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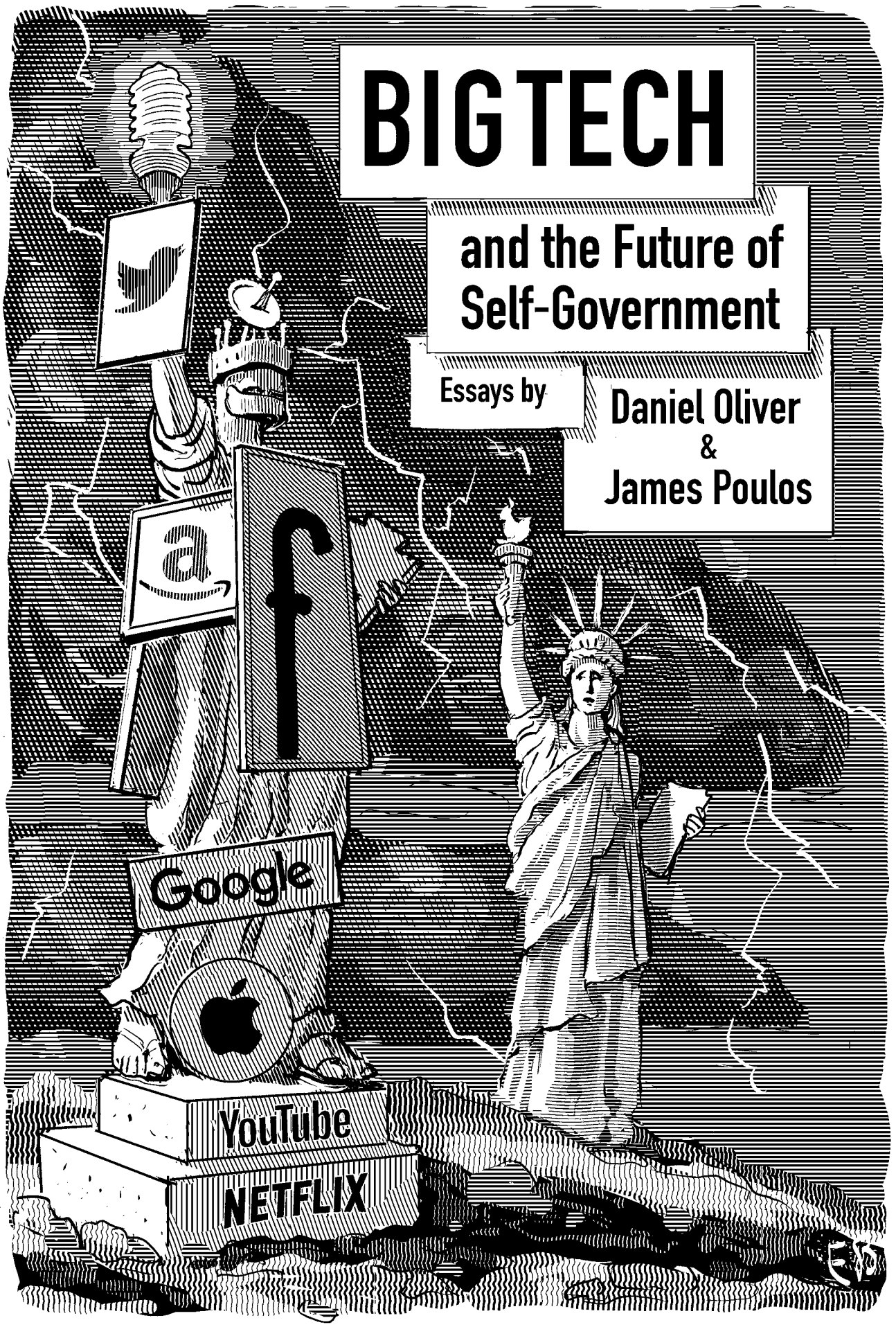

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Book Review by Michael S. Kochin

Before the Law

Founding God's Nation: Reading Exodus, by Leon R. Kass.
Yale University Press, 752 pages, $40

"All honor to the Old Testament! I find in it great human beings, a heroic landscape, and something of the very rarest quality in the world, the incomparable naïveté of the *strong heart*; what is more, I find a people."

