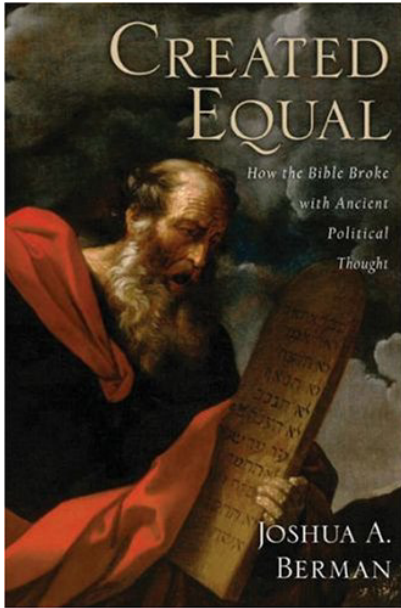


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Berman, Joshua A.

Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought

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Joshua Berman's monograph, which deals with notions of egalitarianism in a variety of texts mostly from the Pentateuch, must be approached with the volume's subtitle in mind. His discussion does not suggest that the biblical authors consciously broke with ancient norms but that the texts they produced combine to create a literary world full of revolutionary concepts. Berman's study emphasizes two persistent and interrelated themes within these texts: that the Pentateuch suggests a social ideal where each individual within Israel is accountable to only one single divine sovereign; and that the Pentateuch deploys rhetoric that promotes the inherent equality of all Israelites.

Berman's discussion is divided into chapters that address the matter of egalitarianism in the Pentateuch alongside related or comparable texts from the ancient world. Chapter 1 ("Egalitarian Theology") takes up the social implications of divine hierarchies in Ugarit and Mesopotamia and the relationship between humans and the divine in those cultures over against the theology of the Genesis: humanity is created to serve the gods in the former but to increase its own potential in the latter. The discussion is extended to the narratives regarding the Sinai covenant in Exodus and its renewal/preservation in Deuteronomy compared with the model of suzerainty treaties from older cultures in the ancient Near East. Berman draws upon the well-known studies demonstrating the formal

similarities between the Sinai covenant and these treaties but ultimately highlights how the Pentateuchal version sidelines the monarchic hierarchy and directs the treaty form to the common Israelite:

Only through the sublimation of the metaphysical standing of the monarchy in Israel could the biblical texts, particularly the Pentateuch, achieve a reformulation of social and political thought along egalitarian lines—a reformulation whereby the common man was transformed from a mere servant of kings into one who stands in honor before the Almighty as nothing less than a servant king. (49)

Chapter 2 delves further into this line of inquiry by examining Deuteronomy as a political mandate supporting the liberty of individuals within a collective environment. Berman argues for the importance of reading Deuteronomy as a coherent discourse on social equality within Israel that nullifies a vast array of hierarchies. He suggests that Deuteronomy provides mechanisms to ensure that the potential trappings of the offices of king, priest/Levite, and judge remain in check. To cite one example, Berman notes that Deut 16:18–20 charges the *public* with the responsibilities of proper jurisprudence precisely because any individual may be called upon to serve as a judge (70). This provides a corollary to Deuteronomy’s rejection of clan structures (73–78), monarchic authority (59–64), and priestly prerogatives (64–68). All Israelites, not a brigade of elites, are responsible for the welfare of the nation. Chapter 3 (“Egalitarianism and Assets”) applies the same principles to the economic conditions of ancient Near Eastern life, with an emphasis on the issue of land tenure, debt arising from crop failure, and systems of support within communities as envisioned by the pentateuchal laws. The biblical law codes that preserve economic equality, Berman observes, are unique in the ancient world insofar as they alone are presented as divine revelation, and it is only through the regulation of time created by these laws that individual liberties are secured over against the hierarchies of typical ancient monarchies (100–101).

Chapter 4 (“Egalitarian Technology”) contributes to the hotly contested subject of literacy in ancient Israel, as Berman considers the Pentateuch’s presentation of the accessibility of its own contents to the Israelite public against the secrecy and elitism of literacy found throughout the ancient world. After surveying the comparative evidence from Egypt and Mesopotamia that attests to the divisions in class sustained by the sequestered nature of literature and literacy (110–14), Berman looks to biblical examples in which literacy and its benefits were not limited to a small circle of scribes or the ruling elite. While admitting that it is impossible to know the extent to which the Israelite public had access to sacred texts, he notes that “only in the rhetoric of the Bible is the message of the text addressed outwardly toward an entire people” (121). Evidence from Exodus, Deuteronomy, and

works outside of the Pentateuch such as Jeremiah present a society where writing is a public trust.

