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Athens and Jerusalem: Myths and Mirrors in Strauss’ Vision of the West

Abstract: The distinction between Athens and Jerusalem is an iconic one. It serves to encapsulate two strands of the Western heritage; it underscores both difference (of region and sensibility) and relationship; and it identifies two ancient cities with concepts and contexts that remain alive into the present. This essay considers the structure of the distinction in the light of its indelible inscription by Leo Strauss. What makes Strauss’ version of Athens and Jerusalem worthy of attention is that for all that his political philosophy has drawn renewed interest of late, his influential treatment of the foundations of the West—absorbed by so many other accounts—remains unplumbed. My intent is to revisit Strauss’ Athens and Jerusalem, not in order to update the terms but to reimagine the distinction altogether. I hold that Strauss is half right: he is right that Athens and Jerusalem are fundamentally different conceptual spaces. But beyond the insight of difference as such, it is possible to tell a better story about the nature of their difference and thus about their contact and conflict. It is Spinoza—Strauss’ frequent interlocutor—who uncovers the blind spots in Strauss’ view and assists in the project, once again, of conceiving of the complexity of the West.

Philosophy and the Bible are the alternatives or the antagonists in the drama of the human soul. Each of the two antagonists claims to know or to hold the truth, the decisive truth, the truth regarding the right way of life. But there can be only one truth....

—Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?”

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I. Athens and Jerusalem

The conceptual dyad of Athens and Jerusalem occupies a formidable space in the history of the West. Signifying the two major topoi of the Western intellectual heritage, it is a symbol of both richness and economy. Athens and Jerusalem—the icon sweeps across the globe with imperial splendor. But also Athens and Jerusalem—not Istanbul or Shanghai or Delhi. The numerous connotations of the dyad would be difficult to catalogue with any precision. It was originally enunciated in the work of the polemical church father Tertullian to name the “heretical” threat to Christian piety: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians?”1 It later came to signify reason (Athens) and revelation (Jerusalem) more generally, becoming a way of speaking of the conceptual poles of the West as such. Two ancient cities, two sensibilities, two desires that remain alive into the present.2

This essay considers the structure of the Athens-Jerusalem dyad in light of its indelible inscription by the twentieth-century, German-born, Jewish-American thinker Leo Strauss. Strauss encapsulated his views on the topic in five public lectures he gave over the course of his career.3 But it is fair to say that the relationship and ultimately the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem was a theme that informed Strauss’ work


3 Heinrich Meier notes the chronology of these lectures in his *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. xvi. In 1946, Strauss spoke on “Jerusalem and Athens” at the New School for Social Research in New York. Two years later, in 1948, he gave a lecture at the Hartford Theological Seminary on “Reason and Revelation.” In 1957, Strauss gave a lecture “On the Interpretation of Genesis” at the University of Chicago (published posthumously). And in the spring of 1967, Strauss gave two lectures at the City College of New York published that same year under the title “Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections.” The latter three lectures (of 1957 and 1967) are published in Kenneth Hart Green, ed., *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought: Leo Strauss* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997). The lecture of 1946 was never published, and the lecture of 1948, “Reason and Revelation,” appears in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*. It includes a more finished lecture (though lacking a conclusion) and some notes, which Meier speculates may have been a first draft. See Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, pp. xvi–xvii.
throughout, as he reflected on and repeatedly returned to the clash of reason and revelation in the writings of such thinkers as Maimonides, Machiavelli, Spinoza, and Hobbes. In so doing, however inadvertently, Strauss translated the motif of Athens and Jerusalem into a powerful descriptive image for twentieth-century Western modernity, with currency far beyond the narrow academic context in which he himself picked it up and deployed it.

To be sure, specialists of the ancient world will find much to contest in Strauss’ overly broad characterizations, as he himself was the first to admit. Historians will find the topoi flat and unilluminating (whose reason? which revelation?), and political theorists, although Strauss himself was one, will no doubt add power and politics to the rather anodyne-sounding pillars, even if Strauss did conceive them in titanic terms. There is also more to be said about the function of the dyad in Strauss’ overall oeuvres and the broader history of its deployment and its effects on political theory, philosophy, and the study of religion. What is noteworthy is that the distinction has come to constitute the bedrock of the very idea of the West and its origins, especially as these have been understood by Jewish thinkers, however secular. When Levinas and Derrida write of the generic “jewgreek,” the subject at once unified and divided by its dual inheritance, they seem to represent, in ostensibly post-modern terms, the conceptual dilemma of Western philosophy, culture, and politics tout court as it begins, arguably, with Philo of Alexandria in the first century of the common era.

Strauss’ distinction is conceived along the following lines: philosophy originates in ancient Athens as the quest for the formless, necessary, unchanging, rarefied, eternal good or truth, in opposition to the dusty world of human concourse, the world of change, opinion, contingency, and fate. Religion, by contrast, originates in the biblical world of Jerusalem and concerns the commanding God of Israel, whose prime concern is obedience, not understanding. As Strauss puts it of biblical wisdom, “man is not meant to be theoretical, a knowing, a contemplating being; man is meant to live in childlike obedience.” What Strauss brings to the terms of the dyad is attention to the sharpness of their difference, and the necessarily constrained context within which each operates. Strauss became notorious for his image of the West as an epic clash “in the drama of

4 See, for example, Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” p. 359: “I want to begin with the remark that I am not a biblical scholar.”

5 See Kavka, Jewish Messianism, for a thoroughgoing re-appraisal of this motif through the lens of the concept of “meontology,” nonbeing.

6 Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?” in Green, Jewish Philosophy, p. 115.
the human soul”: two discourses, vying for supremacy, in a tradition that contains both without being able to resolve their “antagonism.” But even as this language and imagery is particular to Strauss, even as many other philosophers and historians of Western thought would reject the polarized idiom in which Strauss clearly felt most comfortable, very few actually challenge his fundamental conceptual premises: philosophy as the “quest for the true and final account of the whole” and revelation as the disruption of human rationality and the assertion of an absolute command beyond reason. This is to resist Strauss’ perennial lament that the ancient concept of philosophy is replaced by “a derivative form” in the modern period. As I will show, Strauss’ grief over the loss of Athens, “the original meaning of philosophy,” is premature, for the Greek conceptual vocabulary marks the index of what counts as philosophy in the Straussian mode. Modern thinkers are more likely than medieval ones to conceive of the discourses in overlapping terms, as partners rather than antagonists in the human soul, much as Cohen does in his neo-Kantian Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, or, put more negatively, to confuse and conflate them, as Levinas might be accused of doing. But few in the Middle Ages or modernity, whether producing philosophy and theology or classifying them, get beyond the terms themselves, the basic conception of each realm that Strauss so cannily identifies and expresses.

What makes Strauss worth engaging, then, is that for all the attention his political philosophy has received of late in contemporary public life, his Athens and Jerusalem is utterly invisible—absorbed in the plethora of other ways to draw Western origins. My intent is to revisit Athens and Jerusalem, not in order to update the terms but to re-imagine the distinction altogether—indeed, if possible, fundamentally to re-direct its current connotations. I hold that Strauss is at least half right: he is right that Athens and Jerusalem are fundamentally different conceptual spaces and

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7 Ibid., p. 123.
9 Ibid., p. 143.
10 Ibid., p. 145.
11 So argues Batnitzky in Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas.
12 For recent attempts to confront overly ideological readings of Strauss, see Batnitzky, Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas; Steven B. Smith, Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Eugene R. Sheppard, Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2006).
13 Grant Havers expresses the same desire in “Between Athens and Jerusalem: Western Otherness in the Thought of Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt,” The European
cannot be aligned. But beyond the insight of difference as such, Strauss is wrong about the nature of their difference, and thus about their conflict and contact. He is right that the “human soul” is dramatically torn, but he is wrong about what tears it and what the implications are of this tearing. To begin, then, I make what will seem a surprising, even perverse claim: that Athens plays only a mythic role in the founding of the West—indeed, that for the West, Athens, its birthplace, does not exist. By this I do not deny the obvious fact that Athens is a city, both ancient and modern. Nor do I deny that ancient Greek philosophy and literature express a world-historical civilization, nor even that this civilization has had an immense impact on Western thought and politics, as Strauss’ work itself displays. What is a myth, I argue, is Athens as the source of Western philosophy—thus Athens the symbol of eternal mind, thought, logos, reason, truth. It is Athens’ character as the origin of the West in general, and of Western reason more particularly, that I want to re-imagine. For, in my narrative, the West does not originate in Athens; rather, Athens originates in the West as the West’s mythic origins. That is to say, Athens originates not in Athens but in Jerusalem, and can be seen only with Jerusalem’s mirror.

This is not simply to express a fatigue with binaries; indeed, it is not to rid us of the binary at all. It is not to collapse two civilizations, two ways of thinking, into one. This is not an argument about which “site” was earliest or literally first. It pays no attention to influence, to causation, to history in its conventional sense. It is not the argument that philosophy begins with religion or that the two ought never to be mixed. Rather, the argument is that reason and religion, Athens and Jerusalem, begin simultaneously—they begin together, as the irresolvable tension that is internal to the post-biblical, and not to the Greek, world. The icon of Athens and Jerusalem—the distinction insofar as it contrasts logos and history, reason and revelation, truth and law—could occur not in Athens but only in Jerusalem, where the eternal is enunciated in time, where reason is embodied in history. This does not simply shift the distinction to a new place while keeping its logic intact. It is this very logic—the logic of opposition (clash) or complementarity (union)—that is undone by the shift, along with the concepts of reason and revelation it presupposes.

Simply put, the Straussian paradigm is missing a distinction. Athens surely generates Athenian philosophy—the philosophy that is, as Strauss puts it, the “quest for wisdom.” But Athens cannot generate “Athens

Legacy 9:1 (2004), pp. 19–29, concluding that “Jerusalem [and not Athens] is the true source of democracy” in the West (p. 28).

14 Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 95.
and Jerusalem,” that is, the difference between the desire for the truth (which quest, Strauss rightly notes, can never be concluded in Athens) and the truth of desire, which is also a command (thou shalt love).\(^{15}\) Strauss conceives of knowledge and command as utterly divergent modes, and so they are, in Athens. In Athens, to obey is to be subject to the fateful mystery of what one obeys; to philosophize is to subject oneself to the unending pursuit of knowledge—the knowledge, the discovery, that one is ignorant. Identical in their opposition, obedience and knowledge in Greek philosophy constitute the polar structure of Platonic metaphysics by which Strauss structures his dyad: Athens (the quest for the truth above the divided line) and Jerusalem (the requirement that one subordinate oneself to what, from below the divided line, one does not know).

