptible” requires instruction. This, I think, Machiavelli implies when he mentions that “Moses . . . had so great a teacher” (P. VI, 23). God is a resourceful pedagogue. He begins with confidence-building devices to counter Moses’ diffidence. First he provides the spectacle of a burning bush that is not consumed, then the promises of liberation from bondage, the grant of a new homeland, the luxury of plundered Egyptian jewelry and clothing. When Moses still resists, God shows him how to make his rod into a snake and his hand into something leprous. Instead of being impressed with the magic, Moses ignores God’s directions for turning the Nile to blood and tries to weasel out altogether with the excuse that he’s a poor speaker. Exasperated but still persistent, God reassures Moses that his brother Aaron will do the talking for him and that he will never be left at a loss: “I will help both of you to speak and tell you both what to do” (Exod. 4:15). This guarantee elicits Moses’ reluctant assent to take on the duties of leadership, after which God strengthens his commitment with a bout of serious hazing. While Moses is camped in the wilderness on his way back to Egypt, he is subject to a sudden murderous attack which is only averted in the last minute by his wife’s quick thinking (Exod. 4:24-26).

These lessons begin the process of transforming Moses into a great leader, but he still requires renewals and reminders from his teacher throughout the wilderness journey. By its end he has become the mighty and eloquent hero of Deuteronomy, but in God’s eyes he never lives down his earlier failures and is therefore not allowed to enter the promised land himself.

If the concept of *virtu* can help make sense of Moses' character development, Machiavelli's analysis of the difficulties and methods of establishing political power illuminates one of the Pentateuch's general themes, its "teachings." At the same time that they instruct Moses, God's lessons are amplified and transmitted to several other audiences, including Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the Israelite populace in 1250 B.C.E. They also are directed to later generations of friendly and hostile nations and to the descendants of his chosen people, the Israelites, down to the present-day reader. These distinct audiences of learners are specified in the text through a mirrored hierarchy of speakers and listeners: "I have made you like a god for pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your spokesman. You must tell your brother Aaron all I bid you say and he will tell Pharaoh . . .' (Exod. 7:1-2) . . . 'I have made Pharaoh and his courtiers obdurate so that I may show these my signs among them, and so that you can tell your children and grandchildren the story: how I made sport of the Egyptians and what signs I showed among them'" (Exod.10:1-2).

The story thus broadcast by the voice of the Torah is one of exemplary achievement in the face of almost insurmountable odds, the triumph of *virtu* over adversity. The obstacles are carefully mapped in a dense passage by Machiavelli: "nothing is more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than to put oneself at the head of introducing new orders. For as the introducer has all those who benefit from the old orders as enemies, and he has lukewarm defenders in all those who might benefit from the new orders. This *lukewarmness* arises partly from fear of adversaries who have the laws on their side and partly from the *incredulity* of men, who *do not truly believe* in new things unless they come to have a firm experience of them" (P. VI, 23-4; italics mine). The difficulties in founding a new state fall into two categories: defeating one's enemies and maintaining the support of one's adherents. But there is one solution that applies to both, that is, producing belief. In enemies such belief is credibility, in followers it is faith.

The first method for production of belief is intimidation. In dealing with enemies one must make credible threats to weaken their morale, so they and future enemies will be discouraged from putting up a fight. After each of the ten plagues that God sends, Pharaoh relents. As soon as it is lifted, the credibility of the threat wanes and Pharaoh returns to obduracy. On one hand, this justifies the use of increasingly harsh measures against him. On the other, the narrative emphasizes that Pharaoh reneges only because God hardens his heart. The lesson is that to enhance one's credibility by piling on punishments is more important than to be fair to one's enemies.

The same principle of producing belief applies to the Amorites in the war of conquest: "I have put Sihh the Amorite, King of Heshbon, and his territory into your hands. Begin to occupy it and provoke him to battle. Today I will begin to put the fear and dread of you upon all the peoples under heaven; if they so much as hear a rumour of you, they will quake and tremble before you" (Deut. 2:24-26). Such brutalizing of one's opponents also overcomes the difficulty of "lukewarmness" in one's followers. It tends to neutralize their fear of the enemy and heighten their confidence in their own cause. This method is applied by allowing the Israelites to closely observe the sufferings of the Egyptians while feeling protected themselves: "All Egypt will send up a great cry of anguish, a cry the like of which has never been heard before, nor ever will be again. But among all Israel not a dog's tongue shall be so much as scratched, no man or beast be hurt. Thus you shall know that the Lord does make a distinction between Egypt and Israel" (Exod. 11: 6-8). The result is that a population of former slaves "marched out defiantly in full view of all the Egyptians, while the Egyptians were burying all the first-born struck down by the Lord as a judgement on their gods" (Num. 33:3-4).

