Leo Strauss's and Eric Voegelin's Philosophical Approach to the Bible

The question is sometimes posed whether those professing belief in the Bible as the revealed word of God are truly capable of doing philosophy. A question less frequently asked is whether philosophers are capable of doing justice to the Bible. Behind the first question is the concern that religious faith may interfere with our ability to be impartial and objective. The second question suggests that philosophy may be inherently limited in its ability to understand the biblical text. This can be understood in two ways. One would be to assume that, to the extent philosophy is not animated by the spirit of faith it cannot understand a document written in that spirit. But it may also be the case that apart from any consideration of religious faith, there is present in the biblical writings an intelligibility that eludes philosophy. In other words, the Bible as a text accessible to all (and not just to believers) may operate within a horizon foreign to that of the philosophers. If so, then philosophical attempts to interpret the text will run the risk of consistently missing the point. For religious believers fearful of philosophy, and for practitioners of philosophy dismissive of religion and the study of religious texts, such questions are not worth considering. But for Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin they are inescapable. Both men realize that it is impossible to address the central concerns of political philosophy without coming to terms with the Bible.

"The triumph of the biblical orientation�

Responding to the criticisms made by Voegelin and Alexandre Kojeve of his book *On Tyranny*, Strauss wonders whether the attempt to restore classical social science is not, perhaps, utopian, "since it implies that the classical orientation has not been made obsolete by the triumph of the biblical

orientation.� In a 1946 letter to Karl Lowith, he further remarks how "there can be no doubt that our usual way of feeling is conditioned by the biblical tradition;� even as he refuses to rule out the possibility of correcting that feeling. In order to begin the process of correction, though, we must first identify the source of this pervasive feeling. Strauss finds it in the biblical teaching on Providence , which he describes as "the belief in creation by the loving God.� Eleven years earlier, in another letter to Lowith focusing largely on Nietzsche, Strauss praises the latter's doctrine of the eternal return as an attempt "to wean us and himself from millennia-old pampering (softening) due to belief in creation and providence.�1 [1] Strauss's attention to the Bible is not merely a political philosopher's reflections on the biblical text, but a conscious effort on his part to liberate society from the domination of biblical teaching. There is a sense in which everything Strauss writes on the Bible can be understood in light of these remarks. In his view, the "triumph of the biblical orientation� points to a disruptive imbalance

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1 [1] Leo Strauss, "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*,� in *On Tyranny*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth, revised and expanded edition (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 177-178; Karl Lowith and Leo Strauss, "Correspondence Concerning Modernity,� *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 4, (1983), 111; Karl Lowith and Leo Strauss, "Correspondence,� *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 5/6, (1988), 183, 190. As part of the same exchange, Strauss reiterates his point: "If one considers what decisive importance the dogma of creation and providence has for all of post-ancient philosophy, then one comprehends that liberation from this dogma was only to be brought about through the �superhuman' effort of the teaching of the eternal return. Once this liberation � liberation from an unbelievable *pampering* of the human race � is achieved, then the eternal return can be taught calmly � assuming that it is true, and that is the central question for cosmology.�

within western civilization. The predominance of either Athens or Jerusalem jeopardizes the vitality of the West, which depends upon the tension between the two cities for its dynamism and life. In modernity, the teaching of Jerusalem has won out over the way of Athens ; modernity reflects the unfortunate consequences of this "unbelievable *pampering*� of the human race. In a situation in which the Bible has clearly triumphed, adherents of philosophy must work to restore the proper balance.

For Strauss it is not a question of reconciling the biblical and the philosophical; for the two traditions are unalterably opposed: "Western civilization consists of two elements, has two roots, which are in radical disagreement with each other. We may call these elements, as I have done elsewhere, Jerusalem and Athens , or to speak in nonmetaphorical language, the Bible and Greek philosophy.� In other places, he describes the relationship as one of "antagonism,� "fundamental tension,� or "fundamental opposition.�2 [2] For Strauss, living the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem forces us to confront questions concerning our fundamental orientation: "Only through the Bible is philosophy, or the quest for knowledge, challenged by *knowledge*, viz, by knowledge revealed by the omniscient God,

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2 [2] Leo Strauss, "Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History,� in Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 72; Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,� in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, edited with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 104, 116-17, 121; Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections,� in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, edited with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 397-98, 380; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 74.

or by knowledge identical with the self-communication of God. No alternative is more fundamental than the alternative: human guidance or divine guidance�In every attempt at harmonization, in every synthesis however impressive, one of the two opposed elements is sacrificed, more or less subtly, but in any event surely, to the other�� Given this scenario, no compromise or synthesis is possible: "*Philosophy* is incompatible with revelation: philosophy must try to *refute* revelation, and if not revelation, at any rate theology must try to *refute* philosophy.�3 [3]

Strauss locates the origins of this incompatibility in questions having to do with the idea of divine law. The *problem* of divine law arises not only from the multiplicity of divine codes, but also from their contradictory assertions on the most important matters. Confronted with this difficulty, Athens and Jerusalem offer alternatives that, according to Strauss, are deeply at odds. In order to transcend the conflict among divine codes, the Greeks proceed on the basis of inquiry. To obtain knowledge of the "first things� it is necessary to begin with that which is accessible to all human beings, and by means of further questions and demonstration, to comprehend something of the order of things. In the course of this process, the authority of divine law is diminished. If divine law retains any significance for philosophy, it does so only in a political sense, "for the education of the many, and not as something which stands independently.�4 [4] The philosophical life, then, originates in a questioning of divine law

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3 [3] Leo Strauss, "Reason and Revelation,� in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (New York : Cambridge University Press 141, 149-150.

4 [4] "Because the quest for the beginning, for the first things, becomes now philosophic or scientific analysis of the cosmos, the place of the divine law, in the traditional sense of the term (where it is a code traced to a personal god), is replaced by a natural order which may even be

and of those authorities that support it. As political, philosophy will make use of the idea of divine law for the sake of those who are incapable of a philosophical life.

By contrast, the Bible adheres to a particular divine law, and insists that this law alone is true. All other codes are false, human inventions. This acceptance of one code as uniquely divine does not allow for independent questioning in the manner of philosophy. The Greeks ask questions, while the Bible demands "*full* obedience.� In Strauss's view, what philosophers esteem as the highest way of life the Bible condemns as disobedience: "The Bible, therefore, confronts us more clearly than any other book with this fundamental alternative: life in obedience to revelation, life in obedience, or life in freedom, the latter being represented by the Greek philosophers.�5 [5] The cumulative effect of Strauss's analysis is to present the Bible as interfering with the natural human desire to raise questions. Both the Bible and philosophy are familiar with what is accessible to all human beings at the level of experience. With the Bible, however, the spontaneous process of questioning is brought to a halt; whereas in philosophy it is treasured as the highest form of life. Philosophy fosters the human tendency to pursue questions to their ultimate ground. The Bible prohibits this quest in the name of obedience to a

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called, as it was later to be called, a natural law � or at any rate, to use a wider term, a natural morality. So the divine law, in the real and strict sense of the term, is only the starting point, the absolutely essential starting point for Greek philosophy, but it is abandoned in the process.� "Progress or Return?,� 113-114.

5 [5] Leo Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis,� in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, edited with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 373.

mysterious and incomprehensible God.6 [6] In Strauss's reading of Genesis the relationship between Jerusalem and Athens is not that of grace building on nature and thereby fulfilling the natural human capacity for wonder. Rather, revealed religion forbids and suppresses that which is most characteristically human. The Bible rests upon assertions rather than an appeal to intelligence.7 [7] Strauss describes the alternatives of faith and philosophy as a choice between a life of "obedient love�	and a life of "autonomous understanding� or "free insight.� He creates the impression that while

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6 [6] "What to the classical philosophers appeared as the perfection of man's nature, is described by the Bible as the product of man's disobedience to his Creator. When the classical philosophers conceive of man's desire to know as his highest natural desire, the Bible protests by asserting that this desire is a temptation. To the philosophic view that man's happiness consists in free investigation or insight, the Bible opposes the view that man's happiness consists in obedience to God. The Bible thus offers the only challenge to the claim of philosophy which can reasonably be made.� "Reason and Revelation,� 149.

7 [7] "The Bible is distinguished from all philosophy because it simply asserts that the world is created by God. There is not a trace of an argument in support of this assertion. How do we know the world was created? The Bible declared it so. We know by virtue of declaration, pure and simple, by divine utterance ultimately�In other words, the fact that the world has a certain structure is known to man as man. That the world is created is known by the fact that God speaks to Israel on the Horeb; that is the reason why Israel knows that the sun and moon and the stars do not deserve worship�There is no argument in favor of creation except God speaking to Israel .� "On the Interpretation of Genesis,� 369-370.

philosophy is for thoughtful, mature, adults; faith is better suited to the simple and the child-like. Faith, in his reading, is not beyond reason, but at odds with it.8 [8]

In Strauss's view, the contrast between the Bible and philosophy extends to the area of morality as well. Although they may agree with regard to the importance of morality, the content of morality, and the ultimate insufficiency of morality; they disagree with respect to the basis of morality. In fact, Strauss spends far more time highlighting the differences between the Greek philosophers and the Bible on these matters than he does explaining the similarities. For example, fear of God plays a significant role in Strauss's analysis of biblical morality. He notes how "humanly speaking, the unity of fear and pity combined with the phenomenon of guilt might seem to be the root of religion.� In the case of the Bible "God, the king or judge, is the object of fear; and God, the father of all men makes all men brothers, and thus hallows pity.� Whereas the Greek philosophers consider these feelings to be demeaning and unworthy of superior souls, this is precisely the attitude in which biblical morality reaches its fulfillment: "According to the Greek philosophers�it is understanding or contemplation. Now this necessarily tends to weaken the majesty of the moral demands, whereas humility, a sense of guilt, repentance, and faith in divine mercy, which complete morality according to the Bible, necessarily strengthen the majesty of the moral demands.� The stringent demands of biblical morality create an atmosphere in which men and women live in "fear and trembling,� but these believers also live

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8 [8] "Progress or Return?,� 104; *Natural Right and History*, 74. See also Dante Germino, "Leo Strauss versus Eric Voegelin on Faith and Political Philosophy,� *The Political Science Reviewer*, Vol. XXIV, 1995, 258-270.

