

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Susan Orr, *Jerusalem and Athens: Reason and Revelation in the Works of Leo Strauss* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), ix + 245 pp., cloth \$59.00, paper \$23.95.

WILL MORRISEY

The political philosophizing of Leo Strauss first comes to sight, for many students, in the opposition between natural right and historicism, or perhaps in the opposition between ancient and modern. But for Strauss himself, according to his account in the Preface to the English translation of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, political philosophy came to sight when, as "a young Jew born and raised in Germany," he "found himself in the grip of the theologico-political predicament" (New York: Schocken Books, 1965, p. 1). Understood in light of the high rather than the low, this predicament resolves into the opposition or apparent opposition between revelation and reason. Strauss very nearly begins his account of the results of his investigation by admitting that unassisted human reason—thought governed by the principle of noncontradiction—cannot refute the testimony of the Bible. Aware of the political dangers of this admission, which become even more acute when Biblical motifs are 'secularized,' Strauss, famously, turns to an investigation of premodern political philosophy, wandering far from Jerusalem, but without ever forgetting what Jerusalem stands for.

Susan Orr has written a commentary on "Jerusalem and Athens," an essay that is in some sense central to Strauss's *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*. Concerned that some of Strauss's students have wandered altogether too far from Jerusalem, Orr seeks to remind them, and all students of Strauss, of what Jerusalem stands for in the political philosophy of Leo Strauss. At the end of her introduction she frames the question this way: Leo Strauss, "cautious nihilist" or "reluctant believer" (p. 18)? Thus, in good Straussian fashion, she compels us to ask if Strauss might have been a reluctant nihilist or a cautious believer, or perhaps even neither a nihilist nor a believer, but something else (for example, a Platonic political philosopher).

Orr's introduction is the first of seven chapters. In Chapter 2, "Preliminary Reflections," she observes that Athens and Jerusalem represent "the two great traditions of philosophy and faith" (p. 22), of human guidance, freedom, contemplation, and progress as distinguished from divine guidance, obedience, and return. She thereby compels us to consider whether philosophy and faith are equally traditions, or if both *are* traditions. She goes on to present an elegant and accurate outline of Strauss's essay, commenting that the central section is devoted to "Greek counterparts" of the Biblical account of genesis, and that the central paragraph of the essay "deals with the curse of Canaan, the excellence

of Nimrod, and the Tower of Babel”—a paragraph which, “according to Strauss, contains the biblical understanding of the beginning of man as a political animal” (p. 32). This observation compels us to consider that the phrase “political animal” most immediately calls to mind the political thought of Aristotle, a student of Plato.

Chapter 3 contains an ingenious argument concerning one aspect of the theme of beginning or genesis. Strauss observes that for “Jerusalem” the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, whereas for “Athens” the beginning of wisdom is wonder. Orr asks, Is not Biblical awe akin to Greek *wonder*? (She thus draws our attention to Strauss’s own denial, in another place, that awe is akin to wonder.) Orr continues: by emphasizing fear, not awe, Strauss artfully conceals “the compelling rationality of Jerusalem”; he does this because he is “lulling the atheists to sleep” (p. 49). Why would Strauss sing this lullaby of Broadway? Because, in his time and place, the reigning opinion is atheistic. To be a man of faith today is to blaspheme against a militant and powerful atheism, an atheism that will confine the scholar of religious faith to some academic ghetto.

In singing this song, Strauss partakes of an art common to Jerusalem and Athens, Orr argues. Strauss prepares dogmatic atheists to awaken to what will be for them a new, *reasoned* consideration of “Jerusalem” (p. 56). In the essay itself, of course, Strauss contrasts ‘scientific’ Biblical criticism not with the Bible itself but with natural theology. Strauss remarks that he will begin on the surface of the Bible, where both orthodox believers and ‘scientific’ historians begin.

In her central chapter, Orr writes that Strauss describes Jewish and Islamic revelation as perfect law, not dogma, as rational systems, even if revealed through a mere human being, a prophet. She is artfully silent on Strauss’s description of the “loyal philosophers” or *falsafa* as nonorthodox. Orr observes that Strauss’s emphasis on the coherence, rather than the divine inspiration, of the Biblical account of genesis once again softens the dogmatism of atheists, who will now admire that coherence without bristling prematurely at the question of its source. Neither Strauss, nor Orr following Strauss, shirks the question of the Bible’s source. Orr writes that Strauss “says that man shares with God” not so much reason as an “ability to change his ways” (p. 69). If God is “unpredictable,” then philosophy, governed by the principle of noncontradiction, “cannot touch” him (p. 69). It might be added that philosophy, then, cannot touch man either, that political philosophy is impossible and that Heidegger is right. If the “seeming contradictions” of God in the Bible demonstrate the ability of God to change His ways, this does admit “the possibility that the Bible is inspired” (p. 73), but it leaves open whether the Bible was inspired by God or by (equally changeable) men. In pointing to “the fundamental inscrutability of God” (p. 86), one might suspect that Strauss invites us to wonder

rather than to fear. But if one wonders rather than fears, one need not engage in either early-Heideggerian assertiveness or late-Heideggerian passivity.