But followers tend to lose faith and return to fear. Even after the ten plagues, Pharaoh's chasing chariots erode belief: "In their terror . . . they said to Moses, ' . . . We would rather be slaves to the Egyptians than die here in the wilderness'" (Exod. 14:10-13). Fear distorts their perception of Canaanite enemies. The spies sent by Moses on their first approach to the promised land lose heart and provide discouraging false reports: "The country we explored . . . will swallow up any who go to live in it. All the people we saw are men of gigantic size . . . we felt no bigger than grasshoppers" (Num. 13:32-33). Thus, Machiavelli observes, in addition to neutralizing fear of enemies, the leader of a new state must overcome old habits of belief that persist because of mental inertia—the natural tendency to backslide. "Lukewarmness arises . . . partly from the incredulity of men, who do not truly believe in new things unless they come to have a firm experience of them."

One form of backsliding caused by lack of belief is complaint or "murmuring": "If only we had died at the Lord's hand in Egypt, where we sat round the fleshpots and had plenty of bread to eat. But you have brought us out to this wilderness to let this whole assembly starve to death" (Exod. 16:2-4) . . . "Will no one give us meat? Think of it! In Egypt we had fish for the asking, cucumbers and water-melons, leeks and onions and garlic" (Num. 11: 5). Lack of belief also issues in the backslide of counter-revolution. Because they have no firm experience of the new order, the Israelites revert to Egyptian idol worship of a golden calf while Moses is absent on Sinai for forty days writing down their new laws. Not long after-

wards, Miriam and Aaron question Moses' authority to lead: "Is Moses the only one with whom the Lord has spoken? Has he not spoken with us as well?" (Num. 12:2). Then Korah, Dathan, and Abiram along with with 250 men of rank directly challenge him: "They confronted Moses and Aaron and said to them, 'You take too much upon yourselves. Every member of the community is holy and the Lord is among them all. Why do you set yourselves up above the assembly of the Lord?'" (Num. 16:3).

To counteract these failures of faith under new circumstances, says Machiavelli, intimidation also must be used to make followers "believe by force": "The nature of peoples is variable; and it is easy to persuade them of something, but difficult to keep them in that persuasion. And thus things must be ordered in such a mode that when they no longer believe, one can make them believe by force. Moses, Cyrus, Theseus and Romulus would not have been able to make their peoples observe their constitutions for long if they had been unarmed . . ." (P.VI, 24).

Machiavelli here alludes to the punishments attendant upon the lapses into unbelief reported in the Bible. In response to their complaints about the food, God sends so many quail that people are buried in them, and as soon as they start eating they're struck with a deadly plague (Num. 11:34). The rebels fare even worse. Following God's command, Moses deputizes the Levites and says "Arm yourselves each of you, with his sword. Go through the camp from gate to gate and back again. Each of you kill his brother, his friend, his neighbour.' The Levites obeyed and about three thousand of the people died that day" (Exod. 32: 27-28). Miriam is afflicted with leprosy, and Korah, Dathan, and Abiram are swallowed by a gulf in the earth while a fire burns up the remaining 250. People are upset by their deaths so God starts another plague that kills 14,700 of them before Aaron makes expiation and it stops (Num. 16). Such incidents tend to force belief not only in the Israelites but also in the reader.

Both the content and the lurid style of these reports suggest that forcing belief ultimately requires not only strength but cruelty. Machiavelli declares: "A prince . . . so as to keep his subjects united and faithful, should not care about the infamy of cruelty, because with very few examples he will be more merciful than those who for the sake of too much mercy allow disorders to continue . . . And of all princes, it is impossible for the new prince to escape a name for cruelty because new states are full of dangers . . ." (P. XVII, 65-66).