in hope because of the divine promise of final redemption. This is not the case for the philosopher, who "lives in a state above fear and trembling as well as above hope,� resulting in a state of "peculiar serenity,� a serenity rooted in resignation. Strauss observes how, "according to the Bible, the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord; according to the Greek philosophers, the beginning of wisdom is wonder.� The appropriate human response to this God is one of trust and loving submission regardless of the content of the divine command.9 [9]

The God who is to be feared is also kind and merciful � a God who enters into a covenant with the chosen people and offers promises of ultimate redemption. Yet God's love frequently manifests itself in ways that defy human comprehension. Strauss highlights the manner in which the God of the Bible is capable of punishing in a disproportionately harsh manner those who disobey divine commands, even when such disobedience seems to spring from an evidently moral or even noble response to the situation at hand. Saul disobeys God's command and does the noble thing by sparing King Agag's life. Because of this, Saul is rejected by God and Agag is slaughtered by the prophet Samuel. David's wife Michal criticizes him for dancing before the Lord and she is punished with sterility. In Strauss's account, Adam and Eve rather innocently and unintentionally violate God's command; "nevertheless God punished them severely.� God's commands must be obeyed, however unintelligible or contrary to morality they may seem. Strauss contrasts the exemplary philosophical man, Socrates, with Abraham, a model of biblical piety. Faced with an unintelligible command to sacrifice his son, Abraham obeys without question. Socrates confronted with a far less morally problematic command from

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9 [9] "Progress or Return?,� 105-109.

Apollo, questions whether the god's command makes any sense. As Strauss understands the

biblical perspective, the apparent unintelligibility of the demand placed upon Abraham to

sacrifice his son is "disposed of by the consideration that nothing is too wondrous for the Lord.�

That the command to slay Isaac violates the biblical prohibition against the shedding of innocent

blood merely points to the discrepancy between divine and human justice � "God alone is

unqualifiedly, if unfathomably, just.� Abraham's obedience is attributed to "his supreme trust in

God, his simple, single-minded, child-like faith.�10 [10] To illustrate biblical morality, Strauss

tends to select texts that highlight an attitude of absolute, even unthinking, obedience to an

inscrutable God. Biblical morality, on this interpretation, is entirely dependent on the arbitrary

will of God; it is frequently incomprehensible and, by classical standards, immoderate.

With the "triumph of the biblical orientation� in modernity, this biblical morality has come to

dominate western society: "Modern rationalism rejected biblical theology and replaced it by such things

as deism, pantheism, and atheism. But in this process, biblical morality was in a way preserved.

Goodness was still believed to consist in something like justice, benevolence, love, or charity��

However well-intentioned, Strauss believes these modern developments lead to a subordination of

philosophy to extra-philosophical goals, in the interest of serving human needs and relieving suffering.

From the perspective of classical philosophy, this is a deflection of philosophy from its true path. In his

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10 [10] "Progress or Return?,� 107-110, 119; Leo Strauss, "On the *Euthyphron*,� in *The*

Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 206; "

Jerusalem and Athens ,� 379-80, 385, 387, 392-393, 396-97. See also "Reason and

Revelation,� 166.

reflections on Genesis, Strauss repeatedly calls attention to the Bible's depreciation of the heavens and its overriding concern for human beings. This turning toward the human is an implicit criticism of the "superhuman� contemplative ideal of the philosophers. For Strauss this represents a lowering of the horizon, as the highest type of human life is relegated to a position of lesser rank in comparison with the biblical call for moral virtue. Strauss believes this shift of interest "from the eternal order to man� has, as a significant consequence, a focus on "application� (or practicality) rather than contemplation. Such a preoccupation with application easily deteriorates into the manipulation and domination of human life. He suggests as much when he notes how: "According to the modern project, philosophy or science was no longer to be understood as essentially contemplative and proud but as active and charitable; it was to be of service of man's estate; it was to enable man to become the master and owner of nature through the intellectual conquest of nature.�11 [11]

Where biblical morality holds sway, the moderation so characteristic of the classical tradition is jeopardized:

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11 [11] "Progress or Return?,� 99; " Jerusalem and Athens ,� 383; "On the Interpretation of Genesis,� 369, 372-73; Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbe*s, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 92; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 3-4. See also Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 81; Leo Strauss, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research* Vol. 13, no. 3, (September: 1947), 329.

By Machiavelli's time the classical tradition had undergone profound changes. The contemplative life had found its home in monasteries. Moral virtue had been transfigured into Christian charity. Through this, man's responsibility to his fellow men and for his fellow men, his fellow creatures, had been infinitely increased. Concern with the salvation of men's immortal souls seemed to permit, nay, to require courses of action which would have appeared to the classics, and which did appear to Machiavelli, to be inhuman and cruel�He seems to have diagnosed the great evils of religious persecution as a necessary consequence of the Christian principle, and ultimately of the Biblical principle. He tended to believe that a considerable increase in man's inhumanity was the unintended but not surprising consequence of man's aiming too high.

Strauss makes an explicit contrast between classical authors, who would have recoiled at the thought of committing atrocities in the interest of saving souls, and the biblical tradition, whose sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others leads to persecution. On this point Strauss finds the great Florentine thinker to be aligned with the classics; and there is no indication that he believes Machiavelli to be mistaken in his judgment about the effects of charity. If Strauss faults Machiavelli it is because in order to avoid the dangerous effects of aiming too high, Machiavelli lowers the horizon in which political life operates. Strauss believes this to be a mistake, and he looks to the classics for models of society that aim high, while remaining free of the fanaticism that all too frequently accompanies the reign of charity.12 [12]

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12 [12] Leo Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy?� in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 43-44. See Shadia B. Drury, *The*

Aiming high, however, does not mean eschewing the use of violence in the interests of preserving society; classical moderation involves the prudent use of violent means. Strauss praises the moderation and even leniency of Athens in dealing with its citizens; and to the objection that it was Athenian democracy that killed Socrates, he explains that Socrates "was killed when he was 70; he was permitted to live for 70 long years.� Considering the teaching of Thrasymachos in the *Republic*, Strauss advises his readers that "if we look then at Thrasymachos' indignation without indignation, we must admit that his violent reaction is to some extent a revolt of common sense.� Thrasymachos's view that "justice is the advantage of the stronger� is "only the consequence of an opinion which is not only not manifestly savage but is even highly respectable.� Unlike the messianic dreams of the prophets, classical philosophy believes the "establishment of the best regime will not include the cessation of war.� Strauss considers it be entirely consistent with the idea of natural right for society to use whatever means it deems necessary in order to combat an unscrupulous enemy � "natural right must be mutable in order to cope with the inventiveness of wickedness.� Classical natural right is flexible, geared toward creating the best possible approximation of the best regime, not on the basis of unchanging, inviolable moral principles, but by making concrete decisions informed by prudence and moderation. The notion of a moral law that transcends the city, capable of judging its policies

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Political Ideas of Leo Strauss (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988), 118. Unfortunately, Drury is sometimes so polemical she undermines her case.

and decisions, is part of the legacy of the Bible.13 [13] To illustrate the difference between the biblical tradition and the classical tradition in this regard Strauss mentions how "the prophet Nathan seriously and ruthlessly rebukes King David for having committed one murder and one act of adultery.� Strauss then contrasts the prophet's behavior with "the way in which a Greek poet-philosopher [Xenophon] playfully and elegantly tries to convince a Greek tyrant who has committed an untold number of murders and other crimes that he would derive greater pleasure if he would have been more reasonable.� Strauss's illustration is not meant as criticism of Xenophon but as an example of classical moderation.14 [14]

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13 [13] Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 27; "Restatement,� 194-200; "What Is Political Philosophy?,� 32; " Jerusalem and Athens ,� 403; *Natural Right and History*, 144, 157, 160-63.

14 [14] *History of Political Philosophy*, 37; "What Is Political Philosophy?,� 36. To succeed as a "teacher of tyrants� the prudent thinker must make him/herself appear as unscrupulous as possible, not by a Machiavellian espousal of shocking and immoral principles "but by simply failing to take notice of the moral principles. He has to reveal his alleged or real freedom from morality, not by speech but by silence. For by doing so - by disregarding morality "by deed� rather than by attacking it "by speech� � he reveals at the same time his understanding of political things. Xenophon, or his Simonides, is more "politic� than Machiavelli; he refuses to separate "moderation� (prudence) from "wisdom� (insight).� *On Tyranny*, 56. See also "Progress or Return?,� 109-110; " Jerusalem and Athens ,� 404.

The philosopher understands these matters and speaks accordingly. Without the security, order and necessities of life provided by the city, the practice of the philosophical way of life would become difficult if not impossible. But this way of life, by its very nature leads to a questioning of the traditional verities upon which the city depends for its cohesion and stability. Political philosophy at its best strikes the necessary balance between these conflicting demands. The city will at times use coercion to preserve itself; philosophers recognize this and practice a careful prudence with regard to a regime under whose shelter they are permitted to live and philosophize. Philosophy itself remains uncontaminated by the violence to which it must sometimes give its assent for the welfare of the city. Warfare may be a requirement of the city, but philosophy in its highest form, as the disinterested pursuit of truth, has nothing to do with it. For Strauss, questioning and a delight in the truth for its own sake characterize the philosophical life. Philosophy is rational, serene, and moderate; it is "graced by nature's grace.� The philosopher, as the embodiment of the desire for eternal wisdom, rises above quarrels of the vulgar. Consumed with wonder concerning the eternal order, transcends those destructive human passions that can so easily erupt into violent conflict. 15 [15]

Disturbing revelation

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15 [15] "What Is Political Philosophy?,� 40; "Restatement,� 197-200. See also Leo Strauss,

"Liberal Education and Responsibility,� in Liberalism: Ancient and Modern (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1968), 13-15, 20; "What Is Political Philosophy?,� 10- 11.

