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## Response to Roundtable on “Jerusalem and Athens”



It is often helpful to ask what implicit question any given text or author is attempting to answer. When it comes to what remains of the vexed issue of the relation between “Athens” and “Jerusalem,” such an approach is especially useful. When Tertullian asked and answered his famous question about Athens’ relation to Jerusalem, he sought, of course, to answer the more particular question about the nature of Christian faith. As I recently argued in these pages, when contemporary postmodern philosophers argue that Jerusalem has everything to do with Athens, they are trying to answer an implied question about the limits and scope of philosophy in a day and age in which it is increasingly difficult to embrace the remnants of one enlightenment story about universal reason and human progress in history and politics.<sup>1</sup>

What, then, is the unspoken question to which the papers collected in this issue are an answer? Each of the papers is concerned to show that “Jerusalem,” despite claims to the contrary, is in fact, and always was, rational. Just as Tertullian attempted to reject the prevailing view of his age that philosophy had something to teach Christians about Christian

<sup>1</sup> Leora F. Batnitzky, “On Reaffirming a Distinction Between Athens and Jerusalem,” *Hebraic Political Studies* 2:2 (Spring 2007), pp. 211–231. In that article I argued that the denial of a distinction between Athens and Jerusalem is philosophically dangerous because it ultimately reduces philosophy to history, since philosophy is no longer understood as an activity that can, potentially at least, move from opinion to truth. At the same time, the denial of a distinction between Athens and Jerusalem is theologically dangerous, because it ultimately elevates philosophy to religious heights. I do not make this argument in this response, though I believe the response and previous article are consistent with one another.

faith, so too the three authors of the papers included in this issue attempt to reject what they take to be the prevailing view that Jerusalem is irrational.

I wholeheartedly agree with the authors that “Jerusalem” is concerned with reasons and reasoning; that, for instance, when Abraham argues with God in Genesis 18, he does so from a rational and even protolegal perspective. Abraham seeks to *prove* to God that it is unjust to destroy Sodom and Gemora and he asks God to follow the dictates of justice and reason. Like Abraham, the Bible generally and later Jewish traditions more specifically do not reject reason but use reason as a mode of relating to the divine. This is all true. However, my question to the authors is, don’t we already know this? As they *suggest*, anyone who opens the Bible and reads it (not to speak of later Jewish texts) knows this to be true. Why, then, are the authors trying to answer a question to which we already know the answer? To what, more specifically, are they responding?

In providing an affirmative response to the inherent question of whether Jerusalem is rational or not, each paper, either explicitly or implicitly, has an assumed view of Leo Strauss’ outlook on the relation between Athens and Jerusalem in mind. The consensus seems to be that Strauss claimed that Athens was rational and Jerusalem was not. In my brief response, I want to suggest that this is not Strauss’ view. I make this argument not only as a corrective to misunderstandings of Strauss but, more importantly, as an effort to consider what the question is that we should be asking about the relation between Athens and Jerusalem.

Strauss never claimed that Jerusalem is irrational. In fact, for Strauss, Jerusalem and Athens are just as rational or irrational as each other. Both Jerusalem and Athens begin with non-rational starting points for truth—in the case of Jerusalem, with the authority of the Bible, and in the case of Athens, with the authority of the individual philosopher. These are non-rational starting points because their veracity cannot be proven beyond any reasonable doubt. But as Strauss makes abundantly clear, this is much more of a problem for Athens than it is for Jerusalem, because Jerusalem never makes the claim that it begins with self-evident truth.