In addition to the rationale that cruelty is ultimately merciful to the people, Machiavelli volunteers the judgement that the populace is essentially degenerate, both requiring and meriting rough treatment by their leaders: "It is much safer to be feared than loved . . . For one can say this generally of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and

dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain . . . (P. XVII, p.66). Such an assessment accords with the characterization of the Israelites in Numbers 11:4 as “rabble.”⁵

By this point it should come as no surprise that Machiavelli substantiates his least palatable moral claims with the sanctified example of Moses. It is his actions that validate the maxim that the end justifies the means. “He who reads the Bible with discernment will see that, before Moses set about making laws and institutions, he had to kill a very great number of men who . . . were opposed to his plans (D. III.30.4, 547) . . . Reprehensible actions may be justified by their effects . . . when the effect is good, . . . it always justifies the action . . . I might adduce in support of what I have just said numberless examples, e.g. Moses, Lycurgus, Solon, and other founders of kingdoms and republics . . .” (D. I.9.2-5, 235). Though Machiavelli must have taken some iconoclastic satisfaction in using a traditional paragon of virtue as his own paragon of virtue, any disinterested reader of the Bible could hardly find this displacement to be a distortion of the original text.

Thus far, I have outlined what I see as Machiavelli’s submerged reading of plot, characterization, and theme in the Pentateuch. Insofar as he regards human political power rather than divine power as its animating force, Machiavelli disregards the Bible’s manifest theological content. This is not to say, however, that he discounts the significance of religion. In fact, he insists it is essential in the governance of the state: “The rulers of a republic or a kingdom . . . should uphold the basic principles of the religion which sustains them in being, and, if this is done, it will be easy for them to keep their commonwealth religious, and, in consequence, good and united” (D. I.12.3, 244). Though out of prudence, he never applies this analysis directly to the Scriptures, it can be inferred.

Machiavelli observes that “There is nothing more necessary to a community, whether it be a religious establishment a kingdom or a republic than to restore to it the prestige it had at the outset” (D.III.1.10, 463). A state religion furnishes citizens with an enhanced sense of identity derived from the deity at its divinely assisted foundation. God’s selection of Israel as recipient of his blessing is a tenet that Moses continually reemphasizes as a source of national distinction and pride: “I have taught you statutes and laws, as the Lord my God commanded me; these you must duly keep when you enter the land and occupy it. You must observe them carefully, and thereby you will display your wisdom and understanding to other peoples. When they hear about these statutes, they will say, “What a wise and understanding people this great nation is!” (Deut. 4:5-8).

⁵ Translation by Noth: 81.

The association of prestige with a restoration of origins here is crucial. The last book of Moses, Deuteronomy, may itself be an artifact of such restoration. According to the book of Kings, it was unearthed during a renovation of the Temple at the time of the reformation instituted by King Josiah in the seventh century B.C.E. after having been lost for hundreds of years: "The high priest Hilkiah told Shaphan the adjutant-general that he had found the book of the law in the house of the Lord . . . When the king heard what was in the book of the law . . . 'Great is the wrath of the Lord,' he said 'that has been kindled against us, because our forefathers did not obey the commands in this book and do all that is laid upon us'" (2 Kings 22: 8-13). Machiavelli says that restorations like this are the only way that established institutions can gain the vigor of newly founded states. Without that vigor, they tend naturally to decay: "The life of all mundane things is of finite duration . . . Without renovation . . . composite bodies such as states and religious institutions . . . do not last. . . . at the start religious institutions, republics and kingdoms have in all cases some good in them, to which their early reputation and progress is due. But since in the process of time this goodness is corrupted, such a body must of necessity die unless something happens which brings it up to the mark. . . . men who live together under any constitution should frequently have their attention called to it . . ." (D.III.1.1-2, 459-461).

Moses also warns against the dangers of such entropic tendencies: "When you have plenty to eat and live in a fine house of your own building, when your herds and flocks increase and your silver and gold and all your possessions increase too, do not become proud and forget the Lord your god who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deut. 8:11-17). He therefore institutes a permanent and continuous rehearsal of the Pentateuch story for future generations: "But take good care: be on the watch not to forget the things that you have seen with your own eyes, and do not let them pass from your minds as long as you live, but teach them to your sons and to your sons' sons. You must never forget that day" (Deut. 4:9). The originating event is to be relived not only once a year in the Passover Seder, but is to be recalled by hourly reminders: "These commandments which I give you this day are to be kept in your heart; you shall repeat them to your sons, and speak of them indoors and out of doors, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on the hand and wear them as a phylactery on the forehead; write them up on the door-posts of your houses and on your gates" (Deut. 6:4-9). Although it is likely that many passages like this stipulating future memorial practise were anachronistically placed into the earlier texts, their provisions have nevertheless fulfilled Moses' purpose. In Jewish liturgy this instruction to repeat is itself still repeated several times a day.

