A
again and again, the prophet Jer-
miah reminds us, “The Lord of
Hosts, the God of Israel” tells his
people that if they mend their
ways, “oppress not the stranger, the father-
less, and the widow, and shed not inno-
cent blood... [and] neither walk after other
gods to your hurt, then I will cause you to
dwell in this place, in the land that I gave
to your fathers, for ever and ever.”

Enjoined as well to fight oppression and
“let justice well up like water, righteous-
ness like an unfailing stream,” the biblical
Israelites established moral standards,
legal codes and rules for warfare. Primarily
a religious book, political theorist Michael
Walzer (a professor emeritus at the Insti-
tute for Advanced Study in Princeton,
New Jersey, and the author of The Revolu-
tion of the Saints, Spheres of Justice and Just
and Unjust Wars, among many other books) observes, the Bible is also a political
book. But, he argues, although biblical
writers are engaged with politics, they
tend to be indifferent, or even hostile, to it.

In In God’s Shadow, Walzer illuminates
the forms politics and political thought
took in Israel’s religious culture and locates
kings, priests and prophets, mercenaries,
magistrates and “the people” in regimes
that have (or assume) divine connections
and during the experience of exile.

A belief in God’s sovereignty and his
active engagement in the world, Walzer
concludes, did not leave much room for
the everyday politics of negotiation, com-
promise and half loaves or inspire confi-
dence in the capacity for self-government
of a covenanted community. Focused on
obedience to God’s law, he writes, the
prophets subjected Israel far more often
to “absolute judgment than conditional
assessment and counsel.”

In God’s Shadow is full of arresting (albeit
controversial) claims. Walzer indicates that
the Bible portrays Israel before the reign of
kings as a land of danger and chaos.

“Under the strain of emergency,” the
elders (whose identity and source of power
is murky) ignored Samuel’s admonition that
a king would tax them, seize their
lands and vineyards, make them (and
their children) his servants (“as ye were
the servants of Pharaoh”). They chose a
king and an eternal dynastic succession.

Unlike the monarchs of some of Israel’s
neighbors, however, he was regarded as a
“human artifact,” existing “in the space of
secular time, which is the space of normal
politics.”

Emphasizing that the conviction that
God’s rule is better than the rule of kings
survived, Walzer suggests that prophecy
was “born together with monarchy less
divine law have no voice in the world”
and royal immorality go unnoticed and
unpunished.

The Bible, Walzer points out, does not
present a coherent view of God’s relation-
ships with other nations. Omnipotent,
and also angry and frustrated, God uses
them to punish Israel. The connection
sometimes seems more than instrumental,
with biblical writers deeming the king of
Babylon God’s “servant” and the king of
Persia his “shepherd” and even his
“anointed.” And yet, these nations will
themselves be punished. They are not
“suffering servants” and “serve God only
in their triumphs.”

In exile, of course, Israel was no longer
in control of its collective destiny. The actions
Israelites took to remain a com-

munity (with regard to marriage, diet,
worship, Sabbath observance etc.), also
made them vulnerable to accusations of
those like Haman (who Walzer nominates
as “the first anti-Semite”) that a people
who are “scattered abroad” and separate
themselves from others are vicious.

According to Walzer, exile increased
communal support for political passivity
and accommodation – and for a redefini-
tion of the covenant as an individual
moral commitment. Although Diaspora
Jews never ceased dreaming of a return to
Israel, for a time the strategy seemed to
serve them well.

Although the social ethic of the
prophets can be (and has been) under-
stood as a political program, Walzer insists
that nowhere in the Bible is it presented as
such (making it all the more puzzling that
he characterizes Israel as an “almost
democracy”).

Its “enduring radicalism,” he acknowl-
edges, may well be attributable to these
absences, which for centuries have invited
men and women to freely imagine what a
good society would look like and how to get
there. More often, he claims, it resulted in
“attacks on the existing order without any
concrete or practical alternative in mind,”
with vehemence masking a passivity toward
existing social hierarchies and “the fantasy-
ridden character of their politics.”

Walzer knows that “there are no authorita-
tive understandings of the Bible.” And that
serious textual analysis is “a complex and
speculative business.” He believes that “great
scholars can make educated guesses,” but
presents himself as an “ordinary reader”
who “must get by with less educated guess-
es.” He need not be so modest. In God’s Shadow
is elegant and erudite. Anyone interested
in assessing the ideas about politics, govern-
ment and law in the Bible should read it.

The writer is the Thomas and Dorothy
Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cor-
nell University.