Jerusalem, by contrast, concentrates knowledge and obedience—wisdom and piety, reason and revelation—in the same space, without resolving the tension between them. Because you know me (because you are like me), says God to the Israelites, you shall obey. Locked into the Greek sources that were his intellectual mainstay, Strauss could never see that his “Jerusalem” was framed in entirely Athenian terms, his God of Abraham the unmoved mover to whom one could only submit. What is interesting is that, while Strauss is always incredibly careful to distinguish between the Bible and philosophy, he cannot seem to find the roots of the distinction. Strauss writes, for example, that “the Aristotelian God like the biblical God is a thinking being, but in opposition to the biblical God he is only a thinking being, pure thought… he is not a creator-god.” Yet, as Strauss surveys Plato’s idea of the world’s creation, he comes to a difference he considers more basic, namely, “God’s will.” Whereas the Greek gods are worthy of worship only insofar as the worship of them is “natural or rational,” the God of Israel is himself the commanding source of worth. Whereas, to re-state Euthyphro’s problem, the Greek gods are worshipped because they are good, the biblical God is good because he is worshipped.\(^{16}\) Yet this Platonic opposition between the gods as subordinate to the good and the good as subordinate to the gods cannot make sense of the covenantal notion of the good as both absolute and subject to the interpretation of two parties. Indeed, the distinction that is most

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\(^{15}\) Here my frame of reference is not only the biblical, covenantal connection of desire and truth, as expressed in the command to love God and neighbor, but also Spinoza’s insistence that “desire is man’s very essence,” and good (and evil) what we desire. Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, in Edwin Curley, ed., *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 531 (IIIdef.aff) and 543ff. (IV pref). (In references to the “Ethics,” I provide page numbers as well as the standard abbreviations referring to part and section [p=proposition, schol=scholium, pref=preface, def.aff=definition of the affects].) I pursue this connection in a limited way below.

fundamental here is not between “philosophy” (than which no God is higher) and “the Bible” (which no reason can plumb) but between both of these equally remote ends (philosophy’s because it is merely quest, the Bible’s because it is irrational) and that of the biblical covenant, within which God is both rational (righteous) and absolutely constitutive of rationality (righteousness)—God is, in short, subject to (and subject of) himself. It is this covenantal good that Strauss himself invokes, but cannot quite account for, when he writes of Abraham’s relationship to God:

Abraham’s trust in God thus appears to be the trust that God in His righteousness will not do anything incompatible with His righteousness, and that while or because nothing is too wondrous for the Lord there are firm boundaries set to Him by His righteousness, by Him.17

This seems to suggest that Abraham and God are, together, subject to “righteousness”—that even if God is its author (that is, regardless of its authorship), righteousness is something comprehensible to both, enacted by both, and binding on both. Yet Strauss also wants to maintain God’s absolute ineffability, his imperviousness to reason. Hence, Strauss immediately observes, God’s command to sacrifice Isaac “must be understood in the light of the difference between human justice and divine justice.”18 God, finally, is incomprehensible to us, and our faith in him “simple, single-minded, childlike.”19

Strauss, then, opts—indeed seems driven, despite himself—to distinguish Athens from Jerusalem on the grounds of Athens, on the grounds, namely, of an opposition that is internal to and constitutive of Athenian philosophy. He therefore misplaces the fraught ambiguities of biblical metaphysics, wherein the love of wisdom—philosophia—is contention with its messy presence in human history, not its pursuit in a separate realm. One thinks of the famous passage from Deuteronomy:

Surely this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Deuteronomy 30:11–14)

17 Ibid., p. 391.
18 Ibid., p. 392.
19 Ibid., p. 393.
It is Jerusalem which allows that observance of God’s will is possible only in the light of what we also know in our mouth and in our heart. It is Jerusalem, in short, that knows the difference between itself and Athens, Jerusalem that knows the difference between opposition and relationship. It is thus Jerusalem that arrogates to itself not just religion but also philosophy, and thus the tension between them. In the light of Jerusalem, the difference is not between Athens and Jerusalem. Athens is expelled from Jerusalem as an illusion in the opening chapters of Genesis: there is no knowledge of good and evil without history, change, contingency; no pursuit of wisdom without obedience; no freedom without law. The difference is between Jerusalem and Jerusalem—between philosophy as the human effort to make sense of its truth (“what is man that thou art so mindful of him?”) and revelation as the divine insistence that we do so (“for I am the Lord, your God”). To say, then, that there is no Athens, or rather that Athens is an illusion, is to say that Athens in its Straussian sense is a figment of a Jerusalem whose own house is divided between philosophy and religion. Like Eden, the beginning of Athens is its (forever mourned) end.

These claims might seem to advance at once too much (that the entire well-documented presence of Greek ideas in Western history is a chimera) and too little (that it is just a matter of seeing this history one way rather than another). What I aim to do is re-frame and re-narrate: yes, one can tell the story as it has been told, but can we not do it another way? What if the ruling distinction in Western thought were conceived not as the twin poles that Athens and Jerusalem name, around which spin endless combinations of the conceptual possibilities of (a) opposition, (b) complement, and (c) conflation? What if the distinction that mattered, and that masqueraded as Strauss’ twins, was in fact within one pole, between Jerusalem as command and Jerusalem as knowledge? Jerusalem and Athens would then signify a different difference—namely, the difference between Jerusalem the site of the dialectical intimacy of reason and history and Jerusalem the myth that its philosophical grounds are elsewhere.

It would doubtless be more in keeping with contemporary sensibilities to claim thereby that neither Athens nor Jerusalem has the upper hand—that each must see itself riven from within. It is certainly true on one level that, precisely because I am vaporizing his Athens, the Jerusalem I
am seeking to set forth here is not Strauss’ Jerusalem. I am claiming, nevertheless, that it is only Jerusalem, the site of biblical thought and cultures, that is riven in this way; only Jerusalem that can, that could have, hosted the question of the contradiction that binds the West; only Jerusalem, thus, that founds a historical complex predicated on the alienation—even the betrayal—of its own identity. In this genealogy, Athens disappears as a founding figure, and Athenian reason is returned to its place as the eternal, unmoved fortress that cannot be breached. In Strauss, it appears as one mythic name for the doubled origin (both faithful and rational) that is the West. But that this mythic name of Athens thereby papers over the doubling, literally, by seeing double; that it obscures the event that reason and revelation come into existence together and thus shall never, except mythically, be conjoined; that ironically, then, the sole difference that cannot be calcified (conflated, opposed, or complemented) depends on a broken singularity and not on a frozen, complementary pair—these are the claims, this is the West, about which I invite fresh debate.

2. The Theological-Political

May I say this in passing, that I have leaned very heavily in my analysis of these things on Spinoza.

—Strauss, “Progress or Return?”

Although the essay “Jerusalem and Athens” is closely identified with the Straussian vision of Western history, just as compelling is his earlier “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” “first delivered as a series of lectures at the Hillel House, University of Chicago, in November 1952.” Both essays are part of Strauss’ Jewish writings, his effort to grapple with modern Judaism, Zionism, the dominance of historicism, exile, and, of course, the tension between revelation and reason, religion and the secular, theology and philosophy (the

20 I have taken the liberty of associating Jerusalem with something I call biblical thought and cultures. Of course, it will be said, we scholars know that there is no such thing as a unique biblical world cordoned off from other cultures, languages, and communities—that history is just not like that, then or now. In this light, there can be none but an avowedly apologetic reason for doing so. My response is to insist that this very distinction (opposition) between reason and history has its own arbitrary logic, according to which historical truth is imagined as a great deal messier and more faithful to reality than conceptual truth. It is this very logic I mean to contest, refusing the oppositional schema of reason and history from the outset.

21 Green, Jewish Philosophy, p. 477.
second part of Strauss’ “Progress or Return?” talk was published in 1979 as “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy”). 22 To be sure, as Eugene Sheppard shows in his recent book on Strauss’ intellectual history, there was never really a time when Strauss was not involved in Jewish questions, from his early period “as a radicalized conservative Weimar Jew active in Zionist politics and Jewish scholarship” (1921–1932) to his years as a refugee and new immigrant “attempting to accommodate his thought and writing to his new home in the liberal democracy of America” (1932–1948). It was after 1948 that the Strauss most readers know emerged, as he “came to offer mature speculation and re-assessments of his intellectual journey and on the Jewish question in particular.” 23 It is in this later period that Strauss published his famous treatise *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, in which he elaborated a theory of esoteric writing in the context of social and political danger, and it is in this period that he revisited his 1930 book, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, writing a widely read preface to the English translation (published by Schocken in 1965), in which he situates his reading of Spinoza and Jewish thought more generally in the context of his own biography. 24

Strauss’ preface begins with a fact and an admission:

This study of Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise* was written during the years 1925–28 in Germany. The author was a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of a theologico-political predicament. 25

As Strauss looks back, these two statements are intimately entangled in a way that suggests to him the heart of his project and identity. It was in fact a predicament simply to be a Jew in Germany in 1925–1928, and the admission that this particular Jew found much to criticize in the milieu of the much-maligned Weimar period cannot but be seen in the light of the unthinkably worse fate that followed. Strauss is undoubtedly keenly aware that what he has to say about Judaism, Zionism, and Spinoza is amplified by the conditions in which he is saying it. He seems aware, in short, of the power of speaking—after the fact—as a German Jew on the eve of the Holocaust, whose own biography and intellectual inclinations are knit into the most momentous events of his time.

22 Ibid.
23 Sheppard, Leo Strauss, p. 7.
The predicament, then, is that of the modern Jew, trapped in untenable intellectual and political conditions. It is equally important, however, to note Strauss’ language: “in the grip,” “theologico-political,” “predicament.” Here and elsewhere, he will speak of modernity as such in urgent terms: as a crisis, a predicament, a contradiction. The construction “theologico-political” names the kind of crisis Strauss was wont to identify—that of an irreconcilable conflict between opposing goals, aims, or concepts, which calls for an immediate though usually temporary solution and the appreciation of long-term or permanent insolubility. Here the predicament is the failure of Weimar to solve the Jewish question, the consequent inevitability of Zionism, but also the deeply flawed qualities of Zionism itself as a permanent solution for the Jews. The problem with Weimar, and liberal democracy in general, is that it purports to overcome differences between people in the name of a common bond, “a universal morality,” while ironically ensuring that the political existence of minorities is all the more “precarious.”

For having purged the public sphere of all that could be contentious, having ruled that “religion as particular religion belongs to the private sphere,” the state has no way of preventing the private discrimination and hatred that could find free and indeed newly virulent expression there. This is an argument for Zionism, one with which Strauss has evident sympathy, not just because it addresses the problem of the Jews, but also because it reveals the internal contradiction of liberalism:

The liberal state cannot provide a solution to the Jewish problem, for such a solution would require a legal prohibition against every kind of “discrimination,” i.e., the abolition of the private sphere, the denial of the difference between state and society, the destruction of the liberal state.