In addition to buttressing and reviving community identity through its historical narratives, religion is an essential instrument for producing the belief that sustains identification and loyalty. At one of several strata of meaning, every word in both Hebrew and Christian Bibles is there to generate faith. Parables, poems, prayers, preachings, prophecies, and prohibitions all provide teaching tools to strengthen the reader's allegiance to the authority of God. Insofar as political leaders succeed in aligning themselves with that authority, they attain immense power over their own subjects.

Religion is effective in generating belief because it can intimidate the populace with words rather than requiring physical force: "It was religion that facilitated whatever enterprise the senate and the great men of Rome designed to undertake . . . its citizens were more afraid of breaking an oath than of breaking the law, since they held in higher esteem the power of God than the power of man" (D.I.11.2-5, 240-242). Thus Moses warns the children of Israel that if they do not fulfill their oaths and "obey the Lord your God by keeping the commandments and statutes which he gave . . . then you will eat your own children, the flesh of your sons and daughters . . . because of the dire straights to which you have been reduced . . . The pampered, delicate man will not share with his brother, or the wife of his bosom, or his own remaining children any of the meat which he is eating, the flesh of his own children . . . The pampered delicate woman . . . will not share with her own husband or her son or her daughter the afterbirth which she expels, or any boy or girl that she may bear" (Deut. 28:52-57). Since threats made in God's voice are uttered by an invisible presence, they require no enforcement mechanism to retain their credibility. And since they can be ritually repeated, they are magnified by tradition and internalized by the listener.

Another method for producing belief is deception. In regard to this technique Machiavelli says, "The princes who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith and have known how to get around men's brains with their astuteness . . . it is necessary to know well how to . . . be a great pretender and dissembler" (P. XVIII, 69-70). There is no more fertile ground for sowing such deception than religion. The wiser leaders are, the more sceptical they will be about religion, and also the more likely to promote it among their subjects: "They should foster and encourage [religion] even though they be convinced that it is quite fallacious. And the more should they do this the greater their prudence and the more they know of natural laws" (D. I.12.3, 244). Numa, the founder of Rome's religion and its lawgiver, invented the divine source: "Numa . . . pretended to have private conferences with a nymph who advised him about the advice he should give to the people. This was

because he wanted to introduce new institutions to which the city was unaccustomed, and doubted whether his own authority would suffice" (D. I.11.3, 241).

Other successful founders have devised miracles and then lent them the credence of their own authority. Such miracles are confirmed by later leaders whose wisdom resides both in the knowledge that the miracles are false and in their pretense of accepting them as true: "It was owing to wise men having taken note of this that belief in miracles arose and that miracles are held in high esteem even by religions that are false; for to whatever they owed their origin, sensible men made much of them and their authority caused everybody to believe in them" (D.I.12.3, 244). Prophecies and auguries are particularly valuable religious activities because they lend themselves so easily to manipulation by the agents of the state: "When reason told [the priests] that a thing had to be done, they did it anyhow, even should the auspices be adverse. But so adroit were they in words and actions at giving things a twist that they did not appear to have done anything disparaging to religion" (D. I.14.2, 249). The very idea of God may be the founder's necessary political fiction: "Hence wise men, in order to escape this difficulty [of resistance to new laws], have recourse to God. So Lycurgus did; so did Solon, and so have many others done who have had the same end in view. Marvelling, therefore, at Numa's goodness and prudence, the Roman people accepted all his decisions" (D. I.11.4, 241-242). Moses is not named here in the company of founders with whom he often appears in Machiavelli's discussions. But he may be present in disguise as one of the "many others."