Because Strauss and Voegelin differ in their understanding of the relationship between philosophy and the Bible, they also differ in the emphases they give to their critiques. Strauss is far more agnostic than Voegelin with regard to the reality of the transcendent God behind the biblical text. By comparison, Voegelin takes the biblical witness at face value; he has no difficulty accepting the testimony of the biblical authors concerning their encounter with divine reality. For Voegelin, texts such as the Bible are a means of access to originating experiences of transcendence. Strauss stresses the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem ; Voegelin understands philosophy and the Bible as articulations of the noetic and pneumatic differentiations of consciousness respectively, with both differentiations giving expression to experiences of transcendent reality. Accordingly, a philosophical critique of the Bible comes more easily to Strauss, since the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem is a fundamental aspect of his thought. Voegelin does not see these traditions as opposed, so his analysis of the Bible will be concerned with exploring how it is that equivalent experiences of transcendence develop as they do. For Voegelin, both philosophers and prophets are recipients of revelation; the question then becomes why prophetism derails into metastatic thinking while philosophy does not.

While both philosophy and the Bible articulate experiences of divine reality, and while biblical texts more clearly differentiate the transcendence of God, Voegelin does not hesitate to point out ways in which the biblical writings suffer by comparison with the achievements of the classical philosophers. In his estimation, one of the limitations of the Hebrew Bible is that it contains no breakthrough to philosophy. In particular, the emergence of the individual soul as the sensorium of divine transcendence never fully emerges in the Israelite context. Voegelin attributes this to two interrelated facets of Israel 's experience � wariness with regard to notions of immortality that would appear to blur the distinction between divine and human, and the firm hold of a sense of collective identity within Israelite society. Through revelation Israel is constituted as a *people* under God. For Voegelin, this compact "collective� aspect of Israel 's existence is considered a deficiency when evaluated from the perspective of the

philosophical differentiation of the soul. He contrasts the "fierceness of collective existence� with the "freedom of individual souls.� Arguing against the view that the Davidic monarchy was the primary flaw within Israel 's constitutive experience; Voegelin maintains that the very idea of Israel as a collective Son of God, as articulated in Exodus, is itself a deformation. It is Jeremiah who, in Voegelin's view, best exemplifies the prophetic approximation of the philosophical differentiation of the soul. Jeremiah transfers important constitutive symbols of Israelite order (such as the Son of God and Moses) to himself as the Chosen People is replaced by the chosen man. In Jeremiah "the human personality had broken the compactness of collective existence.� For Voegelin, the preferred model of human authenticity is that of the individual attuned to a divine order beyond the contingencies of history. To the extent that Jeremiah (or any prophet) fits this model he is evaluated favorably. But the Jeremiah who calls his people back to faithful adherence to the laws of the Covenant is understood to be engaging in an ultimately futile enterprise, an enterprise that might have been avoided if only he had the advantage of philosophy.16 [16]

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16 [16] Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation* in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 14, *Order and History*, vol. 1, ed. Maurice P. Hogan (Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 2001), 378, 409, 419, 448, 492-93, 500, 512, 520, 539. "[At] a time when a theory of the psyche and a theology would have been required to unfold the meanings implied in the Sinaitic legislation, the prophets were badly handicapped by the want of a positive vocabulary. They had at their disposition neither a theory of the *aretai* in the Platonic-Aristotelian sense so that they could have opposed character to conduct in human relations, nor a theory of faith, hope and love in the Heraclitian sense so that they could have opposed the inversion of the soul toward God to ritual observance of his commandments.� (pp. 492-93)

Central to Voegelin's critique of the Bible is the idea that relative to philosophy, the biblical texts incline toward an unrealistic, imbalanced vision that pays insufficient attention to the exigencies of life in the world. In classical Greece Voegelin finds a line of thinkers who while cognizant of being addressed by the divine, retain the necessary balance between transcendent truth and the demands of earthly life. Anaximander is cited as a philosopher who is acutely aware of the limitations constitutive of the human condition. Plato builds upon this wisdom, using carefully constructed philosophical myths to moderate the intensity of revelation in order to protect the balance of consciousness. Divine reality is one, but it is experienced in the two modes of the Beginning (the divine as mediated through the structure of the cosmos) and the Beyond (the divine as a movement reaching into the soul). The increasingly differentiated awareness of the Beyond must not be permitted to lead its recipients into believing that they can somehow transcend the limits of existence in the cosmos. Striking the proper balance between the two modes requires the use of the revelatory language of consciousness as well as the mythical language of creator-god or Demiurge. Plato does this through the creation of a "philosopher's myth," an "*alethinos logos*" that strives to eliminate the less differentiated and dangerously misleading depictions of the Olympian gods contained within the tradition he has inherited, while simultaneously preserving the pre-philosophical insight which recognizes that humans must live within the limits imposed by the structure of the cosmos. It may be possible, Voegelin believes, to move beyond the primary experience of the cosmos *in consciousness*, but apart from this, the boundaries set by cosmic order, the "laws of mundane existence� must be respected. Unlike his biblical counterparts, Plato never succumbs to the metastatic or apocalyptic temptation to try to transfigure or abolish the cosmos. The philosophers are extolled for having understood human finitude and the boundaries set to human achievement by the structure of reality. In contrast to the prophetic vision, the philosophers "preserve the balance between the experienced lastingness [of the cosmos] and the theophanic events in such a manner that the paradox becomes intelligible as the very structure of existence itself.� Unlike the prophets, "the

epochal consciousness of the classic philosophers did not derail into apocalyptic expectations of a final realm to come.� Nor is this balance due to the philosophers' lack of revelatory experience. Voegelin insists that Plato was just as conscious of being the recipient of divine revelation as was Isaiah � the difference between philosopher and prophet is that the former deliberately chose to preserve the balance of consciousness and not to indulge in metastatic fantasies.17 [17]

Voegelin never loses sight of the fact that the New Testament is part of a continuum extending back to the metastatic faith of the prophets.18 [18] In the case of the gospels Voegelin believes the

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17 [17] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience,� in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 12, Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 266; Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 17, *Order and History*, vol. 4, ed. Michael Franz. (Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 2000), 56-58, 274-81, 291-92, 295-96.

18 [18] "The movement that engendered the saving tale of divine incarnation, death, and resurrection as the answer to the question of life and death is considerably more complex than classical philosophy; it is richer by the missionary fervor of its spiritual universalism, poorer by its neglect of noetic control; broader by its appeal to the inarticulate humanity of the common man; more restricted by its bias against the articulate wisdom of the wise; more imposing through its imperial tone of divine authority; more imbalanced through its apocalyptic ferocity, which leads to conflicts with the conditions of man's existence in society�� Eric Voegelin, "Gospel and Culture,� in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 12, Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 189.

absorption of messianism into the Christian movement "has brought into the history of Christianity, as well as of a Christianized Western civilization, the apocalyptic strand of violent phantasy that can degenerate into violent action in the world.� The teaching of the Matthean Jesus makes little or no allowance for ongoing life in this world, and even though Jesus speaks of having come to fulfill rather than to destroy, "the fulfillment is difficult to distinguish from apocalyptic destruction.� The chapter in *The Ecumenic Age* devoted to "The Pauline Vision of the Resurrected� begins by noting how: "Plato kept the theophanic event in balance with the experience of the cosmos. He did not permit enthusiastic expectations to distort the human condition.� The previous chapter "Conquest and Exodus� provides the context for this statement, by calling attention to the way in which the saying of Anaximander constitutes the "noetic field of consciousness in which the philosophers' debate about reality moves.� Unlike Deutero-Isaiah's tripartite division of history culminating in the perfect realm, Plato's myth of recurrent cosmic catastrophes acknowledges the "primary rhythm of birth and death� and thereby avoids imposing an "apocalyptic finality� on history. As experienced by prophets, philosophers, and saints, reality is alive with theophanies, consequently: "The philosopher must be on his guard against�distortions of reality. It becomes his task to preserve the balance between the experienced lastingness and the theophanic events in such a manner that the paradox becomes intelligible as the very structure of existence itself.� The core of theophanic encounters is "experientially unstable;� consequently revelation requires protection against revelation itself.19 [19]

This sets the tone for what follows � Paul will be read in light of Plato's success in preserving the balance of consciousness. Plato, as conscious of the theophanic nature of his experience as any

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19 [19] "Gospel and Culture,� 205, 210; *Ecumenic Age*, 275-78, 283, 286-87, 289, 291-92, 294, 296, 300, 303-304.

prophet, does not succumb to metastatic dreaming. But what of the Christian saint? Like Plato, the

evolution of Paul's thought is determined by his fascination with the implications of theophany:

> The Pauline analysis of existential order closely parallels the Platonic-Aristotelian. That is to be
>
> expected, since both the saint and the philosophers articulate the order constituted by man's
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> response to a theophany. The accent, however, has decisively shifted from the divinely noetic
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> order incarnate in the world to the divinely pneumatic salvation from its disorder, from the
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> paradox of reality to the abolition of the paradox, from the experience of the directional
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> movement to its consummation. The critical difference is the treatment of *phthora*, perishing. In
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> the noetic theophany of the philosophers, the *athanatizein* of the psyche is kept in balance with
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> the rhythm of *genesis* and *phthora* in the cosmos; in the pneumatic theophany of Paul, the
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> *athanasia* of man is not to be separated from the abolition of *phthora* in the cosmos.