—Friedrich Nietzsche,
On the Genealogy of Morals

Founding God's nation: reading exodus is political philosopher Leon Kass's second volume on the Bible, after his 2003 commentary, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*. In both books, he aims to read the Hebrew Bible "philosophically"—that is, in search of wisdom. In the case of the Book of Exodus, this wisdom is revealed in God's legislation and Moses' acts as prophet and ruler.

Kass's Moses is first motivated by moral outrage, and then by wonder: moral outrage at the Egyptian oppression of the Israelites, and wonder at the bush that burns but is not consumed. Moses receives his commission from God, but fills in the Lord's orders with notions of his own—at times successfully, at times disastrously, as in his first confrontation with Pharaoh (5:1-23) or in the blood covenant with which he attempts to seal Israel to the law (24:4-12).

Kass forces readers to compare the commentator with the prophet: like Moses fostered in Pharaoh's palace, Kass tells us he was brought up apart from the primary traditions of Israel, raised in a secular home on Yiddish rather than Hebrew and science rather than tradition, and never, in his youth, reading the Bible. Kass came to the Bible by teaching it at the University of Chicago as a great book, alongside other great books that he taught in order to seek wisdom. Now, at 82, he presents what he learned in the desert.

Philosophical interpretation of scripture among Jews goes back at least to Philo in the first century. Like philosophy itself, scripture's philosophical interpretation has always been marginal to traditional Jewish experience, which, once one has assured the means of supporting a family, is almost entirely taken up by legalistic study of the law, retelling of the myths (in Rabbinic Hebrew, *agaddot)* with the help of commentators such as Rashi, and participation in the rituals.

Kass's book asks important questions of the text, and offers sensible and sometimes innovative answers. If the book is translated into Hebrew, it will live forever as a commentary on the text alongside other philosophic commentaries such as those of Gersonides (1288–1344) and Abarbanel (1437–1508). Everyone who aims to think about the text will do well to consult Kass. To start with small examples, Kass is the first, to my knowledge, to notice that Moses is the only crying baby in the Bible, and the first to note that Moses' conversation with God during the theophany of the burning bush is the longest conversation in the Torah.

Exodus, claims Kass, is "the foundational political text": it tells us how the people of

Israel entered into "a new order of law and peoplehood." The Exodus story is of universal and permanent significance, because it is through the story of God's people, Israel, that all peoples come to know Israel's God, who created heaven and earth and chose Israel to be the subject of His law. It is God's intention, as Kass states, that through his "kingdom of priests and holy nation" the nations of the world come to know Him and his intentions for them.

Contrary to french philosopher Rémi Brague, Kass contends that we cannot hope to understand the laws of God—the laws that God himself obeys—but only the laws that God, through Moses, gave to His people Israel. As Kass writes: "We should redirect our desire to 'know God' away from philosophy and theology (speech about God) and attend instead to what He reveals of Himself 'in history,' to what *He says* to and *does* for human beings" (emphasis in original). For Kass this "We should" is categorical, and replaces the philosopher's imperative, as Leo Strauss put it, to inquire "*Quid sit deus?*" (What is God?).

The wisdom uncovered by Kass in his reading of Exodus is moral wisdom, or more precisely, the wisdom behind the moral law: not least that "there is a power beyond man-made law and custom—and a notion of natural right—that sets limits on what law and custom can sanction or justify." Kass judges God-made law according to the standards of natural right: "God's ordinances for Israel represent a giant step toward a more humane jurisprudence and a more moral way of life." That knowledge of right and wrong must be empowered by law to become authority—"the voice of reason backed up by the threat of force." Revolted slaves might understandably feel that "all cops are bastards," but the legislator must bring them to obey the command that "in all of your gates you will appoint judges and police" (Deuteronomy 16:18). Moses himself, at the suggestion of his gentile father-in-law, Jethro, appoints taxiarchs and centurions, pentarchs and decarchs (Exodus 18:13-26).

