ABSOLVING GOD
Religion and Rhetoric in Hobbes's Political Thought

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Project Description

For religious believers, the demands of faith can conflict with the duties of citizenship. In our time, these tensions have animated debates over abortion and gay marriage. In seventeenth-century England, these tensions fueled a long and bloody war. The political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) tells us that he was compelled to write his great work *Leviathan* (1651) because some of his countrymen were claiming that God demanded revolt against their king. Hobbes explains that he "could not bear to hear such terrible crimes attributed to the commands of God." Hobbes said that he wrote *Leviathan* to "absolve the divine laws" of the charge that they justify rebellion.[1]

Yet *Leviathan* is rarely interpreted with these motivations in mind. For much of the twentieth century, most Hobbes scholars adopted one of two attitudes toward the scriptural arguments that comprise the entire second half of *Leviathan*: "first, that they aren't really there, second that Hobbes didn't really mean them."[2]

Interpreters with the first attitude have tended to be analytic philosophers, who focus on the secular philosophical arguments for absolutism in the first half of the book. On their view,

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[1] I adopt Quentin Skinner's translation here. See Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 330-31.
[2] J.G.A. Pocock, "Time, History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes," in *The Diversity of History: Essays in Honour of Sir Herbert Butterfield*, eds. J.H. Elliot and H.G. Koenigsberger (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 161-62.

Hobbes's religious arguments are there merely to confirm that the philosophical arguments are compatible with Christian doctrine.[3] When we read Hobbes today, they suggest, we can treat the scriptural arguments as a sideshow to the philosophical main attraction.[4] Yet this interpretation is at odds with Hobbes's own statement about his motives, which foreground the religious aims of the work.

Interpreters with the second attitude have tended to be followers of Leo Strauss, who read Hobbes's religious arguments as mere cover for atheism. On this view, Hobbes's atheism can be inferred from a close reading of his philosophical and theological arguments.[5] Recognizing that these beliefs were likely to open him up to persecution, Hobbes used the scriptural arguments in the second half of *Leviathan* as a kind of rhetorical shield.

Charges of atheism a serious matter in the seventeenth century, and many thinkers went to great lengths to conceal their true views. But it is not clear that Hobbes was one of these thinkers. If he were, he would have remained silent on controversial issues or stuck to very conventional arguments. He did neither. He publicly defended highly inflammatory views on the most fraught debates of the day—on the fate of the soul, the nature of hell, and the kingdom of God.[6] He knew these arguments were "mostly [likely to] offend," but he made them anyway in order to refute those who would "impugne the Civill Power."[7]

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[3] For instance, David P. Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan: The Moral and Political Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 178-79; Gregory S. Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory*, Studies in Moral, Political, and Legal Philosophy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 362-63; John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 25-29.

[4] Two exceptions to this analytic trend are A.P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); S.A. Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes's Leviathan: The Power of Mind over Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[5] Edwin Curley, "'I Durst Not Write So Boldly' Or How to Read Hobbes's Theological-Political Treatise," in *Hobbes e Spinoza: Scienza e Politica*, ed. Daniela Bostrenghi (Naples, 1992), 512, 572-93; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1950), 198-99; Leo Strauss, "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago, 1988), 170-96.

[6] See also Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests,* pp. 17-18; Samuel I. Mintz, *The Hunting of* Leviathan*: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 44-45.

[7] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), dedication, 4-6. All subsequent citations to *Leviathan* will take the following form: L [chapter], [page(s)]. Of course, to show that Hobbes

Both analytic and Straussian readers of Hobbes share a tendency to focus almost entirely on *Leviathan.* And this is a tendency shared by other leading contemporary Hobbes scholars, such as Aloysius Martinich and Sharon Lloyd, who do see the religious arguments of *Leviathan* as central to the philosophical aims of the work.[8] While their attention to Hobbes's engagement with scripture is welcome, Martinich and Lloyd do not consider what we might learn about Hobbes's religious arguments by comprehensively examining the ways in which they change over time.