Where Plato keeps the wisdom of Anaximander ever in mind, Paul lets the "imagery of a *genesis* without

phthora interfere with the primary experience of the cosmos.� Voegelin notes Paul's tendency to treat

death as if it were a minor incident, reduced to nothing more than "the twinkling of an eye� along the

road from imperfection to perfection. For Paul, the vision of the Resurrected is more than a theophanic

event in the metaxy � it is the beginning of transfiguration itself. Commenting on 1Corinthians 15:51 -

52, Voegelin observes how "the metastatic expectation of the Second Coming has begun its long history

of disappointment.� Through his vision of the Resurrected, Paul differentiates the divine Beyond

reaching into the metaxy, as well as the directional movement of reality beyond the metaxy, in a way

that is superior to that of the philosophers. Nonetheless, Voegelin worries that the "mythopoetic genius

of Paul is not controlled by the critical consciousness of Plato.� In fact, Paul, like Isaiah, is a metastatic

thinker who wishes to "abolish the tension between the eschatological *telos* of reality and the mystery

of the transfiguration that is actually going on within historical reality.� Pauline imprecision on these

matters can have dire consequences: the "blood intoxication� that Marx sees as an accompaniment to revolutionary violence is in fact "the ideological equivalent to the promise of the Pauline vision of the Resurrected.�20 [20]

Voegelin distinguishes between the destructive violence stemming from the distortions to which the pneumatic differentiation is prone, and the stabilizing violence admitted by the classical philosophical tradition. For Strauss, the philosopher as philosopher has no direct involvement with violence; however, as a practitioner of political philosophy the philosopher respects the city's need to resort to coercive measures when needed, and seeks, through prudent counsel, to keep the city on the path of moderation. Unlike the biblical prophet, the philosopher does not directly challenge the city's violence. Voegelin would not disagree; but he seems more willing than Strauss to acknowledge the ways in which philosophers make the legitimate use of violence a theme of their work. Voegelin repeatedly praises the wisdom contained in the fragment of Anaximander with its emphasis on the necessity of perishing and paying penalty for injustice. Heraclitus inherits and develops Anaximander's insights; and Voegelin readily acknowledges the constitutive role of violence in Heraclitus' philosophy of order. Voegelin also directly confronts the issue of the relationship between coercion and persuasion in Plato. He cites Plato's *Statesman* to the following effect: "Those who do not possess courage and temperance or other inclinations to virtue, those who by an evil nature are carried away to godlessness, pride, and

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20 [20] *Ecumenic Age*, 305-306, 312-15, 319, 337. The passage from 1 Corinthians reads: "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.�

injustice, the Statesman will have to eliminate by death or exile, or by punishment with the greatest disgrace; and those who find their happiness in ignorance and baseness he will relegate to a state of slavery�Only when the uneducable men are eliminated can the weaving of the political fabric begin.� From Voegelin's perspective, Plato's preferred method of political and social reform is persuasion, but "he is willing to temper persuasion with a certain amount of compulsion on the less responsive and to cast out the obstreperous by force.� These decisions are not easily made, but Plato's judgment is trustworthy; unlike Machiavelli, he never loses contact with the "law of the spirit that doing evil is worse than evil.� Nonetheless, Voegelin makes it clear that with regard to the use of violence, "Plato is not a Christian saint.� As with Strauss's invocation of Xenophon, Voegelin' description of the Platonic attitude is not to be taken as criticism.21 [21] Throughout his writings one does not find the same wariness with regard to the violence associated with the classical tradition as we do with violence understood as stemming from biblical influence. In Voegelin's view the former is in the service of civilizational order, while the latter is destructive. It is no exaggeration to suggest that when Voegelin speaks of the balance of consciousness he is in fact referring to the ability to properly discern the difference between legitimate and illegitimate violence. The "good" violence of myth and philosophy must not be confused with the "bad" violence influenced by biblical sources.

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21 [21] Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis* in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 15, *Order and History*, vol. 2, ed. Athanasios Moulakis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 301-13; Eric Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle* in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 16, *Order and History*, vol. 3, ed. Dante Germino (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 212-23, 277-82, 318-19; "Gospel and Culture,� 188, 209-10, 186.

The Bible and the Myth of Philosophy

Troubled by the effects of the Bible on society Strauss and Voegelin look to philosophy as a corrective. Biblical excess is tempered with philosophical prudence, reasonableness, and moderation. Whether this approach does justice to the meaning of either Athens or Jerusalem is another question. I believe their treatment of biblical materials is susceptible to criticism on a number of points. Here I can do no more than delineate some possible points of departure for a more extended critique.

Philosophical questions, biblical answers

Confronted with "the incompatible claims of Jerusalem and Athens to our allegiance,� Strauss adopts the stance of being "open to both and willing to listen to each.� But he quickly adds that "by saying that we wish to hear first and then to act to decide, we have already decided in favor of Athens against Jerusalem .� Considering the question of creation as depicted in Genesis, Strauss proposes that in order to deal with the issue properly, "we go back to the common stratum between the Bible and Greek philosophy,� a stratum that "can be assumed to be common to all men.� But to begin with what is accessible to all means the proposed starting point is much closer to philosophy than it is to the Bible (with its claims of a special revelation to a specific people). Strauss readily admits this, recognizing how "it is easier to start from philosophy, for the simple reason that the question which I raise here is a scientific or philosophic question.� The quest for beginnings, for the first things is, in Strauss's opinion, an essentially philosophical pursuit, and this is the framework within which he will analyze his

biblical sources.22 [22] In doing so, however, he seems to violate his own criterion for interpretation, i.e., understanding authors as they understood themselves, by beginning his analysis of the Bible with questions that are admittedly non-biblical. Strauss comes to the Bible with questions he considers to be within the proper provenance of philosophy. The Bible will be evaluated on the basis of its answers to questions emerging from philosophy. Heinrich Meier underlines the fundamentally philosophical orientation of Strauss's efforts to account for revelation: "The philosopher knows how to explain faith in revelation insofar as he knows how to link revelation to the *theios nomos* and think both ideas himself, that is, insofar as he is able to trace them back to their underlying necessities and to grasp them in light of their developmental possibilities� [In] other words he can determine their limits and understand their logic. His understanding is furthered by the fact that both the *theios nomos* and revelation point to philosophy. Philosophy is for both *the* alternative.�23 [23] The philosopher can decode biblical revelation because revelation, as a possible solution to the problem of divine law, takes shape as a rejection of philosophy. The contours of biblical thought come into focus against the background of questions arising within the philosophical quest.

Strauss's treatment of Genesis exemplifies this approach. In his introductory remarks to his lecture "On the Interpretation of Genesis,� Strauss says, "I began with the beginning because this choice seems to me to be least arbitrary.� This is hardly a convincing explanation. To focus on the first book of the Bible simply because it is first is, if not arbitrary, certainly at

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22 [22] " Jerusalem and Athens ,� 380; "Progress or Return?,� 111.

23 [23] Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 41.

odds with the order of importance stressed by the biblical authors. Sequentially, Genesis may be first, but in terms of the overall structure of the Pentateuch, it is a relatively late product stemming from the priestly circles who speak of the world's creation through the prism of the gracious deeds wrought by God on behalf of God's chosen people. For these authors, the biblical accounts of creation find their meaning within the wider narrative of salvation which has its center in the events of exodus, law, and covenant.24 [24] They do not come to their work animated by questions concerning the nature of the whole in which they find themselves, but as witnesses to a saving God, whose goodness to Israel manifests itself from the very beginning of creation. Philosophical questions regarding origins were of secondary interest to the biblical

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24 [24] "In the Old Testament, creation is the beginning of history, which means it is the first of the saving deeds of Yahweh. The Israelites do not ask questions about creation for its own sake; creation and nature are integrated in the history of salvation wrought by Yahweh.� John L. McKenzie, "Aspects of Old Testament Thought� in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 745. "It cannot be too much emphasized that this doctrine [concerning origins] was, historically, a secondary development with the Israelites�In a word, the Israelites knew Yahweh as savior, as redeemer, before they came to think of him as creator.� R. A. F. Mackenzie, *Faith and History in the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 47-48. This view is typical of the scholarly consensus concerning the meaning of creation in Genesis � it is Strauss's interpretation that is idiosyncratic. In itself, this would not be problematic, but Strauss insists that he wishes to understand the Bible as it was understood by its authors.

writers. Strauss begins with Genesis because its cosmological themes best accord with the central themes of philosophy. But this is not the same as understanding the biblical writers as they understood themselves. Strauss violates his own professed standard of interpretation by approaching Genesis as if it is the Hebrew version of philosophical reflection.

With Voegelin we find a similar tendency to interpret biblical materials within a philosophical framework. This becomes clear in his discussion of Pauline vision of the Resurrected. As noted earlier, he identifies the central difference between Paul and Plato as having to do with the issue of *phthora* or perishing. The heart of Voegelin's criticism of Paul revolves around the apostle's apparent disregard for the role of "perishing� in determining the human condition. Here Voegelin appears to have correctly diagnosed a crucial difference between the philosophers and the saint. But because he thinks the position of Anaximander and Plato is correct, he misconceives the nature of this difference. Voegelin follows these classical philosophers in taking the reality of perishing for granted, so the issue becomes one of who best "balances� the tension between *genesis* and *phthora*. Reality may be moving in a direction beyond this tension, but it remains an inescapable part of the order of things in this world, invested with a necessary and sacred quality that Plato respects and Paul disregards. Plato accepts perishing as part of the divinely constituted order.

Voegelin concurs in the Platonic view, and he believes a person's refusal to recognize this constitutes proof that his or her contact with reality is precarious. His evaluation of Paul as a metastatic thinker derives from this judgment. What is important to emphasize, though, is that the judgment is made from the perspective that holds Plato's framing of the issue to be correct. On this basis, Voegelin judges Paul to be mistaken. Of course, as long as Paul is evaluated within this philosophical framework such a judgment seems unavoidable. What is lacking in this insight is the extent to which Paul would reject the very manner in which the philosophers have formulated the issue. For Paul, the question is

not how best to preserve the balance of consciousness within a divinely constituted order in which *genesis* and *phthora* are a permanent feature. Rather, the apostle has come to realize that God has nothing at all to do with death. The raising of Jesus from the dead testifies to this. From a Pauline perspective, Anaximander, Plato (and Voegelin) are mistaken in their belief that divinity is in any way involved with perishing. James Alison captures the significance of Paul's claims:

> There is a first step to this recasting of God through the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, and this is the demonstration that death itself is a matter of indifference to God�This marks a decisive change in the understanding of God�since if God has nothing to do with death, if God is indifferent to death, then our representations of God, all of which are marked by a human culture in which death appears as, at the very least, inevitable, are wrong�If God can raise someone from the dead in the middle of human history, the very fact reveals that death, which up till this point had marked human history as simply something inevitable, part of what it is to be a human being, is not inevitable. That is, death is itself not simply a biological reality, but a human cultural reality marking all perception and a human cultural reality that is capable of being altered�This is an anthropological discovery of unimaginable proportions.25 [25]

Voegelin is correct: Paul does treat death as something to be mocked, and he shows little interest in balancing his vision in light of the reality of perishing. But this is precisely because what has been revealed through the resurrection of Jesus is the way in which all human cultures have been previously entrapped within a horizon marked by an acceptance of the inevitability and power of death. To the extent that Anaximander, Plato, and Voegelin associate *phthora* in any way with divinity,

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25 [25] James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 116-118-19.

philosophy remains within a horizon structured by the reality of death. From a Paul's perspective then, Voegelin's framing of the issue misses the essential meaning of the biblical witness. To attempt to determine who is more "balanced� in acknowledging the sway of death over human life, is to ignore the fact that for Paul (and the other New Testament authors) the resurrection reveals how death need no longer be considered as possessing such power over human persons. Of course if Anaximander and Plato are correct, then Paul is, in fact, an unbalanced thinker. But that would be to use philosophical criteria to evaluate a New Testament perspective which understands philosophy as part of the cultural horizon whose involvement with death makes it blind to what is revealed by the resurrection. For the most part, Voegelin's analysis does not engage Paul on his own terms, but evaluates the apostle's vision from the perspective of a philosophy of order whose exemplar is Plato.26 [26]

The idealization of philosophy.