But Zionism has its problems, too. In hastening to remove the Jews from the source of discrimination, it removes them from the commanding, absolute God who chose them from among the nations to be a people set apart. Zionism secularizes and relativizes Judaism—perhaps necessarily so, given its political rationale, but not without some significant loss. Cultural Zionism, recognizing the limitations of political Zionism as focused only on “the community of descent, of the blood,” responds with the effort to make the Jewish state also “a community of the mind,” based on “a Jewish culture that has its roots in the Jewish heritage.” But this, too, misses the spine of the tradition for Strauss:

26 Ibid., p. 3.
27 Ibid., p. 6.
One could not have taken this step [cultural Zionism] unless one had previously interpreted the Jewish heritage itself as a culture, i.e., as a product of the national mind, of the national genius. Yet the foundation, the authoritative layer, of the Jewish heritage presents itself, not as a product of the human mind, but as a divine gift, a divine revelation. Did one not completely distort the meaning of the heritage to which one claimed to be loyal by interpreting it as a culture like any other high culture?  

Here, succinctly stated, is Strauss’ ambivalent relationship to Zionism and Judaism both—his own theologico-political predicament. Throughout his life, Strauss was a believer in Zionism because he was a believer in what he called “human” solutions to intractable political problems. He was a realist who categorically refused messianic and utopian pretensions in the political sphere, a German Jew born and raised in the period of two world wars and the genocide of European Jewry who embraced skepticism as the recognition of the extreme dangers of the human desire to act in the place of God. Zionism was therefore a political solution to which he subscribed, and, although Strauss eventually made his home in America, it was also a personal investment that he consistently defended against its critics.

Still, as the passage above attests, Strauss had an equal commitment to the possibility of Judaism, which he conceived in conflict with Zionism. The Jewish heritage, he held, is insusceptible to comprehension in human, much less narrowly political, terms. One can best be faithful to this heritage not by moving to Israel but through teshuva (return, repentance)—through returning to the tradition that liberal aspirations, including liberal religion, had muted; through repenting in the light of “the experience of God as the Thou, the father and king of all men.” For Strauss, this is an “absolute which cannot be relativized in any way as everything else, rational or nonrational, can,” an “experience of an unequivocal command addressed to me here and now as distinguished from general laws or ideas which are always disputable and permitting of exceptions.”

In his personal life, Strauss was not a particularly

28 Ibid.

29 See, for example, Strauss’ letter to the editor of National Review, in which he states his approval of many things in the journal yet finds its opposition to Israel “incomprehensible.” Strauss rehearses the things he loves about Israel, noting that, as he “taught at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for the whole academic year of 1954–55,” they are based “on what I have seen with my own eyes.” He concludes with a paean to Israel’s “conservative function” (despite the charge that it is “run by labor unions”), noting that “it helped to stem the tide of ‘progressive’ leveling of venerable, ancestral differences.” Green, Jewish Philosophy, pp. 413–414.

religious man by most definitions of the term. But his concept of Judaism was uncompromising: the Judaism of the Bible and its traditions was for him the Judaism of the commanding and absolutely ineffable God transcendent of everything human.

The relationship between Judaism and Zionism—the theological and the political—encapsulates, then, the Straussian motifs of ambivalence, tension, and conceptual conflict in the highly charged atmosphere of Weimar and beyond. But one need not conclude that these motifs arise in his work solely because of his biography and historical period, even as these factors obviously play a crucial role in the multi-layered narratives he tells. As historically specific dilemmas, they have strikingly wide and general application as leitmotifs in Strauss’ more theoretical considerations of modernity, the modern Jew, and the West overall. The question of to what teshuva returns one emerges initially because of the development of modern Judaism both in Strauss’ birthplace and in his adopted homeland. But his depiction of it as a crisis comes from a more general set of reflections on “progress or return,” modernity or tradition, and represents a conceptual choice to emphasize the starkest and most polarized contrasts possible. In this, Strauss claims, as in so many other choices, “I have leaned very heavily in my analysis... on Spinoza.”

Spinoza is many things to Strauss—exemplar, bête noire, predecessor, prophet. Strauss is a well-known expositor of Maimonides, as well as Plato, Aristotle, Halevi, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, in addition to Spinoza. In all of his writings about such figures, he finds in them “Straussian” conflicts, contradictions, vivid contrasts, tensions, secrecies, and strife. But none of these figures evokes quite the level of angst in Strauss, quite the degree of ambivalence, as Spinoza. Spinoza is the ultimate figure of crisis and predicament, the ultimate betrayer, modernizer, critic, and heretic. Given Strauss’ own theological-political predicaments, he can hardly do less than identify with (and also recoil from) the embattled, keenly detached, philosophically relentless, politically astute if theologically dastardly Dutch sage.

I can only hint here at the full range of connections and disjunctions between Strauss and Spinoza. What I want to draw attention to

31 Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 130.
32 See Nancy Levene, “Ethics and Interpretation, or How to Read Spinoza’s Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus Without Strauss,” Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 10 (2000), pp. 57–110, in which I take up some of the problems with Strauss’ reading of Spinoza. See also Errol Harris, Is There an Esoteric Doctrine in the ‘Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus’? (Leiden: Brill, 1978); and Brayton Polka, Between Philosophy and Religion: Spinoza, the Bible, and Modernity, 2 vols. (Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2007), especially vol. 1, appendix 2: “Strauss on the Bible, Philosophy, and Modernity.” But while fruitful work has been done on Strauss’ reading of Spinoza, there has been much less critical
is twofold. First, there is Strauss’ identification of Spinoza with the modern crisis *tout court* and his careful anatomizing of that crisis through a reading of Spinoza’s theological, political, and philosophical views and his autobiography as a modern *epikorus* (heretic). If the crisis of modernity for Leo Strauss is at least partly a Jewish crisis, it is a Jewish crisis seen in the relatively harsh light of the first modern, secular Jew.

The second aspect of Strauss and Spinoza that concerns us here is Strauss’ use of the modern Spinoza to erect the ancient poles of Athens and Jerusalem—his choice to depict Spinoza through the lens of Athens and Jerusalem and equally his choice to depict Athens and Jerusalem as a theological-political predicament, borrowing his language from Spinoza’s major work of politics and religion while hoping to turn this language to his own uses. Strauss’ ambivalence makes it keenly difficult to know of which city, in which era, Spinoza is ambassador. He might be an exemplar of Athens, a philosopher whose overweening confidence in the power of reason to dispel all human mysteries simply exposes the fatal hubris of human desire. Yet this confidence is also uniquely modern, so different from the ancient appreciation of human limits, and indeed ignorance. On the other hand, is Spinoza’s thinking not also on the side of Jerusalem? Is he not the Jew whose rejection of *teshuya* places him in the camp of the modern Zionists—still proudly Jewish, still able to affirm that the God one denies (or simply has no use for) is the biblical God of Abraham? Or yet again, Spinoza as a modern Jew whose denial of Judaism in favor of a generalized enlightenment places him beyond the pale of Jews and Zionists (as well as dissenting Christians) alike—a secular anomaly, uncategorizable, hence in some sense monstrous, if quintessentially modern? Strauss explores all of these possibilities without ever clearly deciding which one is his final view.

What I contend is that Strauss hangs these ambivalences and ambiguities on an especially unlikely thinker—a thinker who is among the few in modernity (or outside it) to challenge—root and branch—the theoretical schema Strauss popularized. It is by virtue of Spinoza that the crisis he unwittingly represents for Strauss can be transformed from the rigid poles of Athens and Jerusalem in ceaseless conflict to the suppler conceptual world of the complex singular. It is the world of Spinoza’s Jerusalem, Spinoza’s Bible, Spinoza’s God—philosophical and faithful, divine and human, theological and political, historical and truthful—that provides grounds for conceiving the relationship

examination of Spinoza’s reading of Strauss, to which task this essay is meant to be a schematic contribution.

33 Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, pp. 10–11.
between reason and revelation in terms other than opposition or conflation—grounds, too, then, for re-conceiving reason and revelation themselves. It is tempting in this light to speculate that Spinoza became a touchstone for Strauss precisely because Strauss sensed that it was Spinoza—ambassador apparent to both ancient cities, to both charged epochs—who could relieve the antagonism in the human soul to which Strauss’ writing is a testament, without thereby collapsing it into meaningless identity or half-hearted assimilation.

3. Progress or Return?

We have this radical opposition: the Bible refuses to be integrated into a philosophical framework, just as philosophy refuses to be integrated into a biblical framework.

—Strauss, “Progress or Return?”

Those who do not understand the distinction between philosophy and theology argue as to whether Scripture should be ancillary to reason, or reason to Scripture.... The latter view is upheld by the skeptics who deny the certainty of reason, the former by the dogmatists.

—Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, chapter 15

Leaving such speculation aside for the moment, let us turn to “Progress or Return?” to assess some of the tangles Strauss lays out there and to look more carefully at Spinoza’s resistance to them. A diffuse, rambling essay covering an impressive range of Strauss’ interests, “Progress or Return?” nevertheless has two principal concerns. The first is the problem of modernity, whose main signature for Strauss is progress. Strauss is trying to understand the significance of progress—for Judaism and the West and for the human condition as such. Not surprisingly, he has decidedly mixed feelings about it. As he puts it most bluntly, “the contemporary crisis of Western civilization may be said to be identical with the climactic crisis of the idea of progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term.”

Yet his tone is also wistful and elegiac: would that progress were possible and that the architects of progressive thought could deliver in reality the confident results they predict in theory. But history shows, life shows—above all, thinking shows—that progress is a deceptive category. Conflict, and the suffering that comes along with it, cannot be prevented,

34 Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 97.
nor can incommensurate truths be resolved or mediated. This conviction is true in all times and places for Strauss—it is one of the pillars of his thinking. What modernity adds to this fact of the human condition is the dissolution of foundational values—good, evil—as absolute reference points, and the substitution instead of progress itself as a categorical imperative:

Modern man is a giant in comparison to earlier man. But we have also to note that there is no corresponding increase in wisdom and goodness. Modern man is a giant of whom we do not know whether he is better or worse than earlier man…. Nothing can be said responsibly about the right use of that immense power. Modern man is a blind giant.35

Strauss is hardly the first to express doubts about the value of progress as a cultural ideal. Indeed, the essay very much reflects its mid-twentieth-century times in its preoccupation with Jewish assimilation, the amorality of modern science, and the substitution of instrumental reason for value-based absolutes. What is noteworthy is what he brings to bear on these problems, the second main theme of the essay, namely, the idea of “return.” On the one hand, the question of return isolates the aspect of modernity that is specific to the modern Jew and the Jewish problem: How does one return to one’s heritage in the wake of its demise? What is teshuva in modernity? On the other hand, it is the West that is in crisis, the West as a whole that needs to return. The familiar intra-Jewish “predicament” is that modernity has been worse for the Jews than the undoubted good of emancipation would have predicted. For Strauss, though, modernity as such is an expression of crisis, for the concept of progress implies the discovery of history, the discovery, namely, that truth is subject to time, that tradition changes, and that there is no end to pursuit and becoming. It is by virtue of the threat to truth raised by the pervasiveness of history that Strauss feels compelled to return us to the “two roots” of Western civilization: “the Bible and Greek philosophy,” in the hope, it might appear, of finding some perennial reference points.36

Yet what is fascinating about Strauss’ move to antiquity is that these cities hardly present a serene bulwark against the crisis of modernity (historicism, progress, ignorance of and indifference to the past). Rather, Strauss’ interest is in the crisis of Athens and Jerusalem themselves (which would be a third crisis after that of Judaism and modernity, though it is sometimes hard to keep count), which he refers to as “the secret of the

35 Ibid., p. 98.
36 Ibid.
vitality of Western civilization.” “Progress or Return?” then, is an essay on these two clashes: the one between antiquity and modernity and the one within antiquity itself, which Strauss finds electrifying and fundamental. This latter clash is not only impervious to being solved (or elegized); we are in fact to live in its very space:

The recognition of two conflicting roots of Western civilization is, at first, a very disconcerting observation. Yet this realization has also something reassuring and comforting about it. The very life of Western civilization is the life between two codes, a fundamental tension. There is, therefore, no reason inherent in the Western civilization itself, in its fundamental constitution, why it should give up life. But this comforting thought is justified only if we live that life, if we live that conflict.37

Whether or not Strauss provides a viable way to live out the tension he found so vital, I suggest at the least that if one were tempted to surmise that Strauss’ problem with progress was the conventional conservative desire for stability and the status quo, one would have to look again. Strauss begins the essay by lamenting the sway of progress. But the plot very soon thickens.