Hobbes's religious and scriptural arguments evolve markedly over the course of his major political works—*Elements of Law* (1640), *De Cive* (1642) and *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes devotes ever-more space to scriptural arguments across these texts. He amends some of his earlier arguments and vastly expands others.[9] Intellectual historians, who take seriously Hobbes's stated aim to respond to the political and religious arguments swirling in the English Civil War, have started attending to the changes in Hobbes's scriptural arguments. However, their efforts have tended to be narrowly focused.

For instance, both Richard Tuck and Jeffrey Collins identify significant changes in Hobbes's arguments about church-state relations. Tuck argues that Hobbes moves from conventional Royalist Anglican positions in *Elements of Law* and *De Cive* to an outright attack on

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was more willing to risk persecution than the covering interpretation allows is not to suggest that he was not an atheist or that he did not have other reasons for concealing his beliefs. Hobbes argued that subjects should not publicly advocate positions that challenge those of the sovereign and that subjects are obligated publicly to adhere to religious practices and affirmations dictated by the sovereign. See L 46, 1100-2 and L 31, 570, respectively. Because the existence of God was part of the public theology of Hobbes's England, his principles committed him to affirming it, regardless of his own private beliefs. See Arash Abizadeh, "Hobbes's Conventionalist Theology, the Trinity, and God as an Artificial Person by Fiction," *Historical Journal* 60, no. 4 (2017), 917; Kinch Hoekstra, "Tyrannus Rex vs. Leviathan," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 82 (2001), 434; Kinch Hoekstra, "The *de Facto* Turn in Hobbes's Political Philosophy," in *Leviathan after 350 Years*, eds. Tom Sorrell and Luc Foisneau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 54.

[8] Martinich, *Two Gods of Leviathan*; Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests*. Neither focuses on the deeply *polemical* (as opposed to philosophical) nature of the project of absolving God's laws.

[9] For instance, between *De Cive* and *Leviathan*, Hobbes changes his argument for the identity of church and state. On this, see: Johan Olsthoorn, "Hobbes's Arguments for the Identity of Church and State," in *Hobbes on Politics and Religion*, eds. Laurens van Apeldoorn and Robin Douglass (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 10-28. Also, between *Elements of Law* and *De Cive*, Hobbes vastly expands his treatment of the Israelite polity under Moses. On this, see my "'A Rhapsody of Heresies,'" in this document.

clerical power in *Leviathan*. The reason for this change, Tuck argues, is that Britain's political situation had changed dramatically by the time Hobbes wrote *Leviathan*. Episcopacy had been abolished and the king had been executed. Hobbes now had an opportunity to shape a new political and religious settlement.[10]

Jeffrey Collins argues that Hobbes's hostility to entrenched clerical power was clear even in his earlier works, but it deepened over time. The most dramatic development in Hobbes's work, on Collins's account, is the result of a change in allegiance. As the political and religious situation changed in England, Hobbes's anti-clerical commitments increasingly allied him not with Royalist Anglicans, but with Parliamentarians seeking a new religious settlement. By the time he wrote *Leviathan*, Collins argues, Hobbes found his closest political bedfellows were the Cromwellian Independents.[11] For Collins, this shift in Hobbes's allegiance explains Hobbes's apparent endorsement of Independency in *Leviathan*—an endorsement that seems puzzling, given Hobbes's persistent worries about the destabilizing potential of religious pluralism.[12]

Both Tuck and Collins foreground the changes in Hobbes's arguments about ecclesiastical authority. But they often reduce his other religious arguments to mere instruments of his claims about church and state.[13] In so doing, they do not take his stated aim to "absolve God's laws"

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[10] Richard Tuck, "The 'Christian Atheism' of Thomas Hobbes," in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, eds. Michael Hunter and David Wootton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 111-30; Richard Tuck, "The Civil Religion of Thomas Hobbes," in *Political Discourses in Early Modern Britain*, eds. Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 120-38.

[11] Independents advocated multiple, free-standing congregations, as opposed to a *uniform* national church. The Erastian Independents, with whom Collins argues Hobbes allied himself, supported a national church structure and state-training of clergy, on the one hand, and the devolution of governance decisions and choice of ministers to local congregations, on the other.