Jerusalem and Athens each reason from their respective non-rational starting points.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Strauss does emphasize that revelation cannot be proven philosophically, but this certainly does not make revelation irrational. Indeed, Strauss does make an epistemological argument vis-à-vis Athens and Jerusalem, but this epistemological claim reflects the

<sup>2</sup> Strauss makes this point again and again throughout his writings. See, for instance, Strauss’ most well-known, American work, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 75–76.

shortcoming of Athens, not Jerusalem. As Strauss puts it, to disprove revelation philosophically "would require at least the success of the philosophical system: man has to show himself theoretically and practically as the master of the world and the master of his life; the merely given must be replaced by the world created by man theoretically and practically."<sup>3</sup>

Confusion about Strauss' view stems from taking his statements out of context and from not appreciating the interrelated epistemological and political arguments he makes about the relation between Athens and Jerusalem. It is well known that Strauss defines philosophy in terms of wonder and revelation in terms of obedience.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, obedience refers not to an irrational conviction but rather to obedience to the law. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Strauss, it is important to recognize that when he writes about revelation, he means specifically Jewish and Islamic conceptions of revelation, in contradistinction to a Christian notion of faith.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this brief response, the point is not whether Strauss gets Judaism, Christianity, or Islam right, but rather that he defines biblical revelation (for better or for worse) in terms of practical action, or obedience to the law. Strauss' notion of obedience corresponds not to a Kierkegaardian leap of faith but to the Israelite response to the book of the covenant presented to them by Moses—"na'aseh v'nishma," "we will do and [then] we will hear" (Exodus 24:7). Plainly with this well-known phrase in mind, Strauss writes, "By saying that we wish to hear first and then to act to decide, we have already decided in favor of Athens against Jerusalem."<sup>6</sup>

A full consideration of the relation between Athens and Jerusalem in Strauss' thought is obviously beyond the scope of this response. But I would like briefly to locate, within the development of his thought, the place in which he moves beyond a consideration of only the epistemological question about the relation between Athens and Jerusalem (again in which Athens, not Jerusalem, always comes up short) to a broader concern with both the epistemological and political relations between the two. Let me be clear that in recounting the political dimension of Strauss'

<sup>3</sup> Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, "The Bible rejects the principle of autonomous knowledge and everything that goes with it. ... The mysterious God is the last theme and highest theme of the Bible. Man is not master of how to begin; before he begins to write he is already confronted with writings, with holy writings, which impose their law on him" (Kenneth Hart Green, ed., *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, [Albany: SUNY Press, 1997], p. 374).

<sup>5</sup> On this issue, see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), especially pp. 18–19, 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

concern with the relation between Athens and Jerusalem, I mean neither to defend nor to criticize his intellectual narrative but rather to reach a better appreciation of Strauss' implicit question when he considered the relation between Athens and Jerusalem.

In a 1936 essay on the political science of Maimonides and Farabi, Strauss reconsiders the meaning of prophecy for Maimonides. While most interpreters, including Strauss in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* and in parts but not all of *Philosophy and Law*, viewed Maimonides' conception of prophecy in epistemological terms, Strauss now argues that Maimonides' innovation was to think of prophecy in political terms. According to Strauss, "Maimonides neither wished nor was able, nor had any need, to lift the veil which conceals the origins of the Torah, the foundation of the perfect nation." Yet the attentive reader will notice that Maimonides distinguishes between Moses, the lawgiver, and all other prophets. Maimonides stresses Moses' exalted status, argues Strauss, because for Maimonides Moses is the Platonic philosopher-legislator. This emphasis on the uniqueness of Moses is the core of Maimonides' political philosophy, because "Not the mystery of its [the Torah's] origin, the search for which leads either to theosophy or 'Epicureanism,' but its end, the comprehension of which guarantees obedience to the Torah, is accessible to human reason."<sup>7</sup>

Obedience to the law and the philosophical meaning of the law are two different matters that are reflected in what Strauss argues is Maimonides' dual conception of law. The exterior, literal meaning of the law serves to uphold the political community in which certain forms of behavior and belief are required, while the ideal meaning of the law is a matter of philosophical speculation only for those who are capable of such speculation. This dual conception of law parallels the dual character of Maimonides' writing, which offers a "moderate" reading meant for the masses and a "radical" reading meant for the philosophical reader.<sup>8</sup> As Strauss would later elaborate in greater detail, this dialectical tension lies at the heart of Maimonides' style of writing and argumentation. Maimonides is able to balance properly the relation between praxis, obedience to the law, and theory, the mystery of the law's origins, not by conflating them but by keeping them in continual dialectical tension.