In biblical antiquity, according to Strauss, there is no conception of progress. The prophets continually remind Israel that

originally, in the past, they were faithful or loyal; now they are in a state of rebellion. In the future they will return, and God will restore them to their original place. The primary, original, initial is loyalty; unfaithfulness, infidelity is secondary. The very notion of unfaithfulness or infidelity presupposes that fidelity or loyalty is primary. The perfect character of the origin is a condition of sin—of the thought of sin. Man who understands himself in this way longs for the perfection of the origin, or of the classic past. He suffers from the present; he hopes for the future.38

As Strauss avows in the opening paragraphs, “the beginning is the Garden of Eden.” And again: “man is originally at home in his father’s house. He becomes a stranger through estrangement, through sinful estrangement. Repentance, return, is homecoming.”39 The doctrine of progress, by contrast, expresses the opposite set of values:

Progressive man, on the other hand, looks back to a most imperfect beginning. The beginning is barbarism, stupidity, rudeness, extreme

37 Ibid., p. 116.
38 Ibid., p. 89.
39 Ibid., p. 87.
scarcity. Progressive man does not feel that he has lost something of great, not to say infinite importance; he has lost only his chains…. What the others call rebellion he calls revolution or liberation. To the polarity faithfulness-rebellion, he opposes the polarity prejudice-freedom.\textsuperscript{40}

The first crisis Strauss identifies, then, is this modern substitution of rebellion for reverence of the past. Even if rebellion can itself be a form of return, a form of rehabilitation or reformation, it introduces a “break” with classical values (the values that elevate the classical itself over the modern) that is in some fundamental sense irreparable. Spinoza’s break with Judaism is a case in point for Strauss, namely, a break that understands itself as “progress beyond.”\textsuperscript{41} Spinoza’s critique of the prophets and the rabbis, his vision of a liberal state in which all differences are publicly submerged, and his search for truth outside of authoritative communal structures placed him outside of both revealed religions. In Strauss’ depiction, Spinoza “acquired a strange, or perhaps not so strange, neutrality in regard to the secular conflict between Judaism and Christianity.” Neither made credible claims to redemption. Referring to Spinoza’s famous back-handed compliment to the Jews that, “were it not that the fundamental principles of their religion discourage manliness, I would not hesitate to believe that they will one day, given the opportunity—such is the mutability of human affairs—establish once more their independent state,”\textsuperscript{42} Strauss writes of Spinoza’s view:

\begin{quote}
The sufferings of the exiles are altogether meaningless. There is no guarantee whatsoever that these sufferings will ever cease. But the first condition of entertaining any reasonable hope for the end of the exile is that Jews should get rid of the foundations of their religion, that is to say, of the spirit of Judaism.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

While Strauss entertains the possibility that “this is the earliest suggestion of a purely political solution to the Jewish problem… the first inkling of unqualified political Zionism,” this is not the aspect of Spinoza that Strauss himself stresses. “In fact,” writes Strauss, Spinoza “laid the foundation for the alternative to political Zionism, the solution known as assimilation.”\textsuperscript{44} Assimilation is finally Spinoza’s legacy to the Jews, his

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., pp. 89–90.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 90.


\textsuperscript{43} Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 90.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 91.
break with the religion of his ancestors. If Maimonides was the thinker who enabled Strauss to see the stakes involved in the attempt to live in both Athens and Jerusalem, Spinoza was the thinker who sees the stakes, recognizes the tension, and, as in Pascal’s wager, without the “pretense to synthesize,” simply commits.\textsuperscript{45}

But to what does Spinoza commit? Would he not be the undecidable wedge between both of Strauss’ axes—ancient-modern and Athens-Jerusalem? He is the modern (progressive) thinker who, unlike Strauss’ other modern touchstone, Nietzsche, never gives up the commitment to absolute truth.\textsuperscript{46} He is the archetypal philosopher and critic of religion who remains rooted in and a reader of Jewish sources. Could Spinoza be the thinker who might have freed Strauss from his own dyadic thinking, or, at least, the thinker who might have enabled him to commit to one side over the other—to overcome the epic Maimonidean contradiction between the two cities about which he seemed equally passionate? Again, these may be fruitless speculations and perhaps also insufficiently fair to Strauss’ genuine commitments. Still, on the question of Athens and Jerusalem, ancient and modern, Spinoza is a bastard figure. Where does Strauss find him on his own grid? Is he the fruit of Athens or Jerusalem, or neither? Is he the wise son or the wicked son, the simple son or the one so far outside the tradition that he can no longer ask?\textsuperscript{47}

These are challenging questions for Strauss, and they deserve more attention to the range of his writings than I can give here. Still, they are not impossible to answer, even if the answer does throw Strauss’ template into a certain amount of chaos. At first consideration, Strauss’ Spinoza has to come out of Athens. He exemplifies the principal posture of the philosopher for Strauss, namely, the insistence that “revelation should establish its claim before the tribunal of human reason.”\textsuperscript{48}

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\textsuperscript{45} The reference is to Strauss’ claim that “no one can be both a philosopher and a theologian, or, for that matter, some possibility which transcends the conflict between philosophy and theology, or pretends to be a synthesis of both. But every one of us can be and ought to be either one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology, or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy.” Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 116.

\textsuperscript{46} This is Strauss’ Nietzsche, of course. Strauss predictably misses Nietzsche’s critique of Greek “absolute truth” no less than he misses his connection to biblical roots. For Strauss, nevertheless, Nietzsche at least had the courage to see that “if biblical faith goes, biblical morality must go too, and a radically different morality accepted.” Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 99.

\textsuperscript{47} The reference is to the four sons in the Passover Haggada.

\textsuperscript{48} Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 128.
simply from ignorance of the laws of nature, or that of the Ethics that “God is clearly fully comprehensible,” Spinoza expresses the philosophical *typos* of the restless sage in ceaseless pursuit of wisdom, recognizing, of course, that this universal quest is limited to “the very few individuals who are by nature fit for philosophy.” But he also represents the limits of this genealogy, its inevitable collapse on the grounds of its own hubris. For while Spinoza claims that God can be known, does he prove that this is so? Does he not, as Strauss puts it, necessarily “abstract from those elements of the whole which are not clear and distinct and which can never be rendered clear and distinct?” In the pitched battle between Athens and Jerusalem that Spinoza energetically initiates, does Spinoza himself not unequivocally lose? As Strauss puts it bluntly, “philosophy has never refuted revelation.” This matters to Strauss not because he himself means to defend revelation from reason, though he does repeatedly insist on revelation’s—God’s—right to command human obedience. It matters because it exposes reason’s fatal flaw, its inability to account for its own ineluctable premise, faith in itself (though the Straussian line is equally, and confusingly, that “philosophy must try” nevertheless “to prove that revelation is impossible”—as if, flaws and all, philosophy cannot, should not, withdraw from this effort).

Spinoza matters—this young Jew born and raised in Amsterdam in the grip of a theological-political predicament—because he exposes once again Strauss’ own ambivalence, this time about classical Greek antiquity: his unwillingness either to be done with its glories or to take them to the end of the road. But that is not the end of the matter. For with only a little more reflection, it is obvious that Spinoza cannot be Athens to the biblical Jerusalem. Strauss wrote widely on Plato and considered him the archetypal philosopher. But Plato faced no theological-political predicament. Plato did not need to take the claims of Jerusalem into account. Plato had no concept of revelation understood as the manifestation in time of the eternal good or truth. Moreover, for Strauss, Spinoza is modern, not ancient. He represents progress over return, the secular over the religious. And while Strauss’ reading hardly recognizes it, Spinoza was just as invested in limiting reason as Strauss was—invested, that is, in banishing

49 Ibid., p. 126.
50 Ibid., p. 130.
51 Strauss, “Reason and Revelation,” p. 146. This argument is developed in detail in Strauss’ essay on Spinoza in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.
52 Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 130.
53 Ibid., p. 131.
Greek “speculations” from the interpretation of the Bible and invested in a metaphysics that stressed human ignorance and frailty as much as it did the power (or hubris) to know and understand God. As he observes in chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, “all men are born in a state of complete ignorance, and before they can learn the true way of life and acquire a virtuous disposition, even if they have been well brought up, a great part of their life has gone by.”

Strauss might have sensed this. His Spinoza is accorded the honor of philosopher according to a conception of philosophy (“a clear and distinct account of everything”) that Spinoza himself did not hold. Can Strauss have failed to notice that, when Spinoza says, in the second part of the *Ethics*, that “the human mind has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence,” this follows Spinoza’s painstaking account of the mind’s inadequate (“mutilated,” “confused”) knowledge, which far outstrips the things we know adequately? In Spinoza’s explanation in the scholium to the proposition about the mind’s adequate knowledge of God, he notes that “from this we see that God’s infinite essence and his eternity are known to all.” It follows, he says, that we are capable of the highest kind of knowledge available to us—the knowledge that is able to hold together singularity and eternity (mind and God, self and other). But, he continues, “that men do not have so clear a knowledge of God as they do of the common notions comes from the fact that they cannot imagine God, as they can bodies, and that they have joined the name God to images of things which they are used to seeing. Men can hardly avoid this, because they are continually affected by bodies.” In other words, that we can have true knowledge of God does not mean we can survey, in (finite) totality, all there is to know. Neither the

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57 Ibid., p. 472 (Ilp35).

58 Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge, *scientia intuitiva*, “proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the... formal essence of things” (ibid., p. 478, Ilp40schol.2). This difficult definition is not illuminated until part 5, where Spinoza connects understanding as *scientia intuitiva* with singularity, as in his classic statement that “the more we understand singular things, the more we understand God” (p. 608, Vp24).