[12] For Hobbes's apparent endorsement of Independency, see L 47, 1116. For doubts about whether the passage is a clear endorsement of Independency, see Arash Abizadeh, "The Radical Hobbes," *Political Theory* 37, no. 5 (2009), 709; Teresa Bejan, "Difference without Disagreement: Rethinking Hobbes on "Independency" and Toleration," *Review of Politics* 78, no. 1 (2016), 2-6; Alan Cromartie, "Review of Collins, The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 58, no. 3 (2007), 580; James Farr, "Atomes of Scripture: Hobbes and the Politics of Biblical Interpretation," in *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory*, ed. Mary G. Dietz (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 189.

[13] Abizadeh, "Radical Hobbes," 709. On Tuck, see Lodi Nauta, "Hobbes on Religion and the Church between *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*: A Dramatic Change of Direction*," Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 4 (2002), 586-97. On Collins, see: Abizadeh, "The Radical Hobbes," 709-10.

seriously enough. Of even more concern from a scholarly perspective is that each interpretation rests heavily on one or two passages, which are at odds with the dominant thrust of Hobbes's arguments.[14]

Absolving God shares with Tuck and Collins the view that attending to changes in Hobbes's religious arguments gives us a fuller picture of his aims and his strategies. The book departs from these interpreters by more systematically identifying the full range of changes that Hobbes makes, and by framing explanations that better account for all of them. By documenting the evolution of Hobbes's arguments more rigorously and completely, we can see in detail how Hobbes thought *Leviathan* would absolve God's laws from the charge that they justify rebellion.

The book focuses on three of the most dramatic changes in Hobbes's religious arguments across his major works. First, Hobbes devotes more and more space to scriptural interpretation.[15] Second, he comes to focus increasingly on the Old Testament, and particularly the early history of the Mosaic polity in the book of Exodus.[16] Third, his strategy of scriptural interpretation takes on a distinctive and increasingly complex argumentative form. Each of these changes proved politically risky for Hobbes, opening him up to angry criticism. None of these changes were strictly necessary to support his philosophical arguments. On the face of it, then, they are puzzling.

In each case, *Absolving God* shows that the changes in Hobbes's arguments track the shifts in the popular religious and political discourses of the time. For instance, Hobbes's increased attention to death, hell, and the ultimate fate of the soul in *Leviathan* tracks an increasing

[14] On Tuck, see: Collins, *Allegiance*, 67-9. On Collins, see: Abizadeh, "The Radical Hobbes," 709-10; Jon Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England 1640-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 414-15.
[15] Just under one-fifth of *Elements of Law* deals with scriptural and religious matters. This proportion increases to just under two-fifths in *De Cive* and then to more than half the book in *Leviathan*. To arrive at these figures, I have classed the following chapters as those dealing with scriptural and religious questions in the three works: 11, 18, 25, and 26 in *Elements of Law*; 4, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18 in *De Cive*; and 12, 31-47 in *Leviathan*.
[16] While only sixteen percent of the scriptural citations in *Elements of Law* are drawn from the Old Testament, this proportion increases to fifty-two percent in *De Cive* and declines only somewhat to forty-four percent in *Leviathan*.

prevalence of these topics in the popular discourse of the late 1640s.[17] Similarly, Hobbes's increasing focus on the polity of the Israelites under Moses in *De Cive* and *Leviathan* tracks a rise in the centrality of biblical Israel in the political and religious debates of the 1640s. His turn to the Old Testament and to its account of the Mosaic polity is a polemical move that appropriates the increasingly prevalent scriptural images of the Parliamentarians and republicans and redirects them to serve absolutism.[18] Finally, Hobbes's argumentative strategy becomes more complex as he strains to respond to the many seditious interpretations of the Bible echoing around the Britain of his day.

The book's ability systematically to connect changes in Hobbes's arguments with changes in public discourse has been made possible by the digitization of early modern texts and the development of computer-assisted methods of textual analysis (e.g., topic modelling). The scriptural weapons used in the battles of seventeenth-century England were brandished not only by scholars and elites, but also by street preachers, radicals, and popular polemicists. Popular printing flourished in the mid-seventeenth century because of the breakdown of state and church censorship in the early 1640s. Much of this printed material was preserved by the London bookseller, George Thomason. Thomason's collection is a record of the momentous effects of this change.

