Does the Bible teach anarchism?

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I first learned about anarchism back in the 1970s. My wife Kathleen and I got involved with an activist group opposed to Jimmy Carter's decision to reinstate registration for the draft in order to "show resolve" to the Soviet Union (this is one of the darker aspects of Carter's presidential legacy—a cynical but failed attempt to hold off the political threat from the right that remains thirty-some years later an important element in the socialization of young people into our national security state). We met a young couple, Karl and Linda, who had just moved to our hometown, Eugene, Oregon, to be part of the rising anarchist movement there.

I had typical superficial stereotypes of anarchists as mindless terrorists (it was an "anarchist," after all, who had shot President McKinley). I was disabused of that superficial antipathy in conversations with Karl and Linda and also in seeing their lives. They were compassionate, committed to social justice, and (Linda, at least) thoroughly nonviolent. They were pretty negative about Christianity, but were interested to learn to know about our Anabaptist convictions.

About the same time, I took a class on the history of political theory at the University of Oregon—and the professor treated anarchism as a serious political philosophy that needed to be considered alongside the other more mainstream approaches. It might have been as part of that class the I read George Woodcock's fascinating book, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*.

I have not traveled very far down the anarchist path in these past decades, but I have remained interested in and sympathetic toward this political orientation. Writers such as James C. Scott, Noam Chomsky, and Rebecca Solnit, whose anarchistically-inclined books I have read for reasons other than direct articulation of anarchism, have kept my interest alive. And then, when I learned about the Jesus Radicals website and movement, I started to realize that there was some genuine compatibility between the evolving political perspective I have been constructing and at some articulations of anarchism.

Anarchism and the Bible

One of the new ideas for me has been to think that perhaps we could say that anarchistic sensibilities (in our present day sense of what those involve) are embedded in the biblical story from start to finish. I want in this post to begin to sketch an argument to support this idea.

For the sake of this conversation, let's define "anarchism" as (1) the belief in living without a centralized state and (2) the belief in organizing society on a voluntary, cooperative basis without recourse to force or compulsion. The term "anarchism" for a political philosophy based on these ideas only arose sometime during the 19th century. It has gotten a pretty negative reputation because of being associated with revolutionary violence in the service of actually overthrowing the state. However, many of anarchism's most important thinkers, while not as a rule thoroughgoing pacifists, have not been advocates of widespread violence.

Because of anarchism's recent emergence as a discrete political theology, it would be highly anachronistic to see the Bible as overtly teaching it. However, my sense is that if we use a looser definition of anarchism and focus on the positive—a view of political life that is not state centered and that understands human life as best organized in decentralized, non-coercive ways—we might be able to discern anarchistic tendencies in the Bible. At least this is my hypothesis.

To begin to test the hypothesis, I will simply list a number of biblical themes that support the idea that the Bible's politics has quite a bit in common with at least some elements of anarchist

thought. I will focus on the general storyline of the Bible more than on proof texts or direct commands in testing this notion.

Starting with Genesis

We may start with the creation story in Genesis 1–3. It is notable, in contrast with other ancient near eastern creation stories, that the picture here does not valorize a human king as the center of human life at its beginning. Nor are conflict and violence at the heart of things. The picture is quite egalitarian—"male and female"—and the human beings are pictured as God's partners with the vocation to relate to one another and the rest of creation in cooperative, peaceable ways. "It was good" is a statement about what appears to be a harmonious, mutually respectful, and creative environment. Human beings are powerful and responsible.

What follows in Genesis, then, is a story of brokenness and destruction, followed by a new creative effort by God to call into being a community that will witness to God's peace and continue the vocation present in the original creation of "blessing all the families of the earth" (Gen 12). Though there is a kind of "fall" that happens when Eve and Adam eat the forbidden fruit, human begins ultimately remain as God's partners with the task of serving God in creative work. And this work, again, does not require a centralized state and human power elite.

The leaders for the Hebrew people in the generations following the call of Abraham and Sarah and the beginning of their peoplehood are not kings and princes, nor are they generals and warriors. They are normal people who establish that this people and their vocation are distinct from the politics of a state or kingdom.

The first state leader we meet in the Bible is Egypt's Pharaoh, who befriends Abraham and Sarah's great-grandson Joseph. The initial impression we get of Pharaoh is benign. He heeds Joseph's advice and comes up with a shrewd plan that provides sustenance for Joseph's family and many others during a time of great famine. We also read, though, that in payment for the help he offers, he takes over the land of the people who he helps. This foreshadows what the Bible portrays as the norm for kingdoms—take and take, centralize power, ultimately enslave.