60 As Brayton Polka puts the distinction: “Just as Descartes indicates in the third Meditation that, while he cannot grasp (within the confines of certainty) the infinite essence or perfection of God, he can (truly) understand the infinite and reach it in his thought... so Spinoza is careful to distinguish complete (finite, certain) knowledge of God from (infinitely) true knowledge of God (on the part of human beings, including the prophets),” Polka, *Between Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 1, p. 255.
overconfident modern nor the skeptical ancient, Spinoza challenges his readers here and throughout the *Ethics* to make sense of how it is that we do not fully know what we know—that we are not on the way to (in quest of) knowledge but that nevertheless it is exceedingly hard-won, and even, as above, unavoidably inadequate and faulty.

When Strauss speaks of Spinoza as having failed to provide “a clear and distinct account of everything,” he means that he tried and failed to vanquish the claims of revelation from the standpoint of reason alone (Spinoza is “the most extreme... of the modern critics of revelation”).

His “teaching presents the most comprehensive, or the most ambitious, program of what modern science could possibly be,” and his failure to refute revelation thus shows that modern science, in fact much more modest than Spinoza, cannot do so. But even allowing for differences of interpretation and the difficulties of Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, this is a cursory reading. Spinoza’s stated desire in this text is to separate reason and revelation, critically to evaluate the claims of the latter—especially insofar as it has attempted to limit the former—and to re-found their relationship on grounds other than opposition (“mutual contradiction”) or hierarchy (that one should be “ancillary” to the other).

These desiderata, of course, are not *prima facie* inconsistent with an “extreme critique”—one, that is, wherein the examination of the claims of revelation so thoroughly undermines their theological premises that they cannot be said to survive. Indeed, one might very well conclude that revelation does not survive Spinoza’s reading of the prophets or his conception of the corruption of the biblical text, depending on one’s theological commitments. But Spinoza’s consideration of the prophets and the biblical text does not *entail* a rejection of revelation, given the highly variable ways in which revelation is understood in both Judaism and Christianity. This, at least, is not what he set out to do by his own account. What Spinoza does set out to do, and what interests him in a way that revelation on its own does not, is separation—the same interest Strauss has: “two faculties, which are as far apart as can be.” But instead of assuming therefore that theology and philosophy, revelation and reason, are *combatants* for the “one truth,” Spinoza finds them in agreement in all important respects: “by theology I mean the Word of God properly so called, which does not consist in a set number of books....

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61 Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 130.
63 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ch. 15, p. 171.
64 Ibid., p. 165.
65 Ibid., p. 164.
thus understood, if you consider its precepts and moral teaching, will be
found to agree with reason; and if you look to its purpose and end, it will
be found to be in no respect opposed to reason, and is therefore entirely
valid for all men.”66

This is not the context in which to provide a full defense of this read-
ing of Spinoza, though my hope is that it hews closely enough to his texts
to be recognizable and plausible.67 The fact is, however, that the relation-
ship between philosophy and theology is one of the most difficult aspects
of the Theological-Political Treatise. Categorical in maintaining their sep-
aration, Spinoza is just as consistent in connecting them, claiming that
“worship of God and obedience to him consists” not in submission to
his will but in “justice and charity, or love toward one’s neighbor.”68 This
makes theology, of course, not the opposite of philosophy but its partner
and support. For it makes central to theology’s performance the virtu-
ous practice that is, in Spinoza’s philosophy (“the dictates of reason”),
also the signature of power, freedom, and truth (“virtue is human power
itself”).69

Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of
his being than that all should so agree in all things that the Minds
and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one
Body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve
their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the
common advantage of all.

From this it follows that men who are governed by reason—i.e.,
men who, from the guidance of reason, seek their own advantage—
want nothing for themselves that they do not desire for other men.
Hence, they are just, honest, and honorable.70

In one sense, it is fair to say that Spinoza thereby rids his system of
anything like what Strauss called in the preface to Spinoza’s Critique of
Religion “a divine gift, a divine revelation.” Spinoza is the forebear of
precisely the rationalized “ethical monotheism” that powers Strauss’ cri-
tique of modernity. Yet Spinoza is more unpredictable on this score than
his modern Jewish readers often notice. Strauss’ position—that theol-
ogy is a discourse of a commanding God beyond reason—is represented

66 Ibid., p. 169.
67 I take up these issues more deeply in my Spinoza’s Revelation: Religion, Democracy,
Bible.”
68 Spinoza, Theological-Political Treatise, ch. 14, p. 162.
69 Spinoza, Ethics, p. 557 (IVp20dem).
70 Ibid., p. 556 (IVp18schol.iii).
in the *Theological-Political Treatise* by the medieval Bible commentator Alpakhar, according to whom (in Spinoza’s rendering) “reason should be ancillary to Scripture [theology], and completely subservient to it.” To be sure, Strauss does not directly advocate the subservience of philosophy to theology, only that neither can make inroads on the other. But the effect is the same. Philosophy cannot refute revelation, because revelation has to do with submission, not reason. In contemporary parlance, they are playing different language games.

Strauss’ form of separation is designed precisely in fear of what Spinoza’s might seem to involve—the blurring of boundaries. If reason is the same as theology (if they share the same root), then so much the worse for theology, for it becomes dependent on philosophy to make a space for its extra-philosophical claims, which philosophy would never have reason to do. Or conversely, if theology is just the same as philosophy, philosophy does not and cannot exist, for philosophy proceeds only with the assumption that the world is fully knowable—that there is nothing extra-philosophical. One cannot but sympathize with this dilemma, and even appreciate Strauss’ recourse to Athens and Jerusalem as a desperate conceptual measure. Spinoza faced the same dilemma. But, as he observes of Alpakhar, who would have us subordinate our reasoning powers to the literal words of the biblical text:

> It is indeed true that, as long as we are simply concerned with the meaning of the text and the prophets’ intention, Scripture should be explained through Scripture; but having extracted the true meaning, we must necessarily resort to judgment and reason before we can assent thereto. Now if reason, in spite of her protests, is nevertheless to be made completely subservient to Scripture, must this submission be effected with reason’s concurrence, or without it, blindly? If the latter, then surely we are behaving like fools, without judgment. If the former, then it is only at reason’s behest that we accept Scripture.…

As Spinoza points out here, Alpakhar’s insistence that revelation can make our reason submit encounters insuperable difficulties. Alpakhar’s only strategy, according to Spinoza, is silence. He cannot respond to the either/or which shows his position to collapse. Strauss (with Alpakhar) might respond that “behaving like fools” is exactly how reason will always depict anything outside of itself, and that revelation need not worry about such judgments. This fideism is fair as far as it goes. But one wonders why Strauss did not learn more from Spinoza on this question, despite

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71 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ch. 15, p. 166.

72 Ibid., p. 167.
his avowal of Spinoza’s claim on his attention. For Spinoza shares Strauss’ critique of the conflation of reason and revelation. He is not interested in reason’s subsuming theology, or in counting himself among those who imply that “her authority has no brilliance unless it is illuminated by the natural light of reason.”

But he equally rejects the idea that revelation, theology, can just sit there silently, uninterrogated, unconnected, authorized to command obedience with no further rational scrutiny. It is this notion of revelation he seeks to critique (“extremely”). For all this really means in practice, Spinoza finds, is that theologians and pontiffs will run wild with what they take theology to mean, that is, with their own private interests and passions in its guise. There will be nothing to stop theology’s political dominance—its despotism—or its intellectual and psychical dominance of human minds and hearts. There has to be a sense of theology’s logic, even if it need not submit to reason in this revelation. Indeed, theology cannot submit to reason, says Spinoza, for the moment it does, it disappears, an option Spinoza never considers, even if others subsequently foisted this preference back onto him.

Theology, then, has its own sovereignty, and for Spinoza this consists in the biblical wisdom of the prophets—the focus on charity, on justice, on frailty, on empowerment, on faith, that is, the practice of loving one’s neighbor. It is of utmost importance to separate theology and philosophy (between which there is “no relation and no affinity”), because, without doing so, we will make one the measure of the other, draining each of its power. For above all it is not that, once absolutely separate, they are utterly opposed. Faith concerns “obedience and piety,” that is, justice, and philosophy concerns “truth,” namely, “that there is no singular thing in Nature that is more useful to man than a man who lives according to the guidance of reason.”

Each has a rich conception of the significance of both reason and practice, mind and body, self and other. It is that, without separating them, one loses this fullness in each. Philosophy (reason, truth) becomes anemic and otherworldly once it does not have to justify itself in relation to the neighbor; faith (revelation, history) becomes blind and “vainglorious” once it does not have to justify itself in relation to the mind.

Spinoza did not worry about how to hold together the commanding God of obedience and the human desire for knowledge—this was not his theological-political predicament. He conceived knowledge and obedience in tandem, as the Israelites were forced to do in

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73 Ibid., p. 171.
75 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ch. 15, p. 171.
the desert when, exhausted from their servitude, they nevertheless constituted themselves as a free polity.\textsuperscript{76} The example of the Israelites in their immediate post-slavery state is a telling one for Spinoza, for it illustrates his point about the difference between “a slave, a son, and a subject”: A slave is one who has to obey his master’s commands which look only to the interests of him who commands; a son is one who by his father’s command does what is to his own good; a subject is one who, by command of the sovereign power, acts for the common good, and therefore for his own good also.\textsuperscript{77}

It underscores that holding obedience together with knowledge does not suggest either that obedience is not really necessary (since human beings are rational) or that knowledge is but an afterthought to the conventions (or revelations) of law (human or divine) to which we are subject. Spinoza is committed to the proposition that human beings can make law and reason accord with one another. But he is under no illusions about the difficulty of doing so. We need both: like the Israelites in the desert, we are mostly unable to “have so clear a knowledge of God [truth] as [we] do of the common notions” that are before our eyes. Much of our life may pass before we come to do so, and until then, we must arrange our laws as rationally as we can. But if that day should come and we should come to apprehend (or have revealed to us through prophecy, whose sign is righteousness) God, the divine law, the absolute truth with the adequacy of which we are capable, this would not be to jettison the tentative provisions by which we had heretofore lived but to affirm them as its very condition and support. Separation in order to connect, one root to nourish genuine and life-giving difference.

Spinoza’s theological-political predicament is not, then, how can we choose between Athens and Jerusalem, knowledge and revelation; it is, now that we “know” God, why is it that we are still so ignorant? God and philosophy are on the same side, not because of a “pretense to synthesize,” but indeed because they are so different: because their difference is that by which we live (with rather great difficulty, mostly). In Spinoza’s terms, Athens is a myth because reason begins with the recognition that it is not God (not absolute, not eternal, not unchanging). It is precisely Strauss’ notion of Platonic reason (absolute, eternal, and unchanging) that requires limits and barriers to its free expression (although equally

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., ch. 17, pp. 189–190.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., ch. 16, pp. 178–179.
one could say that it needs no limits at all, since it never actually meets up with the world), whereas Spinoza’s notion of reason, ostensibly overweening in its “modern” ambitions, is precisely leaden, inadequate, and slow to attain its ends. Reason, like revelation, is stamped from the beginning with a corporeal imprint, but again, unlike Plato, the point is not to lose this imprint but to empower it.