The collection consists of over 22,000 pamphlets, newspapers, broadsides, and books printed in England between 1641 and 1661. About half of these pamphlets have been digitized as searchable text. Using topic modelling, I trace changes in popular religious discourse over the period in which Hobbes was writing his major political works and show how the content of Hobbes's works change in corresponding ways. Topic modelling gives scholars an expanded

[17] See "Memo: The Scriptural Turn" in this document.
[18] See "Mosaic Leviathan" in this document.

ability to show how "the textual tracks the contextual." In my view, its scholarly value is confirmed in this case by how it helps to illuminate Hobbes's own understanding of the purpose of *Leviathan*.

The book deploys these new methods within an approach that is broadly contextualist. That is, I begin with the assumption that "the text itself" is not "the self-sufficient object of inquiry and understanding."[19] The study of a text like *De Cive* or *Leviathan* requires an attention to the context in which it was produced, and more particularly to the range of meanings available to its author. For instance, it is difficult to imagine that one could fully understand the detailed scriptural arguments in *Leviathan*—why they take the form that they do and why Hobbes would have thought it necessary to offer them—without an account of the ways in which scripture was deployed polemically in the political debates of seventeenth-century England. Hobbes himself tells us that *Leviathan* is not just an abstract work of political philosophy but also a polemical intervention in the debates of its day. Hobbes's arguments "are never above the battle; they are always part of the battle."[20]

I have completed three papers that will become the three core chapters of *Absolving God* (they are included with this document). One of these papers, "Mosaic Leviathan," has been published in an edited volume. Another, "'A Rhapsody of Heresies,'" is forthcoming in an edited volume. The third, "Absolving God's Laws," is under review. Along with a doctoral student, Jackie Basu, I am also writing a paper that identifies major changes popular religious discourses in England and assesses how Hobbes's evolving religious arguments track these changes. (Some preliminary results from this work are included in a memo at the end of this document.)

Absolving God makes three major contributions. Its scholarly contribution is to show how we can explain Hobbes's stated purpose in writing *Leviathan* by recognizing how some of his most

[19] Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 4. Original italicization of "text" omitted.
[20] Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), xv.

puzzling and politically risky arguments track the very specific religious debates that fueled Britain's bloody civil war. The book's methodological contribution is to show how automated text analysis can give a more comprehensive and precise account of the arguments to which Hobbes was responding. Except for some of my own collaborative work, these methodological tools have not been used by political theorists.[21]

Finally, the book's contemporary relevance comes from showing why a major political thinker thought that the best strategy for dealing with dangerous religious enthusiasm is to meet it on its own terms. *Absolving God* also isolates the very specific argumentative tactics that Hobbes thought would be most effective for defusing violent sectarian conflict, and evaluates their potential use today.

Annotated Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

Thomas Hobbes tells us that wrote *Leviathan* (1651) to "absolve the divine laws" of the charge that they justify rebellion. Yet *Leviathan* is rarely interpreted with these motivations in mind. This book takes Hobbes's stated aim seriously and explains how he tries to achieve it. Understanding his project demands not only a close textual and contextual reading of *Leviathan*, but also systematic attention to the ways in which Hobbes's religious and scriptural arguments are changing over the course of his three major political works, *Elements of Law* (1640), *De Cive* (1642) and *Leviathan.* This chapter motivates the central questions of the book, situates them within existing

[21] Lisa Blaydes, Justin Grimmer, and Alison McQueen, "Mirrors for Princes and Sultans: Advice on the Art of Governance in the Medieval Christian and Islamic Worlds," *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 4 (2018), 1150-67. For a review that discusses this paper, as well as some of my work on Hobbes, see Jennifer A. London, "Re-imagining the Cambridge School in the Age of Digital Humanities," *Annual Review of Political Science* 19 (2016): 351-73.

debates about changes in Hobbes's religious arguments, offers a summary of the core argument, outlines the work's methodological approach, and gives a plan of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2. "A Rhapsody of Heresies": The Scriptural Turn