Strauss credited Farabi's interpretation of Plato for his rethinking of the political dimension of medieval rationalism: "Farabi had discovered

<sup>7</sup> Leo Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," *Interpretation* 18:1 (1990), pp. 15–16.

<sup>8</sup> Strauss elaborates on this issue in a 1937 essay, "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Teaching," in J.B. Trend and H. Loewe, eds., *Isaac Abravanel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), pp. 93–129.

in the politics of Plato... a golden mean which is neither a compromise nor a synthesis, which is hence not based on the two opposed positions, but which suppresses them both, uproots them by a prior, more profound question, by raising a fundamental problem, the work of a truly critical philosophy."<sup>9</sup> A truly critical philosophy, argues Strauss, is not one that finds final answers but one that continually asks questions. Farabi, and Maimonides who followed him, came to a golden mean by which both revealed law and philosophy were given their due, and by which a good society and the philosophical freedom to question were properly balanced. Strauss suggests that a compromise or synthesis between revealed law and philosophy makes this balance impossible.

In this very brief account of the development of Strauss' thought, we have seen that Strauss describes Athens, and not Jerusalem, in terms of its epistemological shortcomings and Jerusalem in terms of its obedience not to blind faith but to the law. My point here is *not* to defend the readings of particular figures that Strauss offers, nor to defend the broad story he tells about the intellectual development of the West. Instead, my aim has been to point out that the question that Strauss was implicitly and explicitly answering does not concern the rationality of Jerusalem—indeed, he takes and affirms the rationality of Jerusalem as a given. Rather, the question that Strauss continually sought to answer concerns the proper balance between theory (the mystery of the law's origin) and praxis (obedience to the law).

As Strauss put it to Eric Voegelin in a letter of 1950: "[T]he root of all modern darkness from the seventeenth century on is the obscuring of the difference between theory and praxis, an obscuring that first leads to a reduction of praxis to theory (this is the meaning of so-called rationalism) and then, in retaliation, to the rejection of theory in the name of praxis that is no longer intelligible as praxis."<sup>10</sup> Strauss argued throughout his very large corpus that whereas in the seventeenth century, Hobbes, like Spinoza would after him, depreciates pre-scientific knowledge in the name of science, Heidegger, in the twentieth century, depreciates scientific knowledge in the name of historicity. According to Strauss, modern rationalism thus implodes upon itself: what starts as a modern quest for delineating scientific standards in the name of certain knowledge leads to the conclusion that there are neither such standards nor such truths. The distinction, yet relation, between Athens and Jerusalem, for Strauss,

<sup>9</sup> Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934–1964*, trans. Barry Cooper (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 66.

preserves the necessary tension between the two, a tension that he argues is necessary for the vitality of Western thought—philosophical, religious, and political.

Certainly, one need not accept either the details or framework of Strauss' far-reaching narrative of Western thought. But it seems to me that whatever one thinks of the particulars or broad outline of Strauss' thought, Strauss was correct that the right question to ask about Athens and Jerusalem concerns the divergence between them. A consideration of the differences between Athens and Jerusalem begins, of course, with an appreciation of their similarities. Strauss himself stressed the resemblances between Athens and Jerusalem in order to reflect on the differences between them: "[T]he Bible and Greek philosophy agree not merely regarding the place which they assign to justice, the connection between justice and law, the character of law, and divine retribution. They also agree regarding the problem of justice, the difficulty created by the misery of the just and the prospering of the wicked."<sup>11</sup> Recognizing this profound affinity, Strauss sought to answer the question of what makes Athens and Jerusalem different from each other. At the core of his understanding of the divergence between Athens and Jerusalem is Strauss' equation of revelation with law and not blind belief. The question of the relation between Athens and Jerusalem is therefore by definition at once philosophical and political. In my view, it behooves us to return to this question, no matter what our answer, especially in a journal dedicated to a consideration of Hebraic political studies.

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<sup>11</sup> Green, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, p. 106.