4. Progress, Ancient and Modern

Strauss’ template cannot handle Spinoza’s claims, though it is still quite complex (or perhaps just confusing) on its own terms. In thinking through the dichotomy of progress and tradition—initially for Strauss an intra-Jewish question of *teshuvah*, return, and secularism in the context of modern Judaism and the rise of modern rationalism—he returns us to antiquity and the question of progress there. While the prophets had no conception of progress, the Greeks valued it, as witnessed by their pursuit of goods that required long-term effort, such as arts and crafts and medicine. Progress, he writes, is “change in the direction of the end,” and the Greeks certainly had this idea, not only in practical matters but also in the area of the intellect, “the perfection of the understanding.” But what, asks Strauss, does this pursuit of a more perfect end imply about the beginning?78

Having begun his essay contrasting the biblical concept of perfect origins with the modern, progressive contempt for tradition and conception of origins as stupid, rude, and barbaric, Strauss is now inclined to re-examine this latter presupposition. If the Greeks believe in progress, could it be that they, too, have a concept of imperfect beginnings? This would forge an intellectual link between classical antiquity and modernity over against biblical antiquity, with the Greeks’ and the moderns’ positing imperfect origins to be redeemed over time and the Bible’s holding to a notion of a “classic past.”79 Strauss might have gone in this direction, though it would have forced him to give up the parity between Athens and Jerusalem over against modernity, even if it did give him a further insight into the polarity of Athens and Jerusalem themselves. This is not the route Strauss takes. The Bible and ancient philosophy may indeed be fundamentally irreconcilable. But they are irreconcilable from within the same basic metaphysical mode. In confronting Greek notions of progress, Strauss reminds us that the ancient philosopher (unlike his modern progeny) does not see progress as an escape from corrupt origins, as if

78 Strauss, “Progress or Return?” pp. 94–95.
79 Ibid., p. 96.
such origins could be supplanted with wisdom itself. Rather, the Greek philosopher is only ever “in quest for wisdom,” the fulfillment of which is “not possible.”

The ancient Greeks, therefore, understand it to be possible to seek to perfect the understanding. However, this seeking is but a coming to the recognition that one is only ever on a path, never at the goal. While this path might sound like modern progress, it is actually much closer to the biblical denial of progress. For while the Greeks see themselves as looking forward and the ancient biblical authors as looking back—while the Greek looks to his inner daemon and the biblical prophets to the commanding God beyond reason—neither, for Strauss, understands time, the finite, the human, the contingent to be the bearer of truth. In the biblical case, time and history spell the dissolution of the Garden of Eden; in the Greek mythos, birth is but a forgetting of the knowledge one once possessed. But in neither case do you have the possibility, as you do in modern progress, that while one’s beginnings might be ignorant, barbaric, and rude, one’s ends can, through one’s own great effort and perhaps also with the help of good fortune, become blessed, if not quite perfect (though this is not how Strauss, who conceives modern progress as hostile to value as such, would put it). Perfection, in Strauss’ Greek and biblical worlds alike, is something over which human beings have little or no control. Either I have lost it and depend on God, or I recognize with true philosophical sagacity that I am only ever on its trail.

For Strauss, the key difference between ancient and modern notions of progress is that in the classical world, intellectual progress is a rarefied undertaking. It is the preserve of the few, not the many, and it refers not to social progress—not to the progress of a society or community or group, as in, say, the movement from inequality to equality. It refers rather to individual, intellectual progress alone: as above, the progress of the philosopher on the quest for wisdom. Modern progress has a much more ambitious set of presuppositions, not only about who can progress but also about what progress intrinsically involves—as Strauss puts it, there is in modernity “a fundamental and necessary parallelism between intellectual and social progress.”

The whole notion, then, of what one is progressing toward changes in this light, becoming not the careful, studied task of a trained elite who know how to keep secrets but the charging forward of the masses toward ends no one has quite predicted. For the moderns, progress is limited by nothing; it is infinite, ongoing, terrifyingly and inexplicably linear. Strauss quotes Engels to this effect, who argues that “truth... can no longer be found in a collection of fixed dogmatic

80 Ibid., p. 95.
81 Ibid., p. 97.
propositions… but only in the process of knowing…. There is no final absolute truth and no final absolute stage of the development…. Nothing is imperishable except the uninterrupted process of becoming and perishing, of the endless ascent from the lower to the higher." Strauss’ response is equal parts incredulity and outrage. His sense, in short, is that this concept is not a good thing for humankind—that it is arrogant, dangerous, and overreaching. In classical concepts of progress, the movement forward in time was limited by periodic catastrophe (cosmic, telluric). In modernity, whether by the aid of modern science or by the ambitions of a rationality out of control—owing nothing to the past, owing nothing to God—progress is literally infinite (although Strauss also notes of Engels that even he acknowledges that we can and will move from the higher back to the lower).

Strauss’ objection returns us to the time in which he is writing. The question of the value of progress is hardly academic from where he sits. The modern claim par excellence, namely, that “once mankind has reached a certain stage of development, there exists a solid floor beneath which man can no longer sink,” has been proved deeply mistaken. Strauss still prefers philosophical answers to this predicament, noting that it stems from giving up on eternal truths rather than from some particular set of political, social, or historical circumstances. As he puts it, “the discovery of history, to state this very simply, is identical with the substitution of the past or the future for the eternal—the substitution of the temporary for the eternal.”

The point, ultimately, is that progress itself runs aground, undermined by the very intellectual engines that drove it. The drive forward only ensures that the truth one is seeking is ever deferred. In Strauss’ bluntest terms:

The facts, understood as historical processes, indeed do not teach us anything regarding values, and the consequence of the abandonment of moral principle proper was that value judgments have no objective support whatsoever. To spell this out with the necessary clarity—although one knows this from the study of the social sciences—the values of barbarism and cannibalism are as defensible as those of civilization.

Strauss was clearly both rattled by history and also convinced by its inevitability as a counterweight to the classical mode. What most captures

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., p. 98.
85 Ibid., p. 101.
his attention is the pretense of history to replace nature (philosophy) and creation (the Bible) as modes of containing and expressing truth. History gives up on truth, he finds, or at least, it subjects it to time—"man's freedom is radically limited by his earlier use of his freedom." In so doing, it re-fashions the very structure of possibility within which Western man had come of age. If history is absent from the ancient world of both the Greeks and the Bible, then Athens and Jerusalem are absent from modernity.

Although, again, there is nothing surprising in Strauss’ apprehensiveness about modern progress, the question that arises from his construction of it is revelatory: where, then, does modern progress—and indeed, history—come from? Strauss tries out two responses. First, given that he identifies a form of progress in ancient Greece, he considers whether Plato’s *Timaeus*, his account of the origins of the cosmos, might not be the source of the idea of a “beginning but no end.” He immediately rules this out due to Plato’s allowance of “regular telluric catastrophe.” He then says: “the source, I think, has to be found in a certain interpretation of the Bible.” This response gives one pause, of course, because Strauss has already told us that progress is alien to the biblical world. He has allowed that ancient Greece had a concept of progress but that the Bible surely has none. He adds that nevertheless one can find such an interpretation in Maimonides, “where you have the beginning—the creation—and no end, and cataclysms are excluded, not by natural necessity, but by the covenant of God with Noah.” Strauss thereby picks out an essential feature of the biblical philosophical worldview: that nature is subordinate to will, to freedom, to relationship, to covenant. By rooting progress in the Bible, one gets a very different picture from either Strauss’ portrait of modernity cut adrift from all values or his invocation of the Greek commitment to the “ascent from the visible”; one gets value itself—creation and covenant alike—articulated in, and indeed as, history.

But Strauss’ commitment to Athenian ways of understanding biblical antiquity, here seen through the lens of Maimonides, wins out. Noting that “precisely on the basis of the Bible, the beginning cannot be imperfect,” he proceeds to undo what he has just said:

Moreover, such additional important notions as the power of sin and of the need for greater redemption counter the effect of the notion of progress necessarily. Then again, in the Bible the core of the process from the beginning to the end is not progress. There is a classic past, whether we seek it at Mount Sinai or in the patri-

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86 Ibid., p. 104.
87 Ibid., p. 96.
archs or whatever else. Furthermore, and quite obviously, the core of the process as presented in the Bible is not intellectual-scientific development. The availability of infinite time for infinite progress appears, then, to be guaranteed by a document of revelation which condemns the other crucial elements of the idea of progress.  

This is a fascinating passage to read. Against his own intuitions about the biblical-philosophical framework, Strauss reasserts the Maimonidean view of biblical origins (“the beginning cannot be imperfect”). While Maimonides’ view dominates Jewish philosophy, it remains a puzzling one. Adam and Eve are created perfect. But they fall into imperfection through their own fault. Yet how is this possible? How does one move (how is one moved) from perfection to imperfection? What is the cause of such a movement? Like the question of how the one becomes many, this philosophical quandary has always passed for a question native to Athens and Jerusalem both. Does God not create the world (the many) from nothing (the one God)? Jerusalem, Strauss’ first impulse suggests, conceives the problem differently. While Adam and Eve are placed in the natural perfection of Eden, there is no life, even in Eden, without desire, without the knowledge of good and evil, without the struggle to repair human (not natural) cataclysm through covenant. Thus, biblical beginnings are imperfect if by perfect one means lacking desire, knowledge, and law. But this lack is not, I take it, what the Bible values. The beginning of life is the beginning of history, and the Bible is perfectly clear: this beginning is burdened, laborious, painful, but also good, true, and wise. The Bible begins with creation. But creation becomes tov me’od—very good—because of the fall into the freedom and responsibility of covenant. As Spinoza puts it, “our actions—i.e., those Desires that are defined by man’s power, or reason—are always good.” Sin and the need for redemption, then, do not obstruct progress (unless one is thinking of the telluric progress of the Timaeus), since progress in the biblical context is not merely the bare quest for wisdom but the tentative and always

89 Ibid., p. 97.
91 In “On the Interpretation of Genesis” Strauss calls the fall a “mystery” and an “accident,” accepting that “man’s original sin, his original transgression, consisted in eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil” while being unable to account for the forfeiture of perfection that, to him, it represents. As Strauss rightly wonders, would not human beings “have had to have some knowledge of good and evil in order to have” the desire for knowledge of good and evil (p. 372)?
92 Spinoza, Ethics, p. 588 (IVapp.III).
contingent possession (and dispossession) of it ("but the other [Desires] can be both good and evil").