The politics of the exodus and Torah

This tendency of kingdoms (and states) becomes tragically clear as the story continues in the book of Exodus. The foundational moment in the entire story of God's people Israel comes when God intervenes to lead the people to freedom from the domination of the centralized and oppressive power of Pharaoh—who, we learn as the story continues, is all too typical of the power elite in the kingdoms and nations of the world (and, also tragically, all too typical of the Hebrews' kingdom when they turn toward the ways of the world).

The exodus story tells of the corruption inherent in centralized top-down kingdom power. The God of the Hebrews is revealed to the people as a liberating God who rejects such centralized top-down power. The coercive patterns seen in Pharaoh's response to the tensions as the Hebrews resist are portrayed in the Bible as the norm for kingdoms, including the kingdoms of God's people. That is, the picture here and reiterated throughout is a picture of the inherent problems of state power.

Alongside the critique of state power, though, we also see in the exodus story hints of an alternative approach to political life. The people do need a human leader to guide them in their resistance, ultimately to their freedom. But their leader is not a king, not even a great warrior. He's Moses, a prophet, essentially armed only with his voice, his wit, and his trust in God. As the story continues, we learn that Moses does exercise leadership, but he is not made a king. His authority is based on the work he does, a charismatic, not structural kind of authority. And he is also accountable to the ethical core of the society, revealed in Torah. The account is a bit cryptic, but in the end Moses somehow violates that ethical core and dies without leading the people into the promised land. And there is no dynasty. The leadership that follows is also based on charisma, not a permanent structure of power.

We could call the political philosophy implied in the exodus story a kind of "theo-politics." The center is not human power structures but the message of the prophet who speaks for God. This is a complicated idea, because usually a "theocracy" requires a king to be the god's human agent of power, a relationship that actually reinforces human leaders' power. But in Israel, the core is ethical, not power structures. This ethical core is seen in the teaching of Torah.

The political philosophy of the books of the law (Exodus through Deuteronomy) surely is complicated and, even, not necessarily fully coherent. However, the general assumption seems to be to be, at least somewhat, in line with the second part of our definition of anarchism: "the belief in organizing society on a voluntary, cooperative basis without recourse to force or compulsion. " The structure of the society is quite decentralized with an ethical core—not order or submission to authority so much as care for the vulnerable and power's accountability to the community's vocation to be healthy and largely egalitarian.

There is one brief acknowledgement of the possibility of having a human king (Deuteronomy 17), but the king's authority is greatly constrained. One gets the sense, in reading the story as a whole, that the role of Deuteronomy 17 is mostly to provide a basis for sharp critique of the actual kings. Note that already with Solomon, only Israel's third king, the requirements for a godly king were systematically violated. The law codes also do not make allowance for a standing army or elite military class and contain Sabbath regulations that would prevent the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few and the disinheritance of the many.

Being established in the land

The story of the entry of the Hebrews into the promised land tell of horrendous violence and provides for a moral dilemma for biblical people. However, we need to notice a few things that do nonetheless reinforce the political message we get prior to that event. The human leadership of the community remains charismatic and ad hoc. There is no king, no permanent military class. The victory is God's alone; the political core of the society remains Torah. And the possession of the land is from the start said to be contingent upon faithfulness to the ethical message of Torah.

As it turns out, the entry into and possession of the promised land leaves a mostly negative legacy with the tradition. The story actual gives the picture that carrying on the promise is not compatible with becoming a nation like the other nations. God and Torah do not remain at the center of the community. Initially, the community is structured as a loose confederation of decentralized tribes. But this does not last. The community's elders do accept the emergence of a

power elite, a military class, and the economics of exploitation and aggrandizement of the few at the expense of the many.

A key moment is portrayed in the book of 1 Samuel where, in a time of instability, the community's leaders take the decisive step of asking God for a king so they could be "like the other nations." In 1 Samuel 8, a sharp critique of kingly power is voiced, but in the end God relents. As it turns out, Samuel's warnings are borne out—the kings take and take, and the people end up, figuratively at least, back in Egypt. This choice for a human king is portrayed as a kind of rejection of God's kingship—with the latter being a kind of metaphor, it appears, for the decentralized, Torah-centered character of the community up until that time.

Early on, the king's exploitation of his people leads to a terrible split in the community, and two separate kingdoms emerge—Israel and Judah. Tragically, even Israel, originally the dissenting kingdom, comes to embody the same style of corrupt leadership that the its founders rebelled against. Over the next many generations, this move toward being a kingdom like other kingdoms proves disastrous. Prophets such as Amos, Hosea, and Micah arise to confront the people. At the heart of their critique is that the kingdoms both had departed from Torah, seen most obviously in their unjust economics and abusive power structures. Though Israel and Judah exist as counter-anarchistic societies, that the story is told as it is may be seen as a witness for the validity of something like anarchism in contrast to the failure of what actually did exist.