This chapter identifies changes in Hobbes's focus on religion over the course of his three major political works. Just under one-fifth of *Elements of Law* deals with scriptural matters. This proportion increases to just under two-fifths in *De Cive* and then to more than half the book in *Leviathan*. The chapter details what Hobbes amends, subtracts, and adds from *Elements of Law* to *De Cive* and then from *De Cive* to *Leviathan*. I test the most developed scholarly explanations for these changes (those of Jeffrey Collins and Richard Tuck) to assess how well they account for both the textual and contextual evidence. I argue that existing explanations nicely capture Hobbes's worries about spiritual threats to sovereign power and civil peace. However, they tend to focus too narrowly—for instance, on Hobbes's concern about entrenched clerical power—and are therefore incomplete. Taking the full range of textual and contextual changes into account, we can see that Hobbes expands his treatment of religion because the spiritual threats to sovereign power and civil peace were multiplying. He recognized that the battle for political authority would have to be waged on several fronts. This chapter uses computer-assisted text analysis to map changes in religious discourse during the 1640s. I show that in several pivotal cases, the changes in Hobbes's arguments track changes in popular religious discourse.

***Note*:** This chapter incorporates and expands on arguments made in "'A Rhapsody of Heresies': The Scriptural Politics of Hobbes's *On the Citizen*" (pp. 4-12) and draws on the contextual research outlined in "Memo: The Scriptural Turn."

Chapter 3. Mosaic Leviathan: The Hebraic Turn

While chapter 2 tracks and explains changes in Hobbes's focus on scripture, this chapter spotlights the biggest change in the content of his religious arguments: his turn toward the Old Testament. While only 16 per cent of the scriptural citations in *Elements of Law* are drawn from the Old Testament, this proportion increases to 52 per cent in *De Cive*. While this proportion declines somewhat to 44 per cent in *Leviathan*, Hobbes greatly expands his treatment of the early history of the Israelite polity under Moses. In accounting for these changes, this chapter defends three claims. First, we can account for Hobbes's turn toward the Old Testament by understanding the place of biblical Israel in the political and religious debates of the English Civil War. Second, Hobbes's particular focus on the Mosaic polity is harder to explain. This focus is puzzling because, for both contextual and textual reasons, the period of Davidic kingship seems to fit much better with Hobbes's philosophical account of the basis of sovereign authority. Third, Hobbes's focus on the Mosaic polity is best seen as a rhetorical and polemical move designed to appropriate the images and narratives of Parliamentarians, republicans, and radicals and to *redirect* them in the service of absolutism. There is suggestive textual evidence that Hobbes knew that this strategy was both radical and risky.

***Note*:** This chapter incorporates and expands on arguments made in "'A Rhapsody of Heresies': The Scriptural Politics of Hobbes's *On the Citizen*" (pp. 16-22) and "Mosaic Leviathan: Religion and Rhetoric in Hobbes's Political Thought."

Chapter 4. Absolving God's Laws: The Forensic Turn

Having examined Hobbes's increasing focus on scripture and his turn toward the Old Testament, this chapter tracks and explains changes in his argumentative strategy. Over the course of his three major political works, Hobbes develops a complex strategy of scriptural argumentation that he deploys most fully in *Leviathan*. This strategy is a *forensic*, or judicial, argumentative strategy: specifically, a "convergent argument." This set-piece of judicial rhetoric uses multiple independent claims in the hope that one's audience finds at least one of them persuasive. This strategy was a risky one. Many of Hobbes's angriest critics took issue not only with the content of his arguments, but also with their structure. I consider how to evaluate Hobbes's decision to assume these risks and what his decision means for how we should interpret the second half of *Leviathan*.

***Note*:** This chapter incorporates and expands on arguments made in "'A Rhapsody of Heresies': The Scriptural Politics of Hobbes's *On the Citizen*" (pp. 12-16) and "Absolving God's Laws: Thomas Hobbes's Scriptural Strategies."

Chapter 5. Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I revisit Hobbes's changing response to violent religious pluralism. I argue that the picture of Hobbes that emerges in the book is neither of a sincere religious believer seeking to defend true Christianity against its enemies nor of an unprincipled manipulator of scripture. Rather, Hobbes was a "irenic instrumentalist," willing to reinterpret and even distort the meaning of scripture for the principled end of securing peace. This, for Hobbes, is what it meant to "absolve God's laws." I consider what guidance Hobbes might offer us today, as we think about how best to respond to the sectarian conflict and religious extremism of our own times.

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