Ironically, for Machiavelli, religious deceptions are required because most people are not rational enough to accept the real truths that such deceptions support: "Nor in fact was there ever a legislator, who in introducing extraordinary laws to a people, did not have recourse to God, for otherwise they would not have been accepted, since many benefits of which a prudent man is aware, are not so evident to reason that he can convince others of them" (D. I.11.4, 241-242). Machiavelli's point about truth hidden in the lies of state religion hints at the difficulty of determining where he stands on theological questions.⁶ He clearly rejects the Christianity of his own day as a false "interpretation," one that promotes

⁶The question of Machiavelli's religious views has been debated since the sixteenth century and has received much recent attention. Strauss claims he is a sceptical atheist, while De Grazia insists he is a Christian. Parel and Donaldson see him as reviving ancient pagan religious outlooks, respectively astrology and initiatory mysteries of sacred kingship. In his final chapter, "Biblical Machiavellism: Louis Machon's *Apologie pour Machiavel*," Donaldson unearths and analyzes an obscure seventeenth-century reading of Machiavelli and the Bible with a similar gist to mine. In a work of close to 800 pages commissioned by Cardinal Richelieu, Machon defends those passages in *The Discourses*

the negative values of “*l’ozio*” [better translated as leisure, inactivity, and laziness than “*laissez faire*”]: “But, though it looks as if the world were to become effeminate and as if heaven were powerless, this undoubtedly is due rather to the pusillanimity of those who have interpreted our religion in terms of *laissez faire*, not in terms of *valour*” (D.II.2.6-7 364). If such human interpreters had a more activist and political concept of religion, then Christianity could have more positive effects and hence be more worthy of belief: “For, had they borne in mind that religion permits us to exalt and defend the father land, they would have seen that it also wishes us to love and honour it, and to train ourselves to be such that we may defend it” (D. II.2.6-7, 364).

Machiavelli’s own occasional “God-talk” thus can be read either as deliberate rhetorical pretense or as reference to what he actually intuitively feels as the ultimate driving energy of the universe. In *The Prince* he speculates about the goddess Fortuna, who represents the outcome of random and predictable conditions within which people exert their freedom. This goddess, though finally uncanny and uncontrollable, nevertheless is to be treated as if she can be anticipated, contained, satisfied, and even seduced by human beings with virtue: “. . . fortune . . . shows her power where virtue has not been put in order to resist her . . . fortune is a woman; and it is necessary if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down . . . and one sees that she lets herself be won more by the impetuous than by those who proceed coldly” (P. XXV, 98-101). In other places he refers to this force as a male God and connects it with political activity: “That which is most pleasing to God is that which one does for one’s fatherland . . . God is a lover of strong men because we see that He always punishes the powerless by means of the powerful” (cited by Parel: 56-57).

Not only does Machiavelli’s deity reward virtue in human beings, it actively intervenes in the course of historical events, extending either favor or disfavor toward the cause of its worshippers: “There is a well known passage in which Titus Livy shows . . . the power that heaven exercises over human affairs . . . when it wants a man to take the lead in doing great things, it chooses a man of high spirits and great virtue who will

and *The Prince* most often attacked for impiety. “One may cease to be surprised,” says Machon, “that I draw parallels between Holy Scripture and the works of Machiavelli and that I propose that his strongest and most formidable maxims were drawn from the book of books . . . if one considers that this sacred volume, which should be the study and meditation of all true Christians, teaches princes as well as subjects . . .” (1668 preface, 1-2, trans. and cited by Donaldson: 188). Machon justifies the sovereign’s use of unethical means to establish or maintain power with the notion that the sovereign is privy to mysteries of God’s will never revealed to the populace. Like God and his prophets in the Bible, Machon argues, the Machiavellian ruler must use cruelty, deception, and intimidation to bring about the salvation of his people.

seize the occasion it offers him. And in like manner, when it wants a man to bring about a great disaster, it gives precedence to men who will help to promote it . . .” (D. II.29.1, 444-445). Though this conception of heaven is attributed to Livy, Machiavelli might just as well have found it embodied in the behavior of Moses’ Yahweh, who repeatedly enters history to reward or to punish the Israelite nation. The central arena for such divine activity is the battlefield.

In Genesis Moses’ God is pictured as cosmic creator and destroyer, the king of the universe. But during the life of Moses chronicled in the latter four books of the Torah, Yahweh functions as the king of the emergent Israelite nation and is so addressed. In the later books of Samuel and Kings the role of kingship descends to anointed human rulers like Saul, David, and Solomon. Yet in the language of address and in the manifestations of royal behavior, the demarcations separating these three levels of kingship are often blurred. No matter what level, the essence of kingship is sovereignty or rule, and rule is conceived as the exercise of military power. “King” is synonymous with “general” or “warlord.” Yahweh’s power is established by his victory in battle: “He will say . . . /See now that I, I am He,/and there is no god beside me:/ . . . /when I have whetted my flashing sword,/when I have set my hand to judgement,/then I will punish my adversaries/and take vengeance on my enemies./I will make my arrows drunk with blood,/my sword shall devour flesh,/blood of slain and captives,/the heads of the enemy princes” (Deut. 33:37-42).

