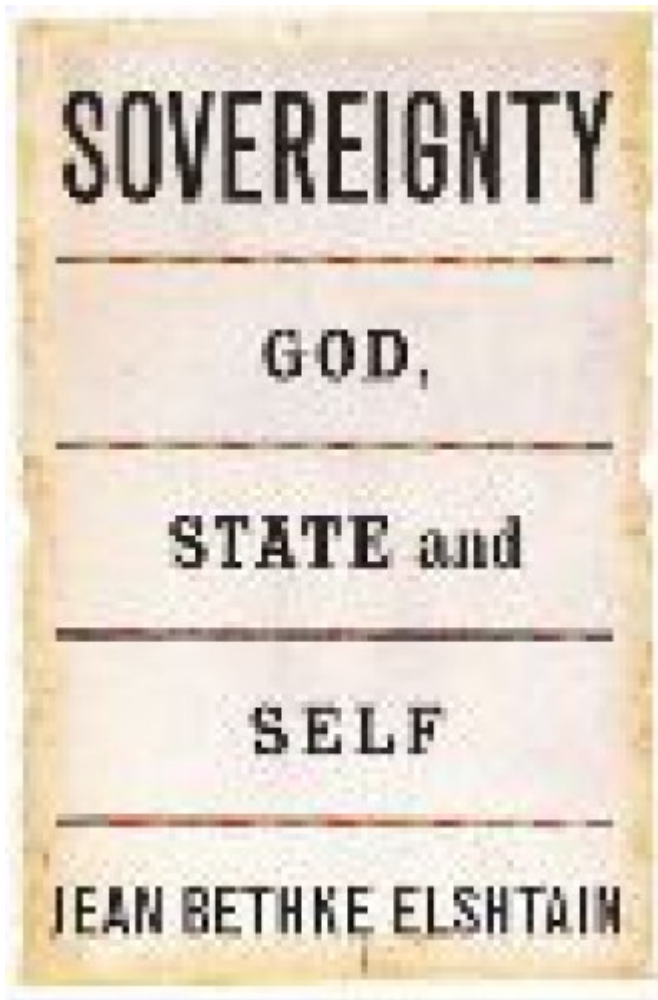


# Sovereignty: God, State and Self

reviewed by [Robin Lovin](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

## In Review



## Sovereignty: God, State and Self

Jean Bethke Elshtain  
Basic Books

We have come a long way from the naked public square. Political strategists have learned that for most people there is a connection between their religious beliefs

and their political choices. The next step may be to understand that our most basic ways of thinking about politics begin in theology. The connection is historical because religion provides a rich source of political images and examples, from Moses and David to Ahab and Pilate. But the connection between theology and politics is also conceptual because thinking about God involves thinking deeply about the connections between power, love and freedom.

In *Sovereignty*, Jean Bethke Elshtain introduces us to a transformation in ideas about God's sovereignty that changed the way the Western world understood politics and personhood. At the outset, God's sovereignty was understood as part of the order of God's creation. This way of thinking was highly developed during the Middle Ages, when theologians wove scripture, newly rediscovered Greek philosophy and an already long tradition of Christian thought into the idea that God was the beginning and end of all things. Reality was intelligible and God was reliable because God had created a world that reflected God's own nature. Thomas Aquinas taught that reality provides a natural law against which human choices and human laws can be measured; thus kings must rule on those terms or they will become mere tyrants—powerful, perhaps, but without legitimate authority.

Later theologians would question that system, and their questions are of central interest to Elshtain because they provide the starting point for our modern ideas of political sovereignty and individual choice. For William of Ockham and the new nominalist philosophers, Aquinas had given us a severely limited God, not a sovereign. To understand God truly, they argued, we must see God not only as the center of a great order of reality, but as its absolute source. The world exists because God chose to create it. God could choose a different world, or no world at all, at any moment. God's will replaces God's reason as the measure of divine sovereignty. The issue, little understood today even among theologians, was the relationship between God's *potentia absoluta*, or absolute power, and God's *potentia ordinata*, the power which orders creation in the way that God happens to want it ordered for now. The debate, Elshtain says, was "arid and arcane," but "it also scared the wits out of lots of people, Martin Luther among them." If God has that kind of power, then virtue and the place I happen to occupy in the order of being mean nothing. God is unimpressed and might just decide to condemn me anyway, for any reason or no reason.