Kass, for his part, rejects the notion that Exodus is simply a slave code for the Israelites, who having been slaves to Pharaoh will now eternally be slaves to a more powerful and even more jealous Master. If Exodus is the great story of liberation, it must be more, Kass argues, than a slave revolt in morality. "Serving God, unlike serving Pharaoh," Kass claims, "is the opposite of servility."

Kass's only consistent methodological canon is to take the book of Exodus as "an integrated whole, with a coherent order and plan." The Bible, he avers, does not provide rules for how to read it. He does not take up the rabbis' claim that the procedure for determining the correct reading, at least of the Bible's legal portions, is established by Deuteronomy 17:8-13. Kass simply asserts that "access to the truth [Exodus] might contain does not require prior faith, prior traditional or religious commitments, or reliance on outside authorities."

Kass reads Exodus as if he were reading Homer's *Iliad*, with no commitment to the work's historicity but only to its coherence and unity. He explicitly places the claim of the divine or inspired character of Exodus on a level with the claim of the divine or inspired status of the *Iliad*. He accepts what he calls the "cultural" prohibition on the worship of other gods, but asserts that the book of Exodus does not teach "philosophical monotheism"—the claim that the God who called Israel "my son, my firstborn" is the only God who exists. Kass claims Exodus teaches merely that Israel's God, Creator of heaven and earth, is the only God the Israelites are to worship.

"The book of Exodus," Kass writes, "does not say it can be understood only within the tradition." He concedes to tradition the idea that Exodus is the sequel to Genesis, but apart from Genesis he uses or ignores texts and traditions as suits his purpose. Having admitted this aspect of extra-textual tradition, Kass makes no consistent decision on whether to read Exodus independent of the rest of the Biblical canon or within the entire canon; in the context of modern scholarship's knowledge of the ancient Near East or with only what Exodus and Genesis reveal about the ancient Near East. He contrasts with one of his main influences, the Italian-Israeli Biblicist Umberto Cassuto, who coherently and methodically applied to Exodus the tools of the science of literature as he understood it. Kass also contrasts with Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), who expounded the Bible as a source of wisdom according to canons of interpretation he himself laid out in *Guide of the Perplexed*. In crafting and applying his canons Maimonides availed himself of the full resources of the rabbinic tradition, whereas Kass is eclectic—perhaps willfully so.

"Israel," kass claims, "is distinguished from other communities by its gratitude for worldly blessings and by its moderate mores and ways—against the opposed extremes of the rational mastering will and the chaos of Dionysian wildness." Yet it is the reader of Friedrich Nietzsche (whose name does not appear in this commentary) who knows of the pairing of "what the Greeks called Apollo and Dionysius." Readers of Homer might wonder about Kass's identification of animal sacrifice with the Dionysian: in the first book of the *Iliad*, the Greeks atone for their trespass against Apollo's priest by offering a hecatomb to Apollo. The Greek poets too preached against both the extremes of rationalism and of chaos.

Kass concludes his commentary on the foundational book of the eternal people of Israel with a peroration addressed to the transient problems of another people:

> Can a people endure and flourish if it lacks a shared national story, accepted law and morals, and an aspiration to something higher than its own comfort and safety? Can a devotion to technological progress, economic prosperity, and private pursuits of happiness sustain us when our story is contested, our morals weakened, and our national dedication abandoned? I doubt it…. [W]e are feasted in body but famished in soul, and our national fabric is unraveling.

Can what God did through Moses to make a people be done to refound a people, without direct revelation, signs, and wonders? What does God want those of us who have heard His word through His prophets to say to those who have not? To quote the Coen Brothers' Rabbi Nachtner, "He hasn't told me."

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