Such poetic celebrations of a military God are amplified more than fifty times in the Hebrew Bible with the formula, “Yahweh Sabaoth,” the Lord of Hosts. This title was derived from earlier Canaanite and Babylonian deities who were described as leaders of battalions of followers warring against enemy gods or monsters to bring forth creation. Biblical usage of “Lord of Hosts” at some times refers to God at the forefront of troops of angels and at others as the chief of the armies of the Israelites (Miller: 154-155): “There is none like the god of Jeshurun [= Israel]/who rides the heavens to your help/riding the clouds in his glory/who humbled the gods of old/and subdued the ancient powers/who drove out the enemy before you/and gave the word to destroy” (Deut. 33: 26-27). “The Lord is a warrior,” proclaims the Song of the Sea in Exodus: “The chariots of Pharaoh and his army/ He has cast into the sea;/ the flower of his officers/ are engulfed in the Red Sea” (Exod.15). Moses’ final words of farewell to his people picture a triumphant God of war: “Happy are you, people of Israel, peerless, set free;/the lord is the shield that guards you/the blessed one is your glorious sword/your enemies come cringing to you/and you shall trample their bodies underfoot” (Deut. 33:29).

This conception of kingship is challenged by the later Hebrew

prophets and by some writers of the Christian Bible, but it is revived by Machiavelli: "Thus a prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but the art of war and its orders and discipline; for that is the only art which is of concern to one who commands . . ." He supports this claim with familiar reasoning: physical strength is what teaches lessons, produces belief, creates respect: ". . . for among the other causes of evil that being unarmed brings you, it makes you contemptible, which is one of those infamies the prince should be on guard against . . . For there is no proportion between one who is armed and one who is unarmed, and it is not reasonable that whoever is armed obey willingly whoever is unarmed, and that someone unarmed be secure among armed servants" (P.XIV, 58). The maxim applies not only to princes (i.e., kings) but to prophets like Moses as well: ". . . all the armed prophets conquered and the unarmed ones were ruined . . ." (P.VI, 24).

Yahweh's war-god manifestations range from miraculous interventions as a destroyer of Israel's enemies to mundane advice on logistical procedures. He drowns the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, and he makes the sun stand still while tearing down the walls of Jericho, but these are rare occurrences. More often he is simply credited with ordering victory in a battle fought by Israelite troops: "So the lord said to me [Moses], 'Come, I have begun to deliver Sihon and his territory into your hands. Begin now to occupy his land.' Then . . . the Lord our God delivered him into our hands; we killed him with his sons and all his people . . . thus fulfilling all that the Lord our God had commanded" (Deut. 2:31-37). A less miraculous military function is to inspire panic in Israel's enemies, for example, by fouling their chariot wheels in familiar battlefield mud: ". . . the Lord . . . made them lumber along heavily, so that the Egyptians said, 'It is the Lord fighting for Israel, let us flee'" (Exod. 14:25). In the later books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel, Yahweh also is credited with inspiring fury and bloodthirstiness in his selected heroes and troops: "Then the spirit of the Lord suddenly seized him. He went down to Ashkelon and there he killed thirty men . . ." (Judg. 15:19).

From Machiavelli's perspective there is a practical point to all these incidents of divine participation in Israel's wars: "If an army is to win the day it is essential to give it confidence so as to make it feel sure that it must win, whatever happens . . . The Romans used to inspire their armies with this confidence by means of religion" (D.III 33.1, 554). As he preaches to the troops, Moses repeatedly employs this approach to produce the belief required for military effectiveness: "'You must not dread them nor be afraid of them. The Lord your God who goes at your head will fight for you and he will do again what you saw him do for you in Egypt and in the wilderness' (Deut. 1:29-31) . . . 'At that time also I gave Joshua this charge:

“you have seen with your own eyes all that the Lord your God has done to these two kings; he will do the same to all the kingdoms into which you will cross over. Do not be afraid of them, for the Lord your God himself will fight for you” (Deut. 3:21-22).

