LEO STRAUSS AND THE JEWISH QUESTION: PHILOSOPHY, HOMELESSNESS, AND THE POLITICS OF REDEMPTION

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By

Alexander Avni, M.A.

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This study of Leo Strauss is an attempt to reconstruct his interpretation of the history of political thought in terms of his own unique appropriation of the meaning of the Jewish question. This question is the context that profoundly shaped and nourished his ideas, and within which Strauss became a political conservative and a philosophical skeptic. Specifically, I argue that Strauss’s work amounts to a recovery of Western political thought as the encounter between competing notions of redemption – the Biblical and the philosophical, and that he ultimately conceived of this encounter as disclosing and articulating the unsettled and unsettling spiritual state of Western Civilization.

I advance the view that his interpretation of political philosophy as the confrontation between reason and revelation comes to light initially within the internal Jewish theologico-political dialogue concerning the meaning of redemption for the Jewish people. That is to say, the analytic categories he uses to expose the underlying structure of the political-religious-philosophical story of the West are the ones he discovered in his consideration of the Jewish historical experience.

I conclude that his own often difficult and ironic work does not allow for comforting, redemptive resolutions of the human condition. His writings on Plato, Xenophon, Maimonides, Hobbes, Spinoza and others are a testament to the fact that in the end he sided neither with the
Bible nor philosophy, neither with revelation nor reason as having redemptive solutions to the problem of human existence. As such, his thought and his life are a testament to the spiritual homelessness of man in the modern world.
I want to express my gratitude to the members of the dissertation committee who guided me throughout this long, difficult but ultimately rewarding process. Special thank you goes to the chair, Gerald Mara, whose patient and ongoing conversations were indispensable to my deeper understanding of the topic. I also want to thank Joshua Mitchell for his mentorship and encouragement during the time that I was formulating my ideas, for always challenging my assumptions, and for introducing me to the writings of Leo Strauss in the first place. Thank you, Ori Soltes, for support and friendship and for teaching me a great deal about modern Jewish thought. Thank you, Yossi Shain, for guiding me toward a more careful recognition of Strauss’s relevance to the contemporary social and political issues of import to the Jewish community in Israel and abroad. Finally, I want to thank my family: my wife Andrea, my sons Joshua and Noah, and my mother Fanya, for their love and support.

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# Table of Contents

Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 1  

Chapter 1: Back to Origins: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Recovery of  
Classical Rationalism .......................................................................................................................... 12  

- Strauss’s Post Modern Plato ........................................................................................................... 13  
- Strauss’s Liberal Plato ..................................................................................................................... 17  
- Nietzsche, Heidegger and Modern Jewish Perplexities ............................................................... 23  
- Strauss’s Nietzschean Answer to the Jewish Question ................................................................. 33  
- Strauss’s Recovery of Platonic Rationalism .................................................................................. 39  

Chapter 2: Liberalism, Antisemitism, Zionism: Modern Discontents and the  
Discovery of the Theologico-Political Predicament ................................................................. 43  

- Liberalism and the Jewish Question: Discourse of Emancipation,  
  Inclusion, and Assimilation ............................................................................................................ 44  
- Antisemitism and the Jewish Question: Discourse of Exclusion,  
  Expulsion, and Elimination .......................................................................................................... 47  
- Political Zionism and the Jewish Question: Discourse of Separation  
  And Political Return ....................................................................................................................... 52  
- Strauss’s Zionism: Discourse of Confrontation, Critique and Revaluation ......................... 57  
  - Rejection of Exile and Tradition ............................................................................................... 60  
  - The Persistence of Antisemitism .............................................................................................. 64  
  - The Challenge of Assimilation ............................................................................................... 68  
- The Theologico-Political Predicament: Discourse of Ambivalence and  
  Ambiguity ....................................................................................................................................... 75  

Chapter 3: Jewish Philosophy as the Dialectic of Estrangement and Return ............ 85  

- Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: Critique of Modern Notions of Return ......................... 87  
  - Judaism as Religion of Reason: Moses Mendelssohn ......................................................... 90  
  - Judaism as Religion of Reason: Hermann Cohen .............................................................. 95  
  - Judaism as Existential Theology: Franz Rosenzweig ....................................................... 105  
- Spinoza, Enlightenment and Tradition: Critique of Radical Estrangement ............... 117  
  - Spinoza’s Epistemological Motive ......................................................................................... 123  
  - Spinoza’s Moral Motive ......................................................................................................... 141  
  - Spinoza’s Political Motive ..................................................................................................... 144  

Chapter 4: Critique of Modern Philosophy and Return to Medieval Rationalism ...... 151
Historical Case for a Return to Jewish Medieval Rationalism ........................................... 154
Overcoming Modern Prejudices ....................................................................................... 159
The Case Against Carl Schmitt ....................................................................................... 163
The Case Against Thomas Hobbes ................................................................................. 170

Chapter 5: Maimonides on Reason and Revelation: Redemption as
Accommodation .............................................................................................................. 179

Limits of Reason and the Necessity for Revelation (the Metaphysical
Argument) ...................................................................................................................... 180
Prophecy as Philosophic Legislation (the Epistemic-Political
Argument) ....................................................................................................................... 188
The Esoteric Dimension of Medieval Jewish Thought (the Rhetorical-
Political Argument) ...................................................................................................... 200