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26 [26] One of Voegelin's most sympathetic readers writes of Voegelin's chapter on Paul: "It seems that this once Voegelin has approached a great spiritual reality from a standpoint extraneous to it.� Gerhardt Niemeyer, "Eric Voegelin's Philosophy and the Drama of Mankind,� *Modern Age,* Winter (1976), 35. In similar fashion Bruce Douglass maintains that "the effect of Voegelin's interpretation is to make Christian eschatology not substantially different from the philosophy of history he claims to find in Plato and Aristotle.� Bruce Douglass, "A Diminished Gospel: A Critique of Voegelin's Interpretation of Christianity� in *Eric Voegelin's Search for Order in History*, ed. Stephen A. McKnight (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 148.

"Philosophy� as described by Strauss and Voegelin serves as a useful foil in relation to what they each see as problematic aspects of the biblical legacy. Yet there is something artificial and unconvincing about this juxtaposition. The artificiality stems largely from their idealized depiction of philosophy. Strauss's "philosopher� � serene, detached, rational and benign � has the character of an abstract ideal type largely disengaged from any particular context. Classical philosophy is described in the most elevated terms as embodying "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.� Its adherents see political things with "a freshness and directness which have never been equaled.� Strauss believes the political order sketched by Plato and Aristotle is the most perfect. His praise of classical political philosophy could not be more emphatic: "It reproduces, and raises to its perfection, the magnanimous flexibility of the true statesman, who crushes the insolent and spares the vanquished. It is free from all fanaticism because it knows that evil cannot be eradicated and therefore that one's expectations from politics must be moderate. The spirit which animates it may be described as serenity or sublime sobriety.�27 [27] No trace of criticism mars this description, and it is hard to imagine how political

27 [27] "Correspondence Concerning Modernity,� 107; "What Is Political Philosophy?,� 27-28, 40. In light of such passages, it has been argued that Strauss's work be understood as primarily rhetorical "and that it should be approached as an example of political theory as evocation.� According to this view, Strauss is quite conscious of the discrepancy between political theory as it lives on in academia and the concrete life of politics. He seeks "without leaving the security of the academy, to speak politically in the language of philosophy and to philosophize rhetorically.� The question naturally arises as to whom such speech is addressed, since those with genuine philosophical aptitude will always be, in Strauss's opinion, quite rare. This observation is not meant to suggest that philosophy must become popular and prove its practical usefulness. But a question certainly arises concerning the status and relevance of a type

philosophy so conceived could ever be mistaken in its judgments. And if Voegelin does not quite reach

the same rhetorical heights as Strauss when extolling philosophy, it is clear that he looks to philosophy

as the best hope for humanity in its present crisis. True philosophy never loses its balance, and it

protects society from the unbalancing effects of revelation by deliberately introducing uncertainties of

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of knowledge claimed by its possessors to be the key to living well while simultaneously

remaining accessible only to the few. John Gunnell writes: "The dilemma propelled his

[Strauss's] project into a kind of inauthenticity where philosophy held itself academically aloof,

but compromised truth in the service of political purpose. More than once Strauss reveals his

willingness to accept the noble lie not only in politics but also in the relationship between

philosophy and politics. His saga of the decline of the tradition and the crisis of modernity falls

into this category, but so do his claims about the existence and rediscovery of natural

right�What cannot be doubted�is that Strauss recognized that political society required

transcendental beliefs and a belief in transcendentalism. There must be a belief in truth in politics

even if truth and politics were ultimately incompatible. His mistake was to assume that it was

within the province and capacity of academic philosophy to save the appearances and underwrite

political values either specifically or generically.� John G. Gunnell, "Political Theory and

Politics: The Case of Leo Strauss and Liberal Democracy,� in *The Crisis of Liberal*

Democracy: A Straussian Perspective, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Soffer (Albany: State

University of New York Press, 1987), 68, 85-86. See also George Kateb, "The Questionable

Influence of Arendt (and Strauss),� in *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German �migr�s and*

American Political Thought after World War II, ed. Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes,

Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38-43.

meaning when needed to prevent consciousness from derailing "into apocalyptic expectations of a final

realm to come.� Voegelin insists on a number of occasions that anyone seeking to understand society

and its current ills must return to the Greeks. In his view this does not involve a fruitless attempt to

revive the polis, but an appreciation of how Plato and the other classical philosophers have bequeathed

to us *the* conceptual language with which to consider problems of order and disorder.28 [28]

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28 [28] Eric Voegelin, "What Is Political Theory?,� in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*,

vol. 33, *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers*, ed. William Petropulos and

Gilbert Weiss (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 65; Eric Voegelin,

Autobiographical Reflections, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press),

93-101, 122-23; "Gospel and Culture,� 210-12 *Ecumenic Age*, 295-96; "Reason: The Classic

Experience,� 266 ; Eric Voegelin, "Democracy and Industrial Society,� in *The Collected

Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 11, Published Essays 1953-1965*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia:

University of Missouri Press, 2000), 217; Eric Voegelin, "Prospects of Western Civilization,�

in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 11, Published Essays 1953-1965*, ed. Ellis Sandoz

(Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 126; Eric Voegelin, "In memorium Alfred

Schutz,� in *The Philosophy of Order: Essays on History, Consciousness, and Politics*, ed. Peter

J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 465; Eric Voegelin, "Conversations

with Eric Voegelin at the Thomas More Institute for Adult Education in Montreal,� in *The

Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 33, *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous

Papers*, ed. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss (Columbia: University of Missouri Press,

2004), 268-70.

But to criticize biblical teaching from the perspective of classical political philosophy is to engage in a critique on the basis of an idealized abstraction � an abstraction not in the sense of something empty and meaningless, but in the sense of a set of ideas lacking institutional embodiment in the present. In other words, to compare the Bible with classical philosophy is to compare a tradition that is in many ways practically constitutive of the modern western world with one that lives on primarily in university departments. In saying this I am in no way ignoring the lasting influence of classical philosophy on Western intellectual and political traditions. Rather, I am simply acknowledging what is clear to both Strauss and Voegelin � that the abiding legacy of classical thought in modern society has been deeply permeated and, in a sense, transformed by the biblical tradition. No doubt the classical tradition has left a lasting imprint on the political institutions of western civilization; but the discourse animating these institutional forms and practices today is permeated by meanings and values derived from biblical sources. Because of this, we no longer have direct access to a world shaped by classical thought apart from the influence of the Bible. Instead we live in a world in which aspects of the classical tradition have been appropriated by a civilization in which the message of the Judaeo-Christian heritage has come to dominate (albeit frequently in transfigured, secularized forms). When Strauss speaks of the "triumph of the biblical orientation� he has this situation in mind, and he certainly understands himself as working to recover the teaching of the classical authors freed from biblical influences. For Voegelin, there is no undoing the pneumatic differentiation of consciousness reflected in the biblical writings, but he also believes the biblical tradition requires the balancing wisdom of classical thought in order to restrain its potentially dangerous tendencies.

The critiques of the Bible made by Strauss and Voegelin depend to a significant degree on the ability to confine the comparison between Athens and Jerusalem to the realm of theory. Their criticism increases in strength and forcefulness to the extent it remains on a conceptual level. In *theory* it is possible to contrast the wisdom of Athens with the teaching of the Bible as if they are both viable

options for contemporary civilization. By analyzing the Bible from a philosophical perspective this is what Strauss and Voegelin do; western civilization is thereby explained in terms of competing sets of ideas represented by Athens and Jerusalem . In fact, though, the realistic choices confronting the modern West are not between the way of Athens and the way of Jerusalem , but rather how best to deal with the *defacto* "triumph of the biblical orientation.� In the theoretical sphere it may be otherwise, but concerning the actual ordering of modern society we have no opportunity to compare societies under the sway of the Bible's insights with comparable societies operating in accordance with Platonic moderation. Strauss and Voegelin both acknowledge this to the degree that they speak most often of a "recovery� or a "revival� of classical thought. For both men, modernity is notable for the *absence* of classical philosophy. This accounts in part for the tension in their thought between a narrative that speaks of Athens and Jerusalem as if they were both viable alternatives, and the actual historical situation we inhabit, which is largely characterized by an ongoing engagement with the legacy of Jerusalem (whether acknowledged or not). The historical sins of societies influenced by the Bible have been and will continue to be amply chronicled. By contrast, Platonically ordered societies can not be similarly criticized because they exist only in theory. Classical philosophy simply does not live on in institutional form in the way that biblically-inspired communities do. This is one of the primary reasons why the appeal to classical philosophy made by Strauss and Voegelin is ultimately unsatisfying. For readers are left to wonder how seriously they intend the return to classical wisdom, and whether they sufficiently think through the consequences of such an effort. Both of them sometimes write as if everything would be better if only the world were to take Plato's teaching to heart. This feeling on their part cannot even be called nostalgia, because there is no historical era informed by "triumph of the Platonic orientation� against which to measure the achievements and sins of the civilization formed by the Bible. Instead, Strauss and Voegelin appear to accept a certain myth about "philosophy� which they employ in their critique of the biblical tradition.