Machiavelli reports that the Romans “used auguries and auspices in appointing consuls, in enrolling troops, and when their armies were setting forth or were about to join battle” (D.III.33.2, 554). Likewise, the Israelites “At the command of the Lord . . . encamped, and at his command they struck camp. At the Lord’s command, given through Moses, they remained in attendance on the Lord.” Machiavelli provides a plausible psychological explanation for the compulsive attention to precise detail where military and religious ritual overlap: “And, if he had omitted any of these things a good and wise general would never undertake any action of moment, since he thought he might easily lose unless his troops had first been assured that the gods were on their side . . . in such small things . . . resides the power of keeping soldiers united and confident—which is the primary cause of victory” (D. III 33 2, 555).⁷

⁷In addition to raising morale and strengthening social cohesion, Yahweh’s military leadership has immediate practical application. He instructs Moses to teach his people army-discipline to make them more effective practitioners of the art of war. The first thing that Moses is to do after delivering the commandments is to conduct a census, which determines the aggregate military capacity of Israelites, organizes them into coherent units, and registers them for the draft: “Number the whole community of Israel by families in the father’s line, recording the name of every male person aged twenty years and upwards fit for military service” (Num. 1:2-3). Next he is told how to lay out the encampment in a smart formation designed for efficient command, control, and communication: “The Israelites shall encamp each under his own standard by the emblems of his father’s family; they shall pitch their tents round the Tent of the Presence, facing it. In front of it, on the east, the division of Judah shall be stationed under the standard of its camp by tribal hosts . . . They shall be the first to march” (Num. 2:2-9). The section from chapter 9:15 through chapter 10 in the book of Numbers includes more military lore in a stirring account of the army’s mobilization and departure from Sinai reminiscent of the festive troop catalogues in classical epics: “The Lord spoke to Moses and said: ‘Make two trumpets of beaten silver and use them for summoning the community and for breaking camp. When both are sounded, the whole community shall muster before you at the entrance to the Tent of the Presence. If a single trumpet is sounded, the chiefs who are heads of the Israelite clans shall muster. When you give the signal for a shout, those encamped on the east side are to move off. When the signal is given for a second shout, those on the south are to move off’” (10:2-7). These maneuvers serve both as drill and as invocation of God’s military assistance: “When you go into battle against an invader and are hard pressed by him, you shall raise a cheer when the trumpets sound, and this will serve as a reminder of you before the Lord your God and you will be delivered from your enemies” (10:9). Warfare itself becomes a ritual activity of worship. “The sounding of the trumpets is the duty of the Aaronite priests and shall be a rule binding for all time on your descendants” (10:8). The priests also carry the Tabernacle of the Ark onto the field. Inside it are the Urim and Thurim, sacred lots used for augury, and the Tablets of the Law. On top is the seat where Jahweh travels into the fray, where he serves as palladium and rallying point for his troops. The sacred status of battle is marked by the ritual purification required of soldiers in camp: “When you are encamped against an enemy, you shall be careful to avoid any foulness. When one of your number is unclean because of an emission at night . . . he must go outside the camp . . . With your equipment you will have a trowel, and when you squat outside, you shall scrape a hole with it and then turn and cover your excrement. For the Lord your God goes about in your camp, to keep you safe and to hand over your enemies as you advance, and your camp must be kept holy for fear that he should see something indecent and go with you no further” (Deut. 23:9-14).

The Bible is replete with accounts of another institution of holy war, the *herem* or sacred ban. Moses distinguishes between the treatment of cities that are “at a great distance” and those that are “nearby.” When the former are attacked, they should first be offered peace. If they accept and open their gates, all their inhabitants should be enslaved. If they resist, all the men should be put to the sword, while the rest of population and its wealth may be plundered (Deut. 20:10-14). Those cities, however that are within the land to be conquered, are offered no such mercy: “When the Lord your God delivers them into your power and you defeat them, you must put them to death. You must not make a treaty with them or spare them. You must not intermarry with them, neither giving your daughters to their sons nor taking their daughters for your sons; if you do, they will draw your sons away from the Lord and make them worship other gods. Then the Lord will be angry with you and quickly destroy you” (Deut. 7:1-5).