Strauss’ own conclusion to the question of the origin of progress is that the nineteenth century brought a “radical modification” in its idea. But this only defers the question. What brought about the nineteenth century? It is hard to know why Strauss avoids the solution right in front of him. He captures the Greek notion of progress, the difference between this notion and the modern one, and some key features of modernity itself. But what Strauss’ template—ancient/modern, Athens/Jerusalem—blinds him to is the mobility of the Bible on these various axes. For the Bible, “the document of revelation,” is also a document of reason, of knowledge, of pursuit and quest, not of the end human beings do not possess, but of the end with which they begin, the knowledge of good and evil. Yes, the Bible conjures a classic past; yes, the Bible conceives history in terms of sin and redemption, thus resisting (though hardly erasing) the human temptation to make themselves the measure of all things, human and divine. Yes, therefore, the Bible is unlike Engels in his positivist (not to say clueless) vein. But it is the Bible, not the Greeks, that makes Engels possible. It is the biblical conviction that truth is in the world and not beyond it that makes its quest so incredibly fraught, and so unlike the more rarefied version in the Greek world. In the Bible, it is humankind, through Adam and Eve, that is charged with living the good (progressing) in light of knowing its difference from evil, and progress is thus intellectual, social, moral, and political alike. Strauss is correct that this concept of progress is different from the Greek one. But his commitment to connecting the two ancient cities prevents him from seeing that on philosophical and not just on religious grounds, Jerusalem is outside the pale of Athens: not the ancient partner to Greece in opposing progress, modernity, history, but rather their very origin and ground.

What this suggests is that for all that Strauss makes of the incommensurability between Athens and Jerusalem, he ultimately understands them in identical terms. Strauss’ Bible is Greek, its God and his commands issuing from the same mysterious place as philosophy’s unreachable telos. Certainly Strauss considers the incommensurability in several different ways. The most straightforward is the one Maimonides makes so much of: “that Greek philosophy teaches the eternity of cosmos or chaos; whereas the Bible teaches creation, implying creation out of nothing.” What’s at stake, says Strauss, is that “only the Bible teaches divine omnipotence,” a

93 Ibid.
94 Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 97.
notion “absolutely incompatible with Greek philosophy in any form.”95 Or, more simply still, “the one thing needful according to Greek philosophy is the life of autonomous understanding. The one thing needful as spoken by the Bible is the life of obedient love.”96 But even these simple, well-attested ways of distinguishing Athens and Jerusalem do not quite hold up to scrutiny. Athens, Strauss shows, cannot support a life of “autonomous understanding”; only the desire for it. While the Bible expresses an obedient subject and philosophy expresses an autonomous one, both, in Strauss’ rendering, are in the identical position of lack in relation to the thing they seek; both begin in a perfection that is constitutively lost to them; both eschew time, progress, and history for the eternally true, however it is expressed (omnipotently or autonomously). This recognition would not surprise Strauss, whose greatest attachment seems to be not to one city or the other but to their complementary opposition, like pieces of a single puzzle—these “two roots,” these foundation stones of the Western soul.97 But Strauss has not thereby succeeded in holding the cities in tension. Indeed, if they were truly incommensurable—as I argue they are—this would be impossible. What he has done instead is use one—Athens—as the measure of the other. In his own terms, this form of “harmonization” was “doomed to failure.”98

Strauss cannily observes that “our intention to speak of Jerusalem and Athens seems to compel us to go beyond the self-understanding of either.”99 Would this not be the key, some neutral middle ground? He rejects such a possibility, presumably because of the difficulty of understanding a relationship outside of its own terms. His recourse is to something that each side shares, something that underlies and thus can explain their difference, such as wisdom or justice. But one can then simply ask his question again: would this something, if it were to connect them, not in fact issue from the self-understanding of one or the other (and if not, how can they be opposed or irreconcilable)? Without an account of what relationship signifies, does this something not then itself split in two: wisdom understood now in one way and now in another, as Strauss does with justice in trying to connect (but then finally opposing) God and Abraham,

95 Ibid., p. 110.
96 Ibid., p. 104. The essay equally surveys the ways in which the Bible and philosophy are the same: both have concepts of divine law, “though they solve that problem in a diametrically opposed manner” (p. 107). Both “agree, indeed, as regards the importance of morality or justice, and as to the insufficiency of morality, but they disagree as to what completes morality” (p. 109).
97 Ibid., p. 104.
98 Ibid., p. 104.
divine and human justice? What is the end to this splitting (or conflating)? What is the ground, what is the nature of the separation?

Strauss clearly prefers the intellectual milieu of Athens, its dramatization that we will only ever be proximal to our ends. It squares with (and no doubt contributed to) the skepticism that he expressed through the desire to hear both reason and revelation: to give each its day and to withhold judgment. This truly seems the posture Strauss is most comfortable with, even though he can also quite passionately insist that “every one of us can be and ought to be either one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology, or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy.” Regardless of where he would put himself on this field, his attraction to Athens, and perhaps to antiquity as such, was consistent with his desire to leave both ends—Athens and Jerusalem, philosophy and theology—as spectral possibilities. But his framework deserts him in the end. Since Athens eternally defers contact with truth, each pole (Athens and Jerusalem, truth and history, reason and revelation) turns ineluctably into its opposite; each is its opposite, because neither is (yet) the ground of itself.

The ironies abound here: that only Jerusalem can serve as the ground of the difference between reason and revelation because it banishes—not preserves—Athens; that modernity’s expulsion of “eternal truth” on the grounds of the Bible’s concept of wisdom in history connects progress with tradition; that philosophy and theology can preserve separate domains (the Straussian skeptical imperative) only if they begin together. Once again, Strauss seems to come close to this recognition himself. In a telling passage, he considers the origin of philosophy from a biblical perspective. Alternating between Greek and biblical accounts of knowledge and understanding—what it is, what it is for—Strauss brings up the fall in order to ascertain the biblical value being conveyed there. He notes, as I quoted in the beginning, that evidently “man is not meant to be a theoretical, a knowing, a contemplating being; man is meant to live in childlike obedience.” But Strauss knows this is not all there is to say about the opening chapters of Genesis. Recalling the story from the first book of Samuel in which the Israelites demand of the prophet that he appoint a king over them so that they might become like other nations, Strauss notes that the kingship is seen as a rejection not of Samuel (who as prophet had watched over the nation) but of God: “it is a kind of rebellion against God, as is the polis and the arts and knowledge.” Every form of human creation is arrogating some

100 Strauss, “Progress or Return?” p. 116.
101 Ibid., p. 115.
power from God. But, he continues, such things that “originate in human rebellion [can] become dedicated to the service of God and thus become holy.” So too with “the problem of human knowledge” as illustrated in the story of the fall:

Man was given understanding in order to understand God’s commands. He could not be freely obedient if he did not have understanding. But at the same time this very fact allows man to emancipate the understanding from the service, from the subservient function, for which it was meant, and this emancipation is the origin of philosophy or science from the biblical point of view. And so the antagonism between them.102

Here Strauss appears to depart from the Maimonidean reading he elsewhere espouses. According to Maimonides, the understanding with which Adam and Eve are blessed in the beginning is not the same understanding by which they fall. Indeed, for Maimonides, the fall is simply a fall from understanding, from the exalted judgments of truth and falsity to the common or conventional judgments of good and evil (which judgments express ignorance of the former understanding, not a lesser version of it). What Strauss is saying above is that the very same understanding can be both obedient and rebellious, servile and emancipated, holy and profane. What he seems to say, in other words, is that knowledge is from the beginning both autonomous and dependent, both rational and religious; that, in short, philosophy and revelation are bound together in their very separation, separate in their very boundedness.

Yet Strauss’ thinking remains reliant on opposition, not dialectic. He can never quite identify what might be the value of conceiving reason and revelation in paradoxical rather than contradictory terms, wherein one is true (valid, empowered) only if the other is also true (valid, empowered)—where they are not fighting for “one truth.” In the above example, the paradox would be that rebellion bespeaks not an original fidelity from which we have unaccountably fallen but a primary, hence divided posture of origination. Neither rebellion nor fidelity can be derived from the other. For each to be true, the other must also be true. Yet they are absolutely different. Put slightly differently, neither understanding nor service can be derived from the other. Each is a critique of the other’s excesses. Yet each is impossible without the other.

102 See also “Jerusalem and Athens,” where Strauss notes that while “the Bible intends to teach that man was meant to live in simplicity, without knowledge of good and evil… the narrator seems to be aware of the fact that a being that can be forbidden to strive for knowledge of good and evil, i.e., that can understand to some degree that knowledge of good and evil is evil for it, necessarily possesses such knowledge” (p. 387).
Convinced, by contrast, that the only model that preserves each value is opposition, Strauss’ great “antagonism”—“the very life of Western civilization”—eventuates in the opposite of what it intends, conflating and confusing its terms. For seeing philosophy as the emancipation of the understanding from its prior subservience only reinstates the fall’s illusion: that once there was a perfect union, and now only (temporary) disunion; that to recover the lost perfection is to lose the thing you now possess. As Strauss rightly notes, “syntheses always sacrifice the decisive claim of one of the two elements.”

But he does not seem to see the identity of synthesis and opposition on this score. Putting the relationship in more dialectical terms, might philosophy instead not be, originally, emancipated? Might emancipation not precisely be a word for origination, for the unrecoverable moment of the birth of two, neither union (perfection) nor disunion (imperfection)—subservience as possible, then, only because the understanding is already emancipated? Would there be any benefit to maintaining the Straussian polar schema (understanding versus service), which collapses what it seems to distinguish, conceiving philosophy as able to maintain its difference from obedience only if it is literally exiled to a different place, a different city—the mirage of Athens from the mirror of Jerusalem?

5. Concluding Genealogical Reflections

To the early Jews religion was transmitted in the form of written law because at that time they were just like children; but later on Moses (Deuteronomy 30:6) and Jeremiah (31:33) told them of a time to come when God would inscribe his laws in their hearts... that is, in [their] minds.

—Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, chapter 12

Philosophy is quest for knowledge regarding the whole. Being essentially quest and being not able ever to become wisdom, as distinguished from philosophy, the problems are always more evident than the solutions. All solutions are questionable. Now, the right way of life cannot be fully established except by an understanding of the nature of man, and the nature of man cannot be fully clarified except by an understanding of the nature of the whole. Therefore the right way of life cannot be established metaphysically except by a completed metaphysics, and therefore the right way of life remains questionable. But the very uncertainty of all solutions, the very

ignorance regarding the most important things, makes quest for knowledge the most important thing, and therefore makes a life devoted to it the right way of life.

—Strauss, “Progress or Return?”

Strauss’ depiction of Spinoza as a philosopher is crucial to unraveling the logic and implications of Strauss’ dyadic thinking. On the one hand, Strauss knows that Spinoza is not a philosopher in the sense he describes in this epigraph. It is precisely Spinoza’s intention, according to Strauss, to establish a “completed metaphysics” and so precisely Spinoza who represents the arrogant modern descent from ancient wisdom. At the same time, the completed metaphysics Spinoza ostensibly failed to secure was for Strauss structurally identical to the metaphysics of Plato: serenely above history, disconnected from authority and politics, pursuing truths as they are in themselves. Or so it seems. Spinoza was so many things to Strauss—he straddled so many crises: Western, Jewish, secular, religious—that it is difficult to keep track of the sum of his symbolic resonances. What is ironic is that it is Spinoza, finally, who operates as both the one on whom Strauss “leaned very heavily” and the one who proves his undoing. Strauss and Spinoza are kindred spirits of a kind. Certainly, the opening to chapter 15 of the Theological-Political Treatise concerning the separation of theology and philosophy seems identical to Strauss’ effort to keep both discourses separate. It is Spinoza, though, who helps us to see the best way to achieve this separation—keeping them close, intricately involved, yet ineradically different. What this relationship depends upon is the connection between progress and return, hence between the Bible and modernity, whose reason and commands work together. In Spinoza’s terms, that the mind has an adequate knowledge of God is not a substitution for revelation but an expression of it, an expression, namely, of the complex and indeed miraculous work of bringing this knowledge to fruition—the theologico-political-philosophical predicament above all (and for all). The concept of revelation that is threatened by this work—that sees this knowledge as philosophy’s illegitimate incursion onto the antagonistic grounds of faith—is, irony of ironies, itself merely a philosophical parody. There is no Athens and Jerusalem that is not simply a reproduction of the split between an antiquity and modernity that conflates them. We need a new template.

