

Where did democratic ideals originate?

Created equal, created to be free?

by Dennis Gordon

How much do you value your democratic freedom? What was historically hard-won and what we take for granted is under threat in many parts of the world, including the West, with a particular low point being the storming of the US Capitol Building on 6 January 2021.

According to Hanne Fjelde, Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, Sweden, one of the greatest challenges of our time (and

there are many), is to safeguard and strengthen democracy.¹ The current war against Ukraine is a deliberate and blatant attack on the democratic freedom of an independent state that wishes to move away from a history of autocracy.

While inherently messy and imperfect, democracy works pretty well, avoiding the extremes of anarchy and authoritarianism. Winston Churchill, Leader of the Opposition in the post-Second World War UK Parliament, famously said (in a speech to the House of Commons on 11 November 1947):

Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time; but there is the broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, and that public opinion expressed by all constitutional means, should shape, guide, and control the actions of Ministers who are their servants and not their masters.²

Democracy as one of the foundations of western civilisation was generally regarded as having originated in classical Athens, by 18th-century intellectuals who attempted to invoke those early democratic experiments into a new model for political organisation and a substitute for monarchy. In 507 BC, as a response to the tyranny of the aristocracy, Athenian leader Cleisthenes had introduced a system of political reforms that he called *demokratia*, or “rule by the people” (from *demos*, people, and *kratos*, power). It survived for only two centuries and was in any case a joke from our modern perspective—it applied only to about 16% of the population, i.e., free males 18 years and older,



A damaged military vehicle is pictured on the outskirts of Kharkiv, northeastern Ukraine, 26 February 2022. The current war against Ukraine is a deliberate and blatant attack on the democratic freedom of an independent state.



The principles underlying democracy originated in the Hebrew scriptures.

thereby excluding women, and the remaining 60% or so, who were slaves.³

The greater foundation of western civilisation is the Bible, and what is generally overlooked is that ideas of freedom and equality began there, long predating classical Athens. An analysis by Professor Joshua Berman, Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv, shows that the principles underlying democracy originated in the Hebrew scriptures.

Beginning with the Pentateuch, the Bible appropriated and reconstituted ancient norms and institutions to create a new blueprint for society. Theology, politics, and economics were reorganised, with the effect of weakening traditional seats of power, and to create a class of empowered common citizens. Much of this anticipates developments in the history of political thought that would happen again only during the Enlightenment and in the thought of the American Founding Fathers. Whereas ancient religion endorsed the ruling classes through sacred rites and symbols, and saw the masses as mere servants, the Pentateuch, by contrast, elevates the common citizenry in the eyes of God by...casting Israel as a subordinate king to the Almighty through the theology of covenant. The Pentateuch is history's first proposal for the distribution of

political power. Standard cultural practices in the ancient Near East concerning land tenure, taxation, and loans are reworked so that the common citizenry remains economically secure.⁴

Freedom and equality continue as key themes in the Greek New Testament (first century AD). In his letter to the ethnically and socially diverse Christians in the Asian province of Galatia, the apostle Paul insisted: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus".⁵ What could be more democratic than that? But we should hardly be surprised, since Paul was reflecting the life and teachings of Jesus, who himself modelled and endorsed fundamental biblical principles that are as old as the first chapter of Genesis:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "...Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."⁶

Whether through over-familiarity or not understanding the context, many miss the significance of this declaration. It was, in fact, utterly revolutionary. Nothing else in the writings of the ancient Near East comes close. It democratises all human beings from the highest to the lowest, men and women, without distinction. Furthermore, it elevates all humanity to the role of delegated suzerainty, a form of kingship under the kingship of God.

Why was this declaration written at all? Because it was important for ancient Israel. Genesis was written after and because of their experience of enslavement and liberation. Another remarkable declaration is recorded in the book of Exodus: "Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, Let my son go so he may worship me'."⁷ Here, "God's son" constitutes all Israel (equality) for whom freedom is demanded; freedom and equality are linked in the same short verse.

At Mt Sinai the Genesis vocation is reframed and repeated: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation".⁸ The point of the Genesis declaration to Israel (the recipient of this revelation)

was that God’s intention was for all humanity ideally to represent Israel’s God to the rest of creation, in short, “creation is good, look after it”. What is sometimes referred to as the covenant with creation reflected extant suzerain-vassal and royal-grant treaties. In context, human equality sprang from the shared responsibility of all humans to act in God’s interests (which were in fact human interests for those who got the point). The failure of Adam and Eve, the first hominids to be invited, out of an existing population, to have a covenantal royal-priestly relationship with God,^{9,10} was an example for Israel to avoid. But Israel, too, failed in this vocation, not just in the golden-calf incident at Mt Sinai, whereby only Levites became priests—the rest of the Tanakh (Old Testament) records the judgements of Israel’s prophets—their social conscience—on Israel’s repeated failures to live out their vocation.