The wealth of the city cannot be plundered because it is considered “holy” and belongs to the Lord (Josh. 6:18-20). Machiavelli provides a worldly reason for such holy ritual: “when a whole people with all its families leaves a place, driven thence either by famine or by war, and sets out to look for a new home and a new country in which to live . . . it takes possession of every single thing and expels or kills the old inhabitants. This is war of the most cruel and terrifying kind . . . it is essential to get rid of all the inhabitants since they want to live on that on which the others used to live” (D. II.8.1, 378): But even he regards this form of “ethnic cleansing” with a shudder.

I have tried to show that during its earliest history the Israelite nation’s military mission of conquest had a formative influence over its political, social, and religious institutions. The resultant warrior culture appealed to Machiavelli, who in his treatise, *The Art of War*, complained of his compatriots’ lack of respect for the values it represented: “Since military institutions are completely corrupted and have, for a long period, diverged from ancient practises, bad opinions about them have arisen, causing the military life to be despised . . .” (1979: 484). It is clear that when he called for “a rebirth of classical military skill through the imitation of ancient military institutions,” (482) Machiavelli was referring as much to the Hebrews as to the Greeks and Romans.

* * *

The Prince concludes with an oration entitled, “Exhortation to Seize Italy and to Free Her from the Barbarians.” Here some of the techniques of religious rhetoric Machiavelli has previously analyzed are put into application. Biblical references expand and take on new functions. First of

all, Machiavelli as speaker adopts Moses' role. He himself will try to become the liberator of his nation. His exhortation, I believe, is modelled on the closing exhortation of Deuteronomy, chapters 29 and 30. Whereas Moses addresses the people of Israel, Machiavelli addresses Lorenzo de Medici. The last sections of both appeals begin with a description of a nation cursed. Moses predicts the consequences of the Israelites' failure to heed God's commandments: "The next generation . . . will see the plagues of this land and the ulcers which the Lord has brought upon his people, the whole land burnt up with brimstone and salt . . . [The Lord has] uprooted them from their soil in anger . . . and banished them to another land where they are to this day" (29:22-28). So in Machiavelli's jeremiad, his own nation " . . . Italy . . . has been reduced to the condition in which she is at present, which is more enslaved than the Hebrews . . . without a head, without order, beaten, despoiled, torn, pillaged, and having endured ruin of every sort" (P. XXVI, 102).

Immediately after this curse, Moses promises the blessings of political and economic prosperity to those who will obey God, emphasizing their freedom of choice and assuring them that the task is not as hard as it might seem: "The commandment that I lay on you this day is not too difficult for you, it is not too remote. It is not in heaven that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to fetch it and tell it to us, so that we can keep it . . .' It is a thing very near to you, upon your lips and in your heart ready to be kept" (30:11-14). Following suit, Machiavelli insists on the feasibility of Italy's salvation: "One may see how she prays to God to send her someone to redeem her from these barbarous cruelties and insults. One may also see her ready and disposed to follow a flag, provided that there be someone to pick it up . . . This is not very difficult if you summon up the actions and lives of those named above [Moses, Cyrus and Theseus]" (P. XXVI, 102-103).

At this point Machiavelli invokes an additional parallel. Speaking as the hortatory Moses of Deuteronomy, he urges Lorenzo to play the other Moses, the armed prophet of Exodus: "And although these men are rare and marvelous, nonetheless they were men, and each of them had less opportunity than the present; for their undertaking was not more just than this one, nor easier, nor was God more friendly to them than to you" (P. XXVI, 103). And if, like the Moses of Exodus, Lorenzo should prove hesitant to take up the call, Machiavelli effects the final switch and takes on the role of Moses' teacher: "Besides this, here may be seen extraordinary things without example, brought about by God: the sea has opened; a cloud has escorted you along the way; the stone has poured forth water; here manna has rained; everything has concurred in your greatness. The remainder you must do yourself. God does not want to do everything, so

as not to take free will from us and that part of the glory that falls to us” (103). In the Dedicatory Letter of the Preface to *The Prince*, Machiavelli had addressed Lorenzo as the Thunderer on Sinai: “And if your Magnificence will at some time turn your eyes from the summit of your height to these low places, you will learn how undeservedly I endure a great and continuous malignity of fortune.” Here at the end, he can at least redeem himself from such abasement by identifying his own voice with the one from the burning bush.

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