Like many of his medieval predecessors, Strauss did not see what biblical prophecy made possible not only for revelation but also for reason—that reason need not be imagined only as the faculty by which we seek a wisdom we shall never fully attain. Reason and reasoning can also
express the confrontation, frail and inexpert, with the wisdom we do have, a revolution in the history of thought. Consistent with his medieval interlocutors, then, Strauss does not make it possible to comprehend the ground of the separation between reason and revelation upon which he repeatedly insists, and indeed, as Strauss saw it, there could be no such ground. One stands on one side and looks over the abyss at the other, transfixed by their “unresolved conflict” yet able only to be “one or the other.” It is this “one or the other” that proves incoherent with Spinoza’s hard questions in view. For what is involved in Spinoza’s insistence that theology and philosophy are separate is the recognition that one can never be only “one or the other,” that the separation is possible only on the basis of connection. Prophets require rational listeners to judge what they say and do; reason requires moral certainty in cases not subject to mathematical proof. It is neither shocking nor fatal to Spinoza’s concept of reason to show that it presumes faith (morality, solidarity, tenacity, and, yes, even the ultimate Straussian matrix, law), not as its complementary or contradictory opposite nor as its true meaning and identity, but as its paradoxical other, its “neighbor.” This is, indeed, pace Strauss and his many sympathetic readers, what Spinoza aims to show in his major works from beginning to end.

What is most fascinating about Spinoza’s place in the history of Jewish thought is that, while he has always been charged with selling out the Jews (and religion in general) for the sake of reason, this judgment can be made only from the standpoint of the Straussian assumption that reason is alien to the tradition—alien in precisely the sense that it erases tradition as such in favor of universal norms and dissolves the mystery and authority of God through its overweening ambition to plug every conceptual hole. In this light, Spinoza’s error consisted in his fundamental commitment to rationality, which implied, *eo ipso*, his betrayal of his people and their God. In other words, he simply took reason too far.

The surprise of Spinoza’s error comes most to life in comparing him with his medieval predecessor. For it is one of the great unarticulated ironies in Jewish history that it is Maimonides, whose thought divides between the Greek and the Hebrew, who is thought to save the Jewish canon—the Jewish tradition—from heresy and collapse. The irony is that it is Maimonides who, unlike Spinoza, truly does embrace reason as the purified, incorporeal nous that ascends above all human vicissitudes, and who thus faces the problem of the eradication of the tradition he (unlike Spinoza) still strenuously wants to defend. For Strauss, as for so many other readers, Maimonides is nevertheless the exemplary figure in Jewish

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philosophy, because, in the face of the threat of which he himself (in his love of Greek wisdom) might be said to be the sole cause, he seeks to limit philosophy’s influence on religion and politics. It is thus Maimonides who saves Judaism, because he precisely recognizes philosophy’s powerful ambitions and has the wisdom to cut it off at the pass: “Maimonides proves that reason has a limit and that it must thus accept the supra-rational teachings of Revelation, without being able to understand and hence to prove them.”

Maimonides, it must be admitted, is a cipher for and symbol of so many modern Jewish hopes and aspirations that he is an impossibly unstable figure even were it not for his own deployment of contradiction. The point is to illuminate the co-dependence of two judgments: Maimonides’ orthodoxy and Spinoza’s heresy, judgments of which Strauss is hardly the original author but, again, whose icon Athens and Jerusalem serves both to express and to explain. Maimonides is a “good” Jew and Spinoza a “bad” one because, while each pursues a life rigorously devoted to philosophy, Maimonides is in command of the place where philosophy must come to an end—where Athens must cede the ground to Jerusalem. Spinoza, by contrast, recognizes no such limits to philosophy and thus, the story goes, simply chose Athens over Jerusalem. Both, for Strauss, admit that the two cities cannot be reconciled, but each responds differently to this recognition. Only Maimonides is able to defend each realm on its own terms—only Maimonides is and remains for posterity a Jewish philosopher, even if, in the end, Strauss thinks Maimonides’ private affinity was for Athens.

Virtually all modern Jewish thinkers, beginning with Mendelssohn, follow Maimonides in conceiving of reason in Greek terms (noncorporeal, eternal, transcendent) and thus as an essential challenge to Jewish law and identity. As Leora Batnitzky details, the solutions they pose to this challenge over time increasingly involve the attempt to “fuse” the Greek and the Hebraic together—to see reason (or ethics) as the key to Judaism itself by founding revelation on a prior rational or ethical commitment. The Judaism of ethical monotheism, the Judaism of the neighbor, the stranger, the face, is the Judaism which makes a supreme virtue of the


106 This is Strauss’ conclusion in “The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed,” one of Strauss’ three essays illustrating his theory of esoteric writing in Persecution and the Art of Writing.

107 Batnitzky, Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas, p. xix.
necessity that one is stuck with these two opposing discourses. Perhaps, the logic goes, they are really one.

This reduction of the two to one is Strauss' biggest complaint. The elegance of Maimonides' Platonic solution is that he was properly respectful of the incommensurability of reason and revelation, the only way, in Strauss' logic, he could keep both. Indeed, it is part of the piety with which Maimonides' legend is burnished that he seemed to recognize the sacrifice involved in loving these two highest goods. In this light, it makes no difference whether one concludes, with Strauss (and Spinoza), that Maimonides would finally have the philosopher sacrifice the law to reason, or, with other readers, that he would have the philosopher subsume reason in the law. 108 Both positions enunciate the Platonic principle that one cannot inhabit the world of law, politics, and religion at the same time—on the same grounds—as one inhabits the world of truth. To Strauss, this bespeaks the entirely praiseworthy recognition that each discourse must therefore, at least publicly, rein itself in to make room for the other. Most urgently in a modern context, reason must be prevented from challenging and thus hollowing out the prescriptions of law even if privately one experiences law as but a steppingstone to (private, solitary, nonpolitical) philosophical truth. 109 No one since Spinoza has challenged the very terms of analysis, the very construct of Athens and Jerusalem with which Maimonides is operating. No one has sought to disrupt the image of Maimonides as a thinker in command of the space between them.

For Strauss, modern Jewish thinkers' erroneous collapse of the two into one is at least partly the fault of Spinoza, whose perfervid rationalism simply abandoned revelation in pursuit of "Enlightenment." 110 Even though later thinkers sought to recover the tradition from Spinoza's critique, they did so wounded by his monism and unable to do anything other than seek to synthesize what Maimonides had wisely kept apart.


109 To be sure, these claims do not mesh with a third wing of scholarship on Maimonides which, post-Strauss, has been determined to downplay the incommensurability of Maimonides' two discourses altogether. This "wing" is represented in the work of Isadore Twersky and David Hartman. See Twersky, Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); and Hartman, Maimonides: Torah and Philosphic Quest (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976). Maimonides himself, after all, never seems to suggest that they are incommensurable, and even seems to hold that one must have one (law) in order to complete or perfect the other (philosophy). But the controversies in the scholarship on Maimonides concern only the question of how he understood his two discourses to be related, with the one side holding and the other denying that there was a contradiction between them.

110 See Smith, Reading Leo Strauss, p. 72.
What these thinkers, along with Strauss, fail to see, however, is that it is Maimonides who is a monist on their terms, for the poles of Athens and Jerusalem cannot but be identical in their very opposition. That is, Strauss’ Maimonidean two cities cannot hold difference between them, for there is no ground which, without conflation or opposition, they truly share. One is sentenced either to opposing them (occupying only one), as some of Maimonides’ readers do, or to conflating them, as the others do and as Judaism’s modern Maimonideans do. Both are right. That is, both truly reflect Maimonides himself and the two (but really also one) discourse(s) he propounds. I am suggesting, in other words, that the very thing Strauss most laments—the modern secular coupling and confusion of religion and reason—is the inevitable fruit of his own ideal type, the eventuality his own genealogy perfectly predicts. It could be said thereby that Maimonides, despite admirable tenacity, is not a very good Jew after all. Or perhaps (and would this not be all one could finally say about the contradictions in his thought?), he was a pious and committed Jew who simply could not—he had not the tools to—give an account of why he should remain one.

This would be my suggestion, at least: that from Maimonides to Levinas there runs the tortured inevitability that Judaism cannot survive the incursion of Athens—that two become one without resistance, and that this one is fatal to each side. But this revision is not all there is to say. For, I have claimed, Athens is a misidentified double, a whitewash over the more subtle doubleness that disrupts the rational and the religious. To launch this genealogy, one needs to revisit Spinoza and his claim that one becomes—because it is constituted as—two.

The story has been told that, since Spinoza is a Maimonidean, he is a traitor, for on Maimonidean grounds, he fails to stop reason from triumphing over religion, over history. Spinoza is a Maimonidean, and therefore he is unfaithful to Maimonides (that is, Judaism). It is only the first part of this statement that I contest here. Spinoza is no Maimonidean, and his infidelity to Maimonides is a fidelity to the one thing Maimonides and his readers and inheritors could never figure out: how to hold together reason and law without contradiction, complementarity, or conflation—how to embody them in the same corpus, the same place, the same city. It would not then be that the two always threatened to become one. It would be instead that the one was always giving rise to two, and that precisely because of their proximity these two could never simply be joined.

Spinoza’s concept of reason makes it possible to re-imagine difference, not as something that threatens reason or that reason must correct but as something disruptive or internal to reason itself. This erases one
of the principal ways of differentiating reason from revelation, for traditionally it is only the latter, insofar as it meets up with history, which can contain or which symbolizes difference (between God and human, heaven and earth, eternal and temporal): it was revelation, Jerusalem, that differentiated itself from Athens precisely by showing that Athens, reason, was identity, plenitude, eternality, with no breaks. This, Spinoza shows, is true only of Greek reason. It is not true of reason in its biblical iteration. The West I envision through this narrative is one in which it is only because reason is broken (by law, by history, by faith) that it can misidentify its own origins in Eden (which misidentification Genesis lucidly narrates), in Athens, in the place of total union, the place it, we, never were and can thus always fantasize. Athens is Jerusalem’s absolute limit, its fantasy, and its myth. It is not that no one ever lived there. It is that, post-Eden, there is no way back except mythically, in the contradictory terms of which Strauss’ dyad is both sign and symptom.

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