The final chapter of the book (“Egalitarianism and the Evolution of Narrative”) provides a novel approach to the narrative of Moses’ birth compared to the Sargon legend. Though Berman notes the close similarities, he demonstrates that the manner in which these similarities unfold presuppose vastly different understandings of the very medium of expression. The Sargon narrative is revealed as structured to highlight the exalted status of its central personality, while the Moses narrative emphasizes tensions and uncertainties that place every character (including Moses) on a level narrative playing field (144–49). Even Pharaoh’s daughter wrestles with the weight of her conscience, with the narrative humanizing her as much as Moses’ biological mother and thus deflating class division between royals and slaves (151, 155).

This final chapter involves a literary analysis and includes a consideration of art history on the Moses tale to augment this analysis (159–65); as such, it may at first appear relatively pedestrian in the context of Berman’s larger enterprise. But this final chapter is in some ways a test case for the observations in the preceding discussion. It is a study in how the force of the Pentateuch’s intellectual and social innovations collectively affect the manner in which the authors even conceive of narrative. The move from the first-person form of the Sargon tale to the third-person form of the Moses story establishes objectivity; the humanization of all the characters provides access to their inner thoughts; the crossing of ethnic boundaries as the narrative follows the character of Moses from Israelite families to the Egyptian court (and back) blur social hierarchies—all of these things, Berman argues, introduce the reader to Moses as the outstanding personality of the Pentateuch, who, like all Israelites, is a subject of YHWH (166). Akin to the purpose of the legal collections he discusses, Berman suggests that the narrative style of the Pentateuch may be understood as a polemic against the type of society usually reinforced by the tradition of royal inscriptions both in terms of form and content (165).

Berman concludes his monograph with a discussion of how these features in the Pentateuch combined to create a concept of society that is sustained “through the merits of its members, rather than on the basis of the authority of its power brokers” (169), leaving the reader with this final sentiment:

If there was one truth the ancients held to be self-evident it was that all men were not created equal. If we maintain today that, in fact, they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, then it is because we have inherited as part of our cultural heritage notions of equality that were deeply entrenched in the ancient passages of the Pentateuch. (175)

Berman's terminology here, that these notions are "deeply entrenched" within the Pentateuch, embodies the nuance of his reading strategy. The concepts he discusses and their political and philosophical ramifications are features of the Pentateuch as a *fait accompli*; they are not reflections of the deliberate design of the pentateuchal writers. At no point does Berman argue that ancient Israel was itself radically different from the other ancient Near Eastern cultures that surrounded it. Indeed, he acknowledges that the pentateuchal vision of society differs markedly from other major texts in the Hebrew Bible that reveal the types of hierarchies that he suggests the Pentateuch dismantles. To a degree, this acknowledgement could be applied to the pentateuchal materials he evaluates as well. Certainly, the study of biblical law in recent years demonstrates sharp polemical tones that serve partisan interests and did suggest hierarchies where one scribal group sought to marginalize the influence of another. And while Berman's analysis of the Moses narrative is illuminating, other narratives—the Joseph tale, for example—may yield a rather different picture regarding rank and class within Israelite society, demonstrating competition between Judah and the Joseph tribes for sociopolitical priority. It would be intriguing to evaluate the decidedly nonegalitarian material such as the features of the aforementioned Joseph tale or the authority of the Aaronides in Lev 10:10–11 and to determine their function within an ostensible egalitarian vision of society.

Berman's monograph raises these and other questions regarding the distinctions between authors, composition, content, and the persistence of collective memory, and this is to the work's credit. Many scholars suggest that the earliest Israelites defined themselves in contradistinction to late Bronze Age urban Canaanite culture as they appeared in the highlands of the central hinterland and tilled the soil with an egalitarian ethic. One may wonder whether or not the redactors of the Pentateuch, living in an imperial context and aware of the failings of Israel's own monarchic past, consciously drew from this ancient stream of egalitarian tradition in constructing a sacred national epic, one that notably combines disparate and hitherto competing legal codes and ethical mandates. *Created Equal* thus contributes to biblical studies well beyond the goal expressed in the volume's subtitle, providing new ways to look into the diverse ideological landscape of the biblical writers and redactors. Any scholar interested in the intellectual history of Israel will benefit tremendously from this sophisticated and substantial contribution to the field.