At the heart of this myth is the belief that philosophy is never wrong � it always takes the side of truth. In varying degrees both Strauss and Voegelin adhere to this position. Strauss's philosopher is detached, disinterested, and impervious to vulgar passions that move the multitude. Such a person is wholeheartedly dedicated to an unflinching pursuit of knowledge of the reality in which we find ourselves. For Voegelin, the classical philosophers are liable to criticism for their refusal or inability to abandon the polis as the primary field of activity, but on the central issue of preserving the proper balance of consciousness their record is consistently prudent and judicious. Unlike the prophet Isaiah or the apostle Paul, "A Plato will be tempted, but he will not fall.� Strauss and Voegelin criticize the Bible from the perspective of classical philosophy without subjecting classical thought to a similarly probing critique.

In order to illuminate what is at stake here, it may be helpful to mention the work of Rene Girard. At the risk of over-simplification, Girard's thought can be summarized as a series of three insights. The first is the mimetic nature of human desire. What this means is that we desire according to the desires of others. Our desires are neither original, nor individual, nor spontaneous; they are always mediated. Girard's second breakthrough is to recognize how, confronted with the violence that can accompany the rivalrous escalation of mimetic desire, communities generate peace and order by channeling this disruptive violence in the direction of a single victim (or a minority), uniting the desires of all against one, thereby bringing to an end (at least temporarily) the previous chaos of conflicting desires. This scapegoating mechanism lies at the origin of all societies. In sacrificial rituals, this founding violence is reproduced and brought to a successful conclusion, thereby continuing the beneficial byproducts of the original act; religious prohibitions attempt to contain the kinds of desires that led to the initial escalation of violence. This is what Girard has in mind when he argues for the religious origin of all culture. In

the evolution of culture, myth follows ritual; myths are stories of scapegoating violence told from the perspective of the scapegoaters. It is essential to understand how those who scapegoat are not aware of themselves as engaged in scapegoating; they are able to do what they do only as long as they are convinced of the guilt of those they persecute. The effectiveness of the scapegoating mechanism increases in direct proportion to the degree in which it remains hidden from those who practice it. Because of this, the innocence of the victim remains hidden in myths; a major function of myth is to disguise society's founding violence. The ordering effects of scapegoating and sacrifice are always temporary; hence the need for more frequent repetition of the rites when their efficacy fails. When confidence in sacrifice begins to wane, i.e., in periods of "sacrificial crisis,� myths are reinterpreted and more "rational� accounts are devised in order to shield from view the truth about humanity's violent origins.

From Girard's perspective, this is the context in which philosophy arises. The myths and religious rituals that previously sustained culture no longer serve as well as they did in the past. As someone deeply concerned with the order of society, Plato realizes this and looks toward a solution beyond traditional Greek religion and myth. He considers the violence of many Greek myths to be repellant and unworthy of imitation, yet he recognizes the profound importance of the sacred for the preservation of order. But despite the best efforts of Plato and other philosophers to transcend and to replace earlier myths, Girard argues that "philosophy is the continuation of myth by more sophisticated means.� If myths serve to disguise the collective murder at the basis of society, philosophy is but a further development in the obfuscation of this violence: "What philosophy does by expelling myth is to discard an outmoded vehicle of scapegoating and to reinstate the same process in less violent forms which are invisible once again.� Philosophy represents a new stage in the process of completely eliminating the traces of

the scapegoating mechanism, both justifying and disguising the violent foundations of culture. The effect of the "philosopher's myth" is to purge from the tradition any traces of the connection between divinities and violence. Plato, through the creation of a new kind of culture, was genuinely trying to protect society from the escalating chaos that accompanies the breakdown of the sacrificial system: "The Platonic stage, as opposed to the preceding one, does not culminate in an actual re-creation of the myth, though it is just as fundamental. Another culture is founded, no longer truly mythological but �rational' and �philosophical,' forming the very text of philosophy.� Yet despite his admiration for Plato's "greatness and depth," Girard concludes "Plato, like all Puritans, misses the goal, which is to reveal the mechanism of the victim and the demystification of the representations of persecution."29 [29] On the verge of insight, philosophy loses its nerve and becomes another screen for the violent sacred.

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29 [29] Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 15, 17; Rene Girard, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with Rene Girard,� *Religion and Literature*, 25 (1993),19; Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 77, 83. It is not that Plato is entirely without an awareness of the scapegoating mechanism. Girard comments on "an astonishing sentence� in Plato (*Republic* II, 361b-362a) which describes the fate of the perfectly just man whose pursuit of justice leads to his death at the hands of the community. Girard mentions how Socrates could be said to fit this description, and that in this instance Plato has had a breakthrough with regard to the nature and function of scapegoating. With Plato, however, this remains an isolated insight, and he is unable to affect a full break with the mythological horizon he criticizes. See Rene Girard, *Evolution and*

Girard's third important discovery is his realization that, in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the scapegoating mechanism is exposed, and the lie on which cultures are founded is revealed. The Bible exhibits a strong tendency to side with victims; and while its earlier strata still contain traces of collective violence, taken as a whole it is remarkable for its gradual unveiling and rejection of the scapegoating mechanism. Because of this, once the biblical message takes root in a culture it begins to subvert the order established on the basis of violence.30 [30] Throughout the Bible, "the collective

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Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture (New York : Continuum International Publishing, 2007), 67-68.

30 [30] Taking the story of Joseph from the book of Genesis as an example, Girard points to the violent expulsion of Joseph by his brothers as an act of "vengeful consensus," and observes how "the biblical text rejects that perspective and sees Joseph as an innocent scapegoat, a victim of his brothers' jealousy, the biblical formulation of our mimetic desire." By contrast, however much Sophocles may sympathize with Oedipus, it remains the case that Oedipus is guilty: "The myth always asks the question, �Is he guilty?' and provides the answer: �Yes'. Jocasta and Laios are right to expel Oedipus, since he will commit parricide and incest. Yes, Thebes is right to do the same, since Oedipus has committed parricide and incest�In the case of Joseph, everything works in reverse. The hero is wrongly accused�I think there is a fundamental opposition between biblical texts and myths.� *Evolution and Conversion*, 200; Rene Girard, "The Myth of Oedipus, the Truth of Joseph,� in Rene Girard, *Oedipus Unbound: Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire*, ed. Mark R. Anspach (Stanford , CA : Stanford University Press, 2004), 108, 112.

violence that constitutes the hidden infrastructure of all mythology begins to emerge, and it emerges as unjustified or arbitrary.� Unlike Romulus , the fratricide whose deed is justified because it leads to the greatness of Rome ; the Bible insists that Cain, the founder of the first city, is a murderer. In the Exodus, God acts to rescue slaves from an oppressive order invested with sacred status; the binding of Isaac makes clear that God does not want the sacrifice of the innocent, the prophets intervene in the name of God on behalf of those most likely to serve as society's scapegoats, and the Psalms and the book of Job give eloquent, powerful expression to the voices of victims. Torah, Prophets, and Writings all testify to the Bible's ongoing revelation of the scapegoating mechanism. The gospels, in Girard's view, bring this biblical revelation to its completion. They "denounce the founding violence as an evil that should be renounced,� and "portray this violence as the vulgar scapegoat phenomenon that it is, the fruit of mimetic contagion.� The gospels differ from myth in that "The same scapegoating that myth misunderstands and therefore reveres as sacred truth, the Gospels understand and denounce as the lie that it really is.� This gospel proclamation appears most starkly and definitively in the Passion narratives. There, the biblical recognition of God's siding with the victim reaches its apex.31 [31]

According to Girard, in this regard the self-understanding of philosophy differs profoundly from that of the Bible:

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31 [31] Rene Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 17, 151-52. See also *Things Hidden,* 151-53; Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll , NY : Orbis Books, 2001), 109-17). See also *Girard Reader*, 9-19, 145-221, 262-88.

But what is so extraordinary about the biblical rehabilitation of victims? Isn't it a common practice that dates right back to antiquity? Yes, but previously the victims were rehabilitated by one group in opposition to another. The faithful remain gathered around the rehabilitated victim and the flame of resistance is never extinguished. Truth is not allowed to submerge�Take the death of Socrates, for example. "True� philosophy never enters into it. It escapes the contagion of the scapegoat. There is always truth in the world; even though this is no longer so at the moment of Christ's death. Even his favorite disciples are speechless in the face of the crowd. They are literally absorbed by it.32 [32]

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32 [32] *The Scapegoat*, 105. Elsewhere Girard makes a similar point: "[The] Gospel tells us there are moments in which there is absolutely no truth in culture; and I do not think any other source tells us that with quite the same conviction. There are some anticipations in Greek culture, in particular the death of Socrates, but in the accounts of the death of Socrates, philosophy always knows the truth, whereas in Christianity, the Christians themselves say �Peter, our leader was ignorant.' In other words, the New Testament says that truth is not a human truth, that truth is outside of culture and has to be introduced into the world against the grain of culture itself�� Walter Burkert, Rene Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith, *Violent Origins*, ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 143. Michael Walzer makes a similar point with reference to the book of Exodus, pointing out its unsparing honesty with regard to the backsliding and defections of the Israelites. The Hebrew Bible allows little room for the Chosen People to congratulate themselves on their fidelity. See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 17-18, 49-55, 147-49.