Human weakness notwithstanding, God prevailed with Israel, and the

rest of the Pentateuch shows how democratic principles of equality and freedom could be expressed, even against the backdrop of the cultural river in which Israel lived. The book of Deuteronomy is particularly instructive regarding the general equality of Israelites within the nation. Among other things, the time would come when Israel wanted a king, like the other nations. How would that work if the whole nation has a collective status? Interestingly, the regulations in Deuteronomy limit the power of any one person or class of people. Here is one representative passage:

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,” be sure to appoint over you a king...from among your fellow Israelites...The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself... He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray.

He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold...he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites.¹¹

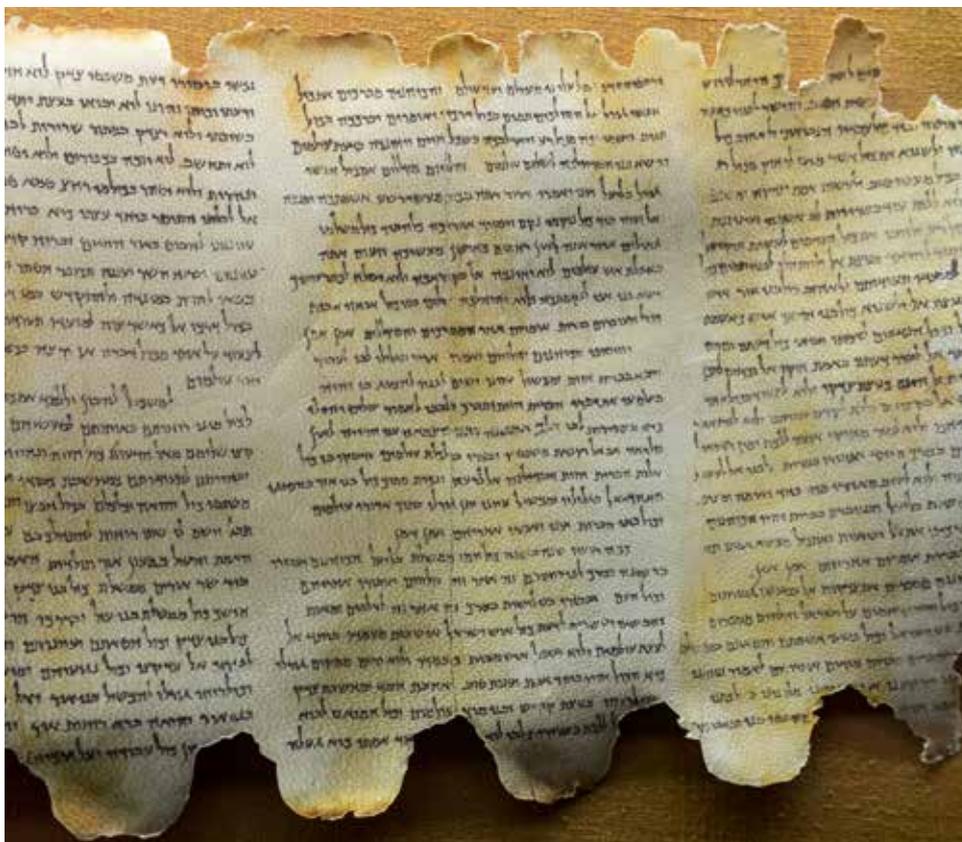
These regulations were intended to limit the power of an Israelite king, in stark contrast to the surrounding nations, in which a king or pharaoh would rule in conjunction with a priestly class, interpreting the will of their imagined gods for their personal benefit. Sadly, Israel’s kings all too frequently sought to be like pagan kings in boosting their own status.

Moses’ final instructions to Israel underscore the democratic ideals that made Israel unique among the nations:

So Moses wrote down this law [Torah] and gave it to the Levitical priests...and to all the elders of Israel. Then Moses commanded them: “At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.¹²

These words are notable for several reasons:

1. The Torah was given not only to the priests but also to Israel’s elders. While the priests had important specific duties,



A handwritten scroll on display at the caves of Qumran. The Old Testament law commanded an Israelite king to “write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law... and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites”.

they were not elevated above other Israelites (nor was any one tribe elevated above another). This is one reason why all Levites and priests had to offer animal sacrifices to God—they too had human nature, transgressed, and needed reconciliation.

2. Every seventh year, debts were cancelled. The reason? “There should be no poor among you.”¹³ The intention was to prevent a rich-poor divide in Israelite society.
3. All Israel (family representatives among all who were well enough to travel) were to go to one location for the Feast of Tabernacles (eventually that would be Jerusalem). There, men, women, children, and even resident foreigners, would learn the words of the Torah—its wisdom and instruction were for everyone, not just an elite.