According to the Bible, human life is not originally political. God intended man to be an apolitical being of childlike innocence governed by God. Man was not intended to know the good, morally or intellectually. “The difference between the Bible’s first discussion of politics and, for instance, Aristotle’s assertion that man is political by nature is astonishing” (p. 83), Orr rightly comments. Strauss’s central paragraph describes “political life . . . as we know it now” (p. 90): the human, Nimrodian attempt to unite mankind by force fails when God destroys the tower of Babel and confuses the tongues of the inhabitants, scattering them to the ends of the earth. This prevents “a worldwide kingdom” (p. 90). One might add to Orr’s account that in this paragraph Strauss sides with the Biblical teaching against not only Nimrod but Hegel, (most immediately) Kojève, and all who would commit the sin against the Holy Spirit by replacing the Holy Spirit with the Absolute Spirit. By doing so, Strauss does not necessarily commit himself fully to Biblical conviction, but rather challenges us to see why ‘universalizing’ reason does not commit us to universal or worldwide government.

Perhaps these wonderings about God, including his wonderings about God’s justice in the story of Abraham and Isaac, lead Strauss to shift his attention from Genesis to Exodus, specifically, the teaching on God’s name. Here Strauss says “I believe,” not “I know,” and translates the Tetragrammaton not as “I am that I am” but as “I shall be what I shall be.” This reemphasizes the changeability of God, even as it emphasizes the covenants, the promises of God. Covenants require predictability, one might note. Following Strauss, Orr rightly observes that “I am that I am” is too metaphysical to fit Biblical thought, too Being-oriented. “[O]ne can even go further” and “say that it is difficult even to speak abstractly in Hebrew” (p. 93). God ‘is,’ so to speak, pure willing, not pure thought thinking itself; God is a person, not an ‘it.’

In her fifth chapter, Orr discusses Strauss’s account of the “Greek counterparts” of Genesis, centrally, the account of Hesiod. Strauss here admits that the Torah is not a coherent whole, but a compilation, now that he has atheists thinking rather than merely disbelieving. Strauss uncompromisingly prefers the Biblical God, who is wise, and whose jealousy of man’s love stems “not out of need, but out of concern for us” (p. 103), to Hesiod’s Zeus, who is jealous of Metis because Metis has wisdom that Zeus lacks. Aristotle reflects “Greek” presuppositions in asking “whether it is prudent to call a man happy until after he is dead so as not to provoke the envy of the gods” (p. 103). (Elsewhere, we know, Strauss in effect questions the piety of Aristotle, by noticing that the classical political philosophers, including Aristotle, exhibit the ancient city more as a natural than as a holy city [*The City and Man*, pp. 240–41]. This may mean that the Philosopher feared human envy more than divine.) At any rate,

the gods of Greece are ruled by fate, by a force; the ultimate power in the Greek universe is impersonal, 'beyond good and evil.' Aristotle's god, not to be confused with fate, is of course pure thought thinking itself. Pure thought thinking itself transcends justice and injustice, although it does not transcend goodness. Be that as it may, Aristotle's god is not a jealous god, any more than the God of the Bible is an envious one. To reflect upon the differences and similarities between envious, jealous, and neither envious nor jealous gods is to reflect upon the theme of 'Jerusalem and Athens'—though not, to be sure, to exhaust it. Plato's god is closer to the Biblical God than is Aristotle's. Orr notes that Plato's theology, with its talk of providence, is both the closest "Greek" thing to the Biblical account of God and likely to be a noble lie (p. 114).

In the sixth chapter, Orr turns to the second, much shorter, part of Strauss's essay. In "On Socrates and the Prophets" Strauss shows how *not* to bring the Bible and Plato together. He sets up a contrast between himself and the Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen. They diverge on the issue of historicism. "By combining the social ideals of Plato and the prophets, [Cohen] envisioned a world of the future in which there would be no suffering, and no distinctions among men" (p. 128). Orr thereby points us to the reflection that historicism is that part of philosophic thought that most closely imitates Biblical providence. Has philosophy corrupted religion, or vice-versa? (Or has each corrupted the other?) Perhaps this is one reason why Strauss distinguishes reason from revelation, even when he takes pains to defend revelation from charges of irrationality.

The problem of historicism, and of the politics historicism spawns, raises the problem of false prophets. In one of her most insightful passages, Orr remarks that Strauss does not "make the traditional arguments for distinguishing false from true prophets": that false prophets are those who contradict Mosaic law; that true prophets "demonstrate the veracity of their calling through miracles" (p. 136). Rather, in Strauss's words, "false prophets trust in flesh, even if that flesh is the temple in Jerusalem, the promised land, nay, the chosen people itself, nay, God's promise to the chosen people if that promise is taken to be an unconditional promise and not as part of a Covenant" (p. 136). This attack on materialism is indeed a kind of Platonism and stands in opposition to all prophecy-of-the-flesh, whether it be dialectical materialism or the dialectical immaterialism of the Absolute Spirit. This stance comports with Strauss's opinion that Socrates is "by Strauss's definition, a pious man" (p. 140), one "who investigates the human things and leaves divine things alone" (p. 141). Moreover, "[f]rom Socrates and therefore philosophy's perspective, the prophets have a beneficial purpose" (p. 143); philosophy "lacks teeth" (p. 144), but prophets, as orators, do not, and (one might add) philosophers might influence the thought of prophets. That it is not a good thing for prophets' impulses to rule philosophers may be seen in the history of historicism.

In her concluding chapter, Orr accurately asserts that Socrates, unlike Nietzsche, does not hold it possible to unite Jerusalem and Athens, to synthesize reason and revelation. Strauss thereby establishes himself as “the new guide”—a better guide than Nietzsche—for perplexed moderns (p. 148).

A gentle but firm guide to the perplexed reader of Strauss, Orr proceeds with careful judgment, slowing down impatient souls who want the philosopher ‘to get to the point.’ She knows that a philosopher wants his student to be the one who gets to the point, and none too hastily. The impulse to get to the point too hastily yields an undue agitation for eschatological relief.