We know that in theology and church history this thinking led to an emphasis on salvation by grace and to the Protestant Reformation. But Elshtain's interest is in the

political consequences of such thought. If reality is ordered only by God's sovereign will, then any durable human order probably requires a similar absolute power. This was the logic by which kings and philosophers, including England's James I and Thomas Hobbes, defended the prerogatives of a sovereign whose law could not be challenged by a subject's reason. The king's law is not law because it is rational or corresponds to the order of nature. It is law because it is the king's will. Those who thought that this gave the king too much power were invited to consider the wreck that the medieval system of overlapping jurisdictions, competing authorities and moral objections had made of the European political landscape.

But Protestants know that the theological story has another chapter. Luther's terror gave way to a recognition that a sovereign God might also decide to be merciful. God's choice to show mercy need not depend on what I am or what I do. God might be merciful not because God is persuaded, but because God chooses self-limitation. God's grace, saving those who have no claim to be saved, might be the ultimate exercise of God's sovereignty. This theology, too, had its political correlate. It involved the idea that instead of submitting to an absolute sovereign, people might commit themselves to one another and agree to live under an authority that would be self-limited by the purposes that brought their relationship into being—justice, domestic tranquillity and common defense, for example. Absolute sovereignty began to give way to the kind of will that creates constitutions. Jefferson and Madison, rather than James I, became the heirs of the theological revolution that Ockham began.

American Protestants like this narrative. It has almost canonical status in Presbyterian and Congregational traditions. But Elshtain sees a problem with it, and this will make the last part of her book challenging to many who are attracted to the first part of the story. The problem is that once sovereignty becomes a matter of will and not reason, there is no stopping the devolution of authority. The self-limited sovereign state, whose power depends on the consent of the governed, yields eventually to the sovereign self, which knows no law but its own choices. We get glimpses from Nietzsche and from Nazi Germany of what that sort of world would be like, and Elshtain sees the same logic at work in the loss of compassion and the neglect of vulnerable people in contemporary American society. The sovereign self does not relate to others or identify with weakness unless it chooses to do so.

An idealist might try to resolve these problems by doing away with the sovereign state, replacing it with a political order that would be both universal and moral. That

was Dante's answer to earthly claims of absolute power, but after nearly 400 years of a world organized around sovereign states, Elshtain points out, that has become a utopian dream. A more realistic answer is to create political and social systems that link sovereignty to responsibility, for nations and for individuals.

God's sovereignty is exercised in relationships. Whatever we may affirm about God's absolute power, we know God as sovereign only in relation to persons—to creating them, responding to them and calling them in turn into relationship with God. God is sovereign in those relationships from the moment they come into being, but for the state and the self, sovereignty is a developing reality that comes into being by degrees:

We presuppose—we believe—that God is sovereign (and this for hundreds of reasons), but we cannot assume that a nation-state is sovereign until it demonstrates its ability to be independent from the protection of another state, to treat its citizens decently, and to foster a vibrant civil society. . . . As with the nation-state, so with the person. Being a mature member of society does not entail complete independence from everybody else, but, instead, requires a willingness and ability to build and to sustain rich relationships with other people.

Exactly how to foster this responsibility among persons and among states is controversial. The question of how to enforce it among nations now divides our ideas about foreign policy even more deeply than questions of personal responsibility separate us on social issues. We have a tendency to affirm personal responsibility without recognizing that this inevitably means limits on self-sovereignty, and we often argue against the sovereignty of nations without realizing that sovereignty is the only mechanism we have in today's world to hold governments accountable for what happens to their people.

Elshtain is not contentious in *Sovereignty*, though she makes arguments for some controversial policies. She serves the best purposes of moral and political philosophy when she urges us to be consistent in the ways we think about persons, politics and God. That is considerably more challenging than finding a candidate, a party or a platform that agrees with our ideas about morality and makes a public nod in the direction of religious belief. It requires thinking about what kind of power is possible—not as an achievement of will, but as an enduring reality. It requires us to know who we are and not just what we want. And it imposes those demands on nations and individuals alike.