Israel’s regulations, if followed through, would have the effect of limiting the power vested in any one person or class of people. The tithe of the third and sixth years in a cycle of seven was for

the poor and debts were cancelled in the seventh year, and all of this was to even out the inequalities that inevitably develop in any society. We see a parallel in the New Testament with the collection and distribution of relief among churches in times of need.

Concerning the status of women in Hebrew society—it was never going to be perfect in the ancient world—it’s just the way it was, and the Torah had to reflect existing realities—but scripture gives clues to what regulations and possibilities did exist. For example:

1. In the book of Numbers, the daughters of Zelophehad had the right to receive their father’s inheritance since he had no sons.
2. Deborah is presented as a female “judge” (tribal leader) who achieved a great victory and brought about 40 years of peace.
3. Proverbs 31 describes an astute industrious woman skilled in buying property, selling, trading, manufacturing, managing a large household of family and servants, and achieving public recognition for her skills.

There are other examples. The point is, regardless of the cultural constraints in the male-dominated world of the ancient Near East, and Israel was part of that world, the consistent message to Israel was that men and women are equal in God’s sight and the Torah showed ways in which that could be demonstrated.

When we come to the New Testament, the message of equality comes through loud and clear. In everything Jesus said and did, he treated everyone with equal respect in a way that was utterly unique. It should not have been the case, but in Jewish society in the first century there tended to be neglect by the wealthy elite of the poor, sick, elderly, and children; there was discrimination against non-Jews (regarded as unclean) and women were regarded as inferior to men. Jesus cut through every prejudice and cultural barrier that existed. He lived the reality that Paul wrote about concerning all being “one in Christ”. And as we have seen, that principle is as old as Genesis 1. Knowing that you are not intrinsically inferior to anyone else in God’s sight is very liberating.

The collection and distribution of relief in times of need parallels the Torah’s tithe of the third and sixth years, designed to even out the inequities that inevitably develop in any society. Firefighters in Granada, Spain, collecting food and basic necessities for victims of poverty from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Paul also wrote: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free”,¹⁴ and this is confirmed in John’s gospel: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!”¹⁵ What did they mean? To a Christian ethnic Jew, it meant in the first instance that they were





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set free from the impossible demands of the Mosaic law. That law defined sin, and under that law sin was inevitable. But regardless of whether one was Jewish or not, all humans have sinned, formally beginning with Adam and Eve, and all are set free. All undertake their personal exodus from slavery to sin and death, if they accept what Jesus achieved in the crucifixion and the resurrection for all humanity. In its fullness, freedom in Jesus means genuine existential freedom—from sin and death and ultimately our present human nature—the freedom to be truly ourselves, beginning now. No one is excluded from the offer.

Freedom and equality are God-given gifts. May we cherish, preserve and protect what freedoms remain in our democracies and extend them to others, regardless of gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, loving neighbour as

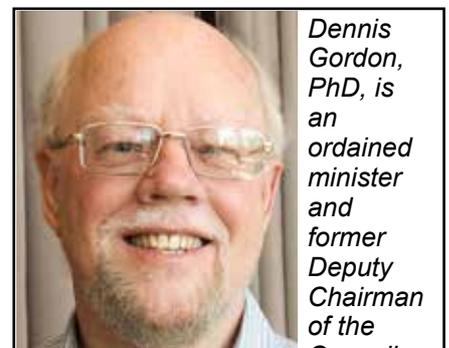
ourselves. And in a time when wild nature suffers greatly from human greed and rapaciousness, let us think about how best we can also serve its needs, thereby obeying the Genesis mandate, honouring the creator and experiencing the benefits of creation.

Notes

- ¹ <https://kaw.wallenberg.org/en/research/present-day-threats-democracy> .
- ² <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/the-worst-form-of-government/> .
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_democracy .
- ⁴ *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought*, Oxford University Press, 2009, Kindle edn.
- ⁵ Galatians 3:28.
- ⁶ Genesis 1:26–28.
- ⁷ Exodus 4:22-23a.
- ⁸ Exodus 19:5b–6.
- ⁹ N.T. Wright in Walton, J.H., *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the human origins debate*. IVP

Press, 2015, p. 177.

- ¹⁰ <https://biologos.org/resources/if-creation-is-through-christ-evolution-is-what-you-would-expect/> .
- ¹¹ Deuteronomy 17:14–20.
- ¹² Deuteronomy 31:9–13.
- ¹³ Deuteronomy 5:4.
- ¹⁴ Galatians 5:1.
- ¹⁵ John 8:36.



Dennis Gordon, PhD, is an ordained minister and former Deputy Chairman of the Council of Wellington Churches. He lectures at the Wellington Pacific Bible College, and is an associate member of the UK-based Society of Ordained Scientists.