
The notion of the distinctiveness of ancient Israel—of the stark contrast between biblical literature and the writings of the ancient Near East—is difficult to sustain in contemporary academic biblical studies. It must be done carefully, either with an elaborate and rigorous methodological apparatus, as Robert Kawashima has recently demonstrated, or with careful attention to nuance so as not to overdraw the comparison, as Jon D. Levenson has shown. Reading Joshua Berman’s book, Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought, may feel like a throwback to an earlier mode of thought exemplified by Yehezkel Kaufmann and G. Ernest Wright, in which ancient Israel radically diverges from the cultures that surround it. For Berman, it is biblical ideology that stands firmly in opposition to the thought patterns of Israel’s neighbors; though it is never stated outright, biblical ideology is clearly valued positively (as egalitarian, democratic) while non-Israelite thought patterns are valued negatively (as hierarchical, feudal). It is Berman’s overstating of these contrasting themes and his glossing over any detracting elements which he himself notes—most importantly, the fact that the word “egalitarian” in this context applies only to free-born, male Israelites—that obscure some very legitimate insights and arguments found throughout the book. Created Equal nonetheless is a helpful synthesis of much that has been written about the way biblical texts both resemble and depart from the surrounding cultures in which they were embedded. But Berman accomplishes more than that in his monograph: by highlighting the threads of biblical “egalitarian” thought and placing them within the context of western political thought, Berman rightfully dislocates classical Greece as the sole source of western democracy, showing that Near Eastern notions of God, the “state,” and distributive justice—as reflected and refracted in biblical texts—earn a place among the most revered Athenian philosophies. Berman’s chapters each address a discrete field of study: Chapter 1, “Egalitarian Theology,” argues that the primary relationship between humans and the divine is reformulated from a “celebration of social hierarchy” (21) through the notion of the covenant to create a cosmic origin for an “egalitarian social order” (29). Chapter 2, “Egalitarian Politics,” examines the book of Deuteronomy as a “statement of principles and the broad contours of an ideal regime” (53)—one which advocates for a “collective power strategy, with its emphasis on the people as a whole and its relatively egalitarian agenda” (56). Chapter 3, “Egalitarianism and Assets,” looks to the biblical law codes for “a prescription for an economic order that seeks to minimize the distinctions of class based on wealth and instead seeks to ensure the economic benefit of the common citizen” (82). Chapter 4, “Egalitarian Technology,” demonstrates how within the Pentateuch’s rhetoric, “reading and writing were not viewed as the exclusive domain of a scribal class and ruling court, as was the case for Israel’s neighbors” (116). And finally Chapter 5, “Egalitarianism and the Evolution of Narrative,” turns to the ideology of biblical narrative, unearthing a “narration in service of covenant theology” which “explore[s]
character and the complexity of the human condition, over against the dominant
mythic and epic traditions of the ancient Near East” (143). The chapters cover the
gamut of Pentateuchal texts, persuasively demonstrating that the thread of “egalitarian”
thought—the significance imputed to the people themselves as opposed to leaders,
deities, or the wealthy—is not limited to one particular genre of writing but stands
as a cornerstone of biblical ideology.

Although Berman’s close textual readings and chapter-by-chapter arguments are
strong and convincing, the central weakness that pervades the book and threatens to
align it with the overstated biblical exceptionalism I mentioned above is method-
ological: Berman selectively uses comparative history to distinguish the Pentateuch
from much of ancient Near Eastern culture and simultaneously to leave it hanging in
a historical no-man’s land. In the Introduction, Berman clearly articulates his meth-
odological process: rather than looking at distinct biblical sources diachronically, he
“examine[s] the text of the Pentateuch in its received form, at the conclusion of the
editorial and redaction processes, with little attention to what its prehistory may have
been” (8). Attention to the final form of the Pentateuch is certainly justifiable, for the
Torah was undoubtedly edited into an integrated whole intended to be read as some-
thing greater than a mere collection of fragments. Berman argues that in reading the
Bible holistically, we can gain a greater understanding of “biblical religion,” by which
he means “the vision—idealized, at times—of the concepts and institutional blueprint
for Israelite society that one may derive from a reading of the texts” (7). Does this
vision of “biblical religion” emerge from the afterlife of the Pentateuchal text, the text
as read and received by “one” in the present? Berman’s frequent invocations of enlight-
enment philosophers, novels, and American political history would lead a reader to
believe that this is precisely what he means—that “biblical religion” serves in many
ways as a precursor to, and a source of, our own democratic and egalitarian ideals. If
this is the case, Berman’s consistent use of parallel texts from the ancient Near East
(most often from the second millennium B.C.E.) is surprising. The comparative
method implies historical conclusions—or, if not strictly historical, literary conclu-
sions which are steeped in historical context. Berman remarks that indeed he wishes
to “analyze these texts … in light of the geopolitical domain of the ancient Near East”
(9). He in fact associates the Pentateuch’s “eschewing” of social classes and “reworking”
of older, ancient Near Eastern writings with the “European revolutions of the eigh-
teenth and nineteenth centuries” (5). But texts can neither eschew, nor rework, nor
revolt. Berman’s language thus begs historical questions—who were the agents behind
this formidable Pentateuch who redacted, reformulated, and reshaped ancient political
thought in ways that so resonate with our own sensibilities? What could have
motivated them to do so? Berman chooses to thoroughly obscure this part of the pic-
ture, never mentioning the exile or the Persians or the burgeoning nation-building in
which the early returnees to the Promised Land would have been immersed. *Created
Equal* wants to have it both ways: to have a Pentateuch that reacts to and improves
upon the specific cultural heritage of the ancient Near East but also a Pentateuch that