From Girard's perspective this self-criticism is one of the great strengths of the biblical tradition. By comparison, philosophy, from the time of its birth, is not able to recognize its own complicity in scapegoating. Athens may have demanded the death of Socrates, but philosophy insists it had nothing to do with this injustice � its hands remain bloodless. This conviction is possible as long as consciousness of scapegoating is lacking. When Plato advocates expulsion of the poets from his city, he does so with the belief that they fully deserve their fate. The justification of scapegoating is inscribed in the narrative of philosophy's founding.33 [33]

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33 [33] "The Platonic rejection of tragic violence is itself violent, for it finds expression in a new expulsion � that of the poet. Through his very castigation of the poet, Plato reveals himself the poet's "enemy brother,� his "double,� who like all true doubles, is oblivious to the relationship. As regards Socrates, whom the community � unwilling to soil its own hands by contact with an impious creature � asked to do away with himself, Plato's sympathy is every bit as suspect as Sophocles' sympathy for his pharmakos-hero.� Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 295. Similarly, in a scene reminiscent of the confrontation between the biblical Job and his "friends,� Socrates (in the *Crito*) is confronted by the Laws of Athens. Job maintains his innocence to the end; Socrates, the willing scapegoat, goes to his death convinced by the Laws that such is the will of the gods. Socrates accepts the verdict of his scapegoaters; Job does not. On the book of Job as an anti-scapegoating text see Rene Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People*, trans.Stephen Bann and Michael Meetter, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

To the extent that Strauss and Voegelin identify philosophy with the life of reason in its highest form, their acceptance of the myth of philosophy's innocence makes them relatively uncritical of reason's own limitations. For Strauss, philosophy understands itself as "*the* perfection of reason and *therefore the* perfection of man is philosophy.�34 [34] Voegelin notes how while reason "is the constituent of humanity at all times,� it was the "genius of the Hellenic philosophers� that "discovered Reason as the source of order in the psyche of man.� They made this discovery as part of their "resistance against the personal and social disorder of their age.� But, Voegelin quickly adds, Plato and Aristotle did not indulge in metastatic thinking about the age to come.35 [35] Reason, so understood, seems especially liable to sacrificial thinking; particularly because it seems to pride itself on being immune to such tendencies. Girard's work reminds us that scapegoating remains a permanent temptation. Having relied on this mechanism for so long, humanity finds it difficult to abandon it. Human beings operate within societies already structured by the effects of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating. If at the origins of every culture there is an act of victimization, then every area of human life will bear traces of this violent origin, including the operation of human understanding. It is within this context that the following comment must be understood: "Our own rationality cannot reach the founding role of mimetic victimage because it remains tainted with it. Narrow rationality and victimage lose their effectiveness together. Reason itself is a child of the foundational murder.� Girard is neither an irrationalist nor a fideist. No more than Strauss or Voegelin would he think of dismissing the role of intelligence and reasonableness in human life. But he would call our attention to how our understanding

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35 [35] Strauss, "Reason and Revelation,� 141; Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience,� 265-66.

of rationality, as it arises within a given culture, is often insufficiently aware of its involvement with scapegoating practices. As it operates concretely within a community, reason participates in the lie of "misremembering� the community's violent foundations. For Girard, this is a pervasive temptation for all those who would justify their own acts of violence and/or victimization by an appeal to reason. It is difficult to persuade those who are convinced that, unlike their opponents, their judgments proceed from reason, and therefore epitomize the virtues of balance and moderation. Reason must become aware of its own scapegoating tendencies in order to be faithful to the exigencies of its own reasonableness.36 [36] Only when freed from the contaminating illusions of sacrificial thinking is reason able to become fully rational. Girard shares with Strauss and Voegelin a commitment to the development of a genuine human science, but he sees this as possible only after the Bible's exposure of scapegoating has been taken into account.37 [37] This is not to be confused with a summons to faith;

36 [36] Rene Girard, *A Theatre of Envy* (Leonminster: Gracewing, 2000), 208; Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 304.

37 [37] "The scientific spirit cannot come first. It presupposes the renunciation of a former preference for the magical causality of persecution so well defined by the ethnologists. Instead of natural, distant, and inaccessible causes, humanity has always preferred causes that are *significant from a social perspective and permit of corrective intervention* � victims. In order to lead men to the patient exploration of natural causes, men must first be turned away from their victims. This can only be done by showing them that from now on persecutors �hate without cause' and without any appreciable result. In order to achieve this miracle, not only among certain exceptional individuals as in Greece , but for entire populations, there is need of the extraordinary combination of intellectual, moral, and religious factors found in the Gospel text.

rather it is a claim that the Bible as a text accessible to all provides us with the ability to become aware

of the lies used to sustain culture and to generate social solidarity. The life of reason is truly able to

flourish only where the victimage mechanism has been called into question. In order for intelligence to

be true to itself it must first be liberated from the prison of sacrificial thinking. Strauss and Voegelin

critique the Bible from the perspective of philosophy � what is required, though, is that the

anthropological insights of the biblical text be permitted to help philosophy fulfill its commitment to

self-knowledge.

In varying degrees, Strauss and Voegelin resist this conclusion, preferring to correct or oppose

the biblical message in light of philosophy. Strauss is not mistaken in recognizing the Bible's wariness

with regard to philosophy. But he misinterprets that wariness, reading it as further evidence of the

contrast between the unquestioning obedience demanded by the Bible and the freedom of thought

typical of the philosophical life. Voegelin, unlike Strauss, does not oppose reason to revelation � on the

contrary, he understands reason as being constituted by revelation.38 [38] Yet no more than Strauss

does he submit reason to criticism from a biblical perspective. This is perhaps the most disappointing

aspect of their treatment of the Bible � their critiques move in only one direction. Neither Voegelin nor

Strauss conceives of the possibility that the biblical text could hold the key to understanding the

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The invention of science is not the reason that there are no longer witch-hunts, but the fact that

there are no longer witch-hunts is the reason that science has been invented. The scientific spirit,

like the spirit of enterprise in an economy, is a by-product of the profound action of the Gospel

text.� *Scapegoat*, 204-205.

38 [38] *Ecumenic Age*, 292-93.

limitations of philosophy.   Because of this they remain relatively uncritical of philosophy's complicity in violence and of the ways in which philosophy perpetuates sacrificial thinking. For Strauss and Voegelin violence is legitimate when it is reasonable; but neither of them provides an adequate account of how such rationality is to be determined. Instead, their readers are frequently left with the impression that the standard of rationality they employ coincides with their own political judgments and commitments. What I wish to highlight is the relative ease with which Strauss and Voegelin justify such violence on the basis of an appeal to classical philosophy.39 [39] Rhetorically invoking the balance and

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39 [39] For example, the flexibility with which Strauss endows the idea of natural right would place no limit on the forms of violence to be used in defending society. He takes it to be characteristic of philosophical moderation that it is able to accommodate itself to exigencies of the particular situation in determining what is to be done. From the perspective of natural right (as he understands it) the decision to make use of violence on behalf of society, is left in the hands of the "true statesman� whose own "magnanimous flexibility� mirrors this natural right as he "crushes the insolent and spares the vanquished.� *Natural Right and History*, 163; *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 140-43; "What Is Political Philosophy?,� 28. Voegelin is equally flexible when contemplating violence against dangerous enemies, justifying his position with an appeal to classical sources: "[An] atomic bombardment is not a moral matter but depends on politics and questions of existence. And when a social process is involved, we cannot, in the name of morality, refuse to use certain types of weapons and make certain kinds of decisions. The classic treatise on this point is Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*. The necessity of the process he terms *kinesis*, and he considers *kinesis* a kind of social illness.� "The West and the Meaning of Industrial Society,� in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 33, *The Drama of*

moderation of the classics somehow legitimates violence in the present. Voegelin praises Plato for his understanding of how best to balance persuasion and coercion, while strongly indicating that it is the philosopher who is the best judge of when such violence is justified. The appropriate use of violence, i.e., one that recognizes the truth of Anaximander and the laws of mundane existence, testifies to the philosopher's rationality, while the philosopher's rationality justifies the violence. Platonic rationality is intimately tied to the violence of order � so much so that at times Voegelin seems to come close to the view that the prudent use of intelligence in knowing how to use violence in the service of order is one of the defining characteristics of reason. Plato is judged to be more reasonable than biblical thinkers because his attitude toward the use of violence is considered by Voegelin to be more judicious. However, the criteria for this judgment are never made clear. With Strauss, the pervasiveness and the acceptability of sacrificial thinking is strikingly reflected in his interpretation of the death of Socrates: "Socrates preferred to sacrifice his life in order to preserve philosophy in Athens rather than to preserve his life in order to introduce philosophy into Crete �His choice was a political choice of the highest order.�40 [40] In reality, the political choice extolled by Strauss is nothing more than Socrates acquiescence in his own scapegoating. But philosophy justifies these sacrifices for the sake of the city.

I am not suggesting that the use of violence can never be justified; but I am interested in the question about *how* violence is to be justified and for what reasons. Attempts to revive the wisdom of Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Plato without a thorough examination of how sacrificial thinking is

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Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, ed. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 94-95.

40 [40] "What Is Political Philosophy?,� 33.

operative in their thought may easily lead (as I believe it does in the case of Strauss and Voegelin) to an

idealization of the classical tradition. From this idealized perspective modernity is condemned. What is

lacking in these judgments, however, is a sense of the ways in which modernity represents an advance

beyond classicism. There may in fact be good reasons for the "triumph of the biblical orientation.� In

order to sustain the superiority of classical wisdom over modern thought, the central role of the victim

must be omitted from one's account (or as is the case with Strauss and Voegelin, simply taken for

granted). But if Girard is correct, the biblical tendency to side with victims is one of the defining features

of modernity.41 [41] Once this concern for victims is included, an evaluation of modernity becomes

more complicated than either Strauss or Voegelin would have us believe. They would direct our

attention to the failings of the biblical tradition when considering the evils of modernity. Strauss traces

some of the less fortunate aspects of modernity to the legacy of the biblical call for charity. Voegelin

finds in the metastatic faith of the prophets one of the principle sources of disorder in the contemporary

world. But it is precisely here that greater nuance is required. For we surely need to ask ourselves

whether, as Strauss suggests, it is the biblical notion of charity that accounts for modern fanaticism.

Also, looking back at the twentieth century, it is a question of the utmost importance as to whether a

reversal of the millennia-old "pampering� and "softening� associated with belief in a loving

Providence actually serves the best interests of humanity. In Voegelin's case it must be asked whether it

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41 [41] "Our society is the most preoccupied with victims of any that ever was�No historical

period, no society we know, has ever spoken of victims as we do�We are all actors as well as

witnesses in a great anthropological first�Our world did not invent compassion, it is true, but it

has universalized it.� *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 161, 169. See also *Evolution and

Conversion*, 257-58.

is the vision of Moses, Isaiah, Jesus and Paul that needs to be balanced and approached with caution. Taking "metastatic faith� to be the greatest threat facing contemporary civilization runs the risk of ignoring those aspects of the same engendering biblical vision responsible for the most humane aspects of the modern world. Likewise, a case can be made that the destruction wrought by modern ideologies is a consequence of their *departure* from the biblical spirit. Political and social movements become most lethal precisely when they forget to take victims into account; they are most awful when they cloak their deeds in the seemingly impartial talk of rational necessity and the impenetrable conviction of the "sublime sobriety� of philosophy.42 [42] The horrors of the twentieth century are better explained as a consequence of the lasting hold exercised by sacrificial thinking, rather than as the offspring of a biblical orientation whose effect on western civilization has been to call our attention to the lies by which we justify our scapegoating. Perhaps our problems stem, not from naively imagining that we can live in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount, but from naively following Machiavelli.