The demise of the kingdom—and what follows

The prophets played an especially important role in providing a theological basis for understanding the eventual demise of both kingdoms as a consequences of those societies' failure to embody Torah. Rather than being a sign of God's failure, the God of Israel and Judah being defeated by the gods of Assyria and Babylon, the prophets helped the remnant that remained understand their kingdoms' failures actually as evidence of God's presence.

The original call was to live in the land in harmony with Torah—with the warning that failure to do so would lead to disaster. The prophets then pointed to the disasters as indicating that God continued to hold the people accountable to the original vocation of living justly.

Out the rubble, the peoplehood survived—not as a nation-state, but as a disaporic set of communities sustained by the ethical vision of Torah and trust in the God of the Exodus. Here is where the crux of the story is centered. What does it mean to be a people that is not a nation-state? A people without a kingdom?

One alternative, as voiced in Jeremiah 29, is to seek the peace of the city where you find yourself. Live as scattered communities, generally minorities in other cultures but sustained as a distinct people. The core reality is the ethical vision and trust in the reality of their God who is not tied to a particular geography or a specific political structure.

The people who remained in the land did rebuild the temple after the Babylonians destroyed it, but for hundreds of years it served more as a cultural touchstone than the reinforcement of state power it had originated as under Solomon. The temple, during this time, was secondary to Torah as the center of Jewish identity. In time, the Roman puppet king, Herod, understood the utility of reviving the Solomonic arrangement, and he greatly expanded the role the temple played. As a result, the temple became an important tool for centralized political authority in

Judea. Eventually, the arrangement broke down, a rebellion against Roman domination arose, and in retaliation, the Romans destroyed the temple.

Two distinct paths emerged from the rubble of the Roman violence—Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. Both for some time were expressions of Jeremiah's vision of faith communities that sustain the promise apart from the nation state and that sought, to a large extent, to foster social organization that was voluntary and non-coercive.

The politics of Jesus

Jesus spent his short career as a messianic figure as the tensions that led to the Roman Judean catastrophe were growing stronger. While on the one hand, he did not seek power in a conventional manner (though he was severely tempted to at the beginning of the public ministry and likely for the rest of his life). On the other hand, Jesus did appropriate political images as characterizing his work. He taught about a kingdom being present among his followers; He—admittedly with much ambivalence—allowed himself to characterized as "Son of God" and "Messiah" (terms used for Israel's kings). He organized his community around twelve disciples (paralleling ancient Israel's tribal political structure). And, in the end, Jesus was executed by the Roman Empire as a political criminal.

So, Jesus was political. His politics, though, were quite different from the state-centered, intensely coercive politics of the nations. In fact, when looked at through the lens of modern anarchism, Jesus's politics seem pretty familiar. He de-centered the state. While he did not overtly seek to abolish it, he proceeded to organize social life as if the state did not matter. He called for people to live together without coercion and to rely on voluntary cooperation. He expected that people are capable of exercising responsibility in fruitful and creative ways (note most obviously his Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew five—the prelude to a long political organizing speech that evokes the giving of Torah to Moses).

Jesus was more explicit than most anarchists, though, in embracing pacifism as core to his political philosophy. It could be that to read him as an anarchistic thinker would make it more clear that anarchism should be pacifist. Jesus stated his political philosophy in a nutshell, according to Mark's gospel, when he contrasted his expectations for his followers with how the nations operate. The rulers of the nations are tyrants, basing their legitimacy and power on exercising coercive force. It must not be so among you, the greatest among you must be servant of all.

The most practical fruit of Jesus's ministry was his establishing and providing a philosophy for communities of his followers, what eventually became known as the churches. The term that the earliest Christians used for these communities, *ekklesia*, was a common term denoting various political assemblies. Clearly, Jesus's intention was not to establish religious groups that functioned as spiritual centers apart from everyday political life. Rather, the ekklesia was itself to be a political entity that engaged the world in direct ways and, to use Jesus's own language, served as a light on a hill and salt that seasoned the broader society.

Important thinkers who followed Jesus and whose writings circulated widely among the early Christians, ultimately making it into the Christian Bible, reinforced his political message. Two key ones, the Apostle Paul and John of Patmos, were especially sharp in their critiques of the Empire and its coercive ways, positing the ekklesia as a counter political reality. Like with Jesus, then Paul and John also prefigured the key elements of anarchism: de-centering the state and advocating

for organizing social life in ways that highlight voluntary cooperation and non-coercive ways of inter-relating. I'd see this as "anarchistic," even if not necessarily yet full-fledged "anarchism."

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