The discrepancy between account and performance.

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42 [42] For example, I think a case can be made that communism was most destructive when its adherents were most convinced of its rational, scientific character, and that the revisionism that took place within the communist movement itself had a good deal to with a reaction against its tendency to create victims in the name of defending victims. This tension is at the heart of Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon*. See Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* , trans. Daphne Hardy (New York: Scribner, 1968).

Despite these criticisms, I believe that performatively Strauss and Voegelin go beyond, and are in some sense even at odds with the narratives they employ when speaking about the Bible and philosophy. I mean this in two ways. First there is their preoccupation with victimization. Even though they do not pay much attention to this dimension of the biblical legacy, concern about victimization is a driving force in the work of both men. One does not have to read much of the work of either man in order not to be struck by how their treatment of seemingly purely "philosophical� issues frequently reflects an underlying focus on the plight of victims. Strauss may write with cool detachment about the need to preserve the possibility of the philosophical life within society, but in nearly all his analyses there is present a worry about violence being used against unpopular minorities, whether Jews or philosophers. His *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is an entirely typical work, one which epitomizes Strauss's mature philosophy. Strauss is quite clear on the fact that he identifies the "Jewish problem� (i.e., the status of Jews as an often persecuted minority within the societies in which they find themselves) with the fundamental problem of politics. Eugene Sheppard writes how Strauss's description of the philosopher's relationship to society is a symbol of the precarious position of Jews.43

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43 [43] "Why We Remain Jews,� 312; Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 143; "Strauss was a German-Jewish refugee vitally concerned with the possibility of Jewish existence in exile. During his own period of exile from his native country, he came to question the wisdom and prudence of any project that called for an overcoming of political imperfection or for any messianic aspiration to overcome exile. Strauss regarded exile as the natural condition of all political societies; he recast the precarious existence of the diasporic Jew, who lives in perpetual fear of persecution, as the normative model of the philosopher.� Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 7

[43] Throughout his writings Strauss never loses sight of the reality of persecution; one of his indictments of charity's effect on modernity is that it leads to greater violence against victims. But Strauss is far less sensitive to the possibility that the ability to offer this critique has its source in the very biblical text he criticizes. He writes as if it is the moderation of the classics that inspires his aversion to victimization. Voegelin's anger over the unwarranted destruction of innocent people is often palpable in his writing. He is particularly distressed by the ways in which fanatics and ideologues in modern times have drawn upon the Bible in order to justify the annihilation of their foes. However, what Voegelin does is to accept such violence as somehow legitimately derived from biblical sources, rather than as a resurgence of the archaic violent sacred, a sacred violence from which, however haltingly, the biblical text is moving away.

From a Girardian perspective, the concerns voiced by Strauss and Voegelin about the destabilizing effects of the Bible on social order are legitimate. He would readily concede that the biblical text does in fact undermine social stability � to the extent that it exposes the scapegoating mechanism upon which society depends. Where this mechanism is revealed (as it has been in those cultures under biblical influence), it becomes increasingly difficult for communities to make use of sacrificial means in order to solve their problems. Once exposed, scapegoating begins to lose its power. Social and cultural distinctions which rest upon sacrificial practices and patterns of scapegoating are undermined, and society is plunged into a crisis involving a loss of social differentiation. Deprived of sacrificial protections by the biblical message, societies may resort to extreme measures in order to preserve unity and stability. This is precisely what Girard believes is happening in the modern world. The truth about history's victims is being revealed, and "victimage patterns, systems of scapegoating will not provide the stable form of culture that they have had in the past.� As a result, "all of Western and then world history can be interpreted as a turbulent, chaotic, but constantly accelerating process of devictimization.� Unfortunately, humanity's habitual recourse to violence does not disappear without a

struggle; the less it is able to produce its desired effects the more virulent it becomes. The Bible produces a double movement within a culture; both a heightened awareness of victims and a violent reaction on the part of the sacrificial system it exposes. This helps to explain the paradoxical character of the contemporary world: "Whether we examine the matter attentively or not, we easily see that everything people say about our world is true: it is by far the worst of all worlds. They say repeatedly � and this is not false � that no world has made more victims than it has. But the opposite proposition is equally true: our world is also and by far the best of all worlds, the one that saves more victims than any other. In order to describe our world, we must multiply all sorts of propositions that should be incompatible but now are true simultaneously.� The very force which weakens the scapegoating mechanism also acts as a safeguard against the violence that could easily arise when the mechanism's ability to order society is undermined.44 [44]

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44 [44] "Victimage is still present among us, of course, but in degenerate forms that do not produce the type of mythical reconciliation and ritual practice exemplified by primitive cults. This lack of efficiency often means that there are more rather than fewer victims. As in the case of drugs, consumers of sacrifice tend to increase the doses when the effect becomes more difficult to achieve�In our world, sacrificial means have degenerated more and more as victimage, oppression, and persecution have become predominant issues. No return to the rigidities of prohibition and ritual is in sight, and some very special cause must be found to account for this unique evolution. I have an answer to propose, and it is the presence of the biblical text in our midst.� *Girard Reader*, 209. Also *Girard Reader*, 16-17, 183; *I See Satan*, 165; *Things Hidden*, 195-96, 284-85.

Strauss and Voegelin emphasize just one side of Girard's twofold insight. They are both sensitive to the ways in which the biblical message undermines social order and how this contributes to modern violence and persecution. Unfortunately, their fear of the destabilizing tendencies brought about by the biblical message outweighs, and to some degree limits their appreciation of the Bible's role in the rehabilitation of victims. They criticize the violence they understand as stemming from the biblical tradition, but they are less aware of how this same tradition is also the source of their ability to make their critiques. Instead, both Strauss and Voegelin, each in his own way, work to impede, temper, or reverse the Bible's influence. In suggesting the possibility of a reversal of the triumph of the biblical orientation, Strauss plays a subtle yet dangerous Nietzschean game; while Voegelin's call to combat metastatic thinking is simultaneously an attack on the biblical sources of modernity's preoccupation with victimization. Their prescriptions for modernity rest upon incomplete insights into the Bible.

The second area in which I detect a discrepancy between account and performance in Strauss's and Voegelin's thought is their attitude toward philosophy. The highly idealized descriptions of philosophy which they present perpetuate the myth of philosophy's invulnerable correctness and superiority. This portrait, however, does not correspond to their actual practice. Intelligence, as concretely operative in their work, is much more open, dynamic, and self-critical. Strauss's reiterations about philosophy being the possession of the few, quickly become wearying; but he is also capable of speaking with eloquence about the joys associated with the exercise of our minds - and of doing so in a way that belies his reputation for elitism.45 [45] In Voegelin we have a thinker whose ecumenical

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45 [45] "We cannot exert our understanding without from time to time understanding something of importance; and this act of understanding may be accompanied by the awareness of our

openness to experiences of transcendence in all their myriad forms enters into tension with the philosopher who insists that in order to converse about reality we must use the language of Plato. The stories Strauss and Voegelin tell about philosophy do not always coincide with their actual practice as philosophers. To some extent they remain prisoners of the narratives they tell about Athens and Jerusalem . This is unfortunate, because it deprives them of the possibility of fully appreciating the meaning of the biblical text. In critiquing the Bible from the perspective of philosophy they do not allow the biblical voice to be heard in a way that might actually serve as a purifying challenge to philosophical wisdom.

For it is when reason convinces us that our violence stems from a sober assessment of what needs to be done, when we take pride in the "realism� of our position, and when we regret the unfortunate "necessity� of having to do harm � it is then we need to be most alert to our scapegoating. At its best, philosophy's pursuit of self-knowledge leads in this direction. But to the extent that philosophers identify what is reasonable with their own positions and judgments (a temptation obviously not unique to philosophy), reason's own need for conversion becomes apparent. In order not to be misunderstood here or accused of injecting the issue of religious faith into the discussion at this point, let me be clear that I am using the term "conversion� as Girard does when he describes it as a willingness to accept our own susceptibility to engage in scapegoating. Conversion, so understood "is a form of intelligence, of understanding.�46 [46] As applied to philosophy this would involve become

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understanding, by the understanding of understanding�and this is so high, so pure, so noble an experience that Aristotle could ascribe it to his God.� "What Is Liberal Education?,� 8.

46 [46] *Evolution and Conversion*, 45.

increasingly attentive to the ways in which reason itself is implicated in the scapegoating practices constitutive of culture. This is not a matter of the philosopher accepting biblical faith, but of allowing the anthropological insights contained within the biblical text to serve as a purifying critique of philosophy's own involvement with society's violent practices. That philosophy might actually require a biblical critique in order to better fulfill the exhortation to "Know thyself� is something neither Strauss nor Voegelin seriously entertains. But if Girard is correct, self-knowledge is only possible in a context in which scapegoating has been exposed and where it is repudiated on an ongoing basis. At its best, philosophy has intimations of the disturbing truth at the basis of culture. But the decisive break with scapegoating never occurs, and like the myth-makers and poets, the philosophers perpetuate the sacrificial thinking that shields the victim from view. Confident in its own reasonableness, philosophy may convince itself that its intentions are always pure, its judgments moderate and just. Its greatest strength then becomes a source of blindness. However, this need not be so. Plato did not have the benefit of the insights disclosed through the biblical text. Today we do, and if philosophy would be true to itself these insights must be considered. For it may well be the case that the knowledge of scapegoating disclosed in the Bible represents the decisive truth about human societies and cultures from which there can be no turning back. If so, then we are left with the task of living out the implications of this knowledge. And with all due respect to the achievements of Strauss and Voegelin, the crucial question becomes not whether the Bible is in need of moderation, but whether philosophy is open to conversion.