Chapter 6: Socratic Piety, Philosophic Homelessness, and Redemption as
Homecoming .................................................................................................................... 215

“The Two Faces of Socrates” .......................................................................................... 217
Xenophon’s Socrates: Piety as Justice as Lawfulness ...................................................... 218
Plato’s Socrates: Piety as justice as Virtue ..................................................................... 226
Redemption as Homecoming ......................................................................................... 238

Selected Bibliography ................................................................................................... 246
The trouble with us human beings is that we are not quite complete, neither when we are born nor when we die.\(^1\)

The Jewish character of Leo Strauss’s political philosophy is the subject matter of this dissertation. The origin of its main idea can be traced to a claim Strauss made during a lecture organized by the Hillel House at the University of Chicago in 1962 and titled “Why We Remain Jews.” There he said the following: “I believe that I can say, without any exaggeration that since a very, very early time the main theme of my reflections has been what is called the ‘Jewish question’.”\(^2\) This claim is not at all self-evident for students of political theory for whom the writings of Strauss became an object of attraction. It is certainly not as evident as his better known proposition that the theme in question is the theologico-political problem. Stated this way, the proposition invokes both Spinoza’s great work and Strauss’s self-described spiritual condition as a Weimar Jew.\(^3\) Given these categorical statements, we can provisionally begin our inquiry by holding that there is some inherent relationship between these formulations and that perhaps for Strauss the theologico-political problem cannot be understood without getting at the Jewish question. At the same time, we can begin to understand Strauss’s insights into the Jewish question when, and only when, we recognize its theologico-political dimension. What is certainly evident, however, is that the relationship between his Jewish thought and his political philosophy needs explication.

Leo Strauss was raised in a traditional religious Jewish family, but in his teenage years he abandoned the faith of his parents and converted to political Zionism. After attending the University of Marburg – at the time the center of the neo-Kantian philosophy of Hermann Cohen – and after receiving a Ph.D. degree in philosophy from university of Hamburg, he continued to attend classes at the University of Freiburg and began to write on Judaism, Zionism and modern Jewish thought until the early 1930’s when he turned his attention to political philosophy and to Maimonides. This shift in focus coincided with his emigration from Germany, first to England in 1932 and then, in 1937, to the United States. His position with respect to Judaism became a matter of scholarly controversy as his interpretation of the history of Western political thought gained in stature. Specifically, at issue is the extent to which Strauss’s Jewish background, his personal experience as a German-Jewish emigre, and his early (and continuing) scholarly contribution to modern Jewish thought were either central or marginal (if relevant at all) to his writings in political philosophy. This dissertation is a contribution to this inquiry.

As a scholar and a student of Plato, Maimonides, Hobbes, Machiavelli and Spinoza among others, Strauss had garnered a famously loyal following as well as a rather hostile opposition. Scholarly disagreements are sharp and profound addressing and questioning his philosophical, religious, and political commitments. His noteworthy critics come mostly from the ranks of defenders of liberalism, popular democracy, modern egalitarianism and multiculturalism. Two such critics stand out for serious consideration. Shadia Drury, in her oft quoted work on Strauss, has accused him of anti-democratic elitism, religious cynicism, contempt for the masses, and for justifying political deception. She is most incensed with

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Strauss’s insistence that certain truths must never be publicly revealed and that the uneducated masses must always and cynically be nourished on a diet of salutary lies. She concludes that Strauss is as much a secret follower of Machiavelli as he is a self-proclaimed student of the classics.\(^5\) Similarly, Steven Holmes criticized Strauss’s melodramatic antiliberalism and antimodernism, his philosophical elitism and abstract ahistoricism, and his hostility toward democratic equality, individualism, cosmopolitanism and secular humanism. He further asserted that Strauss’s rhetoric has an intellectual affinity with the fascist theories of Giovanni Gentile and Carl Schmitt.\(^6\) Both Drury and Holmes conclude that Strauss’s ideas, rooted as they were in foreign soil, pose a real danger to the American tradition of democracy; the political implication of his purported recovery of classical natural rights – the right by nature of the wise few to rule over the unwise many – is tantamount to tyranny. Strauss, on this reading, teaches the virtues of despotism; he is the philosopher of tyranny.

Strauss’s students and followers in general are less certain of his intent although they view his stance with respect to modernity and liberal democracy in quite different terms. Harry Jaffa argued that Strauss’s project, in the face of the modern turn toward historicism and moral relativism, was to recover ancient ethical standards rooted in the idea “of the beneficence of nature,” or “the primacy of the Good.”\(^7\) He argued, against Strauss’s critics, that Strauss in fact supported the idea of a constitutional government as a regime that was morally grounded in natural right and supported by both reason and revelation. According to Jaffa, Strauss saw in

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\(^5\) Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988). Drury goes as far as to accuse Strauss of perversity and corrupting the youth (p. 193), a somewhat strange accusation given its significance in the history of political thought.


American democracy the best practicable regime, a model of moderation. Thomas Pangle, despite his disagreements with Jaffa on where Strauss ultimately stood with respect to revelation, arrives at a similar conclusion. He, as well as others, had recently argued that Strauss’s greatest achievement was to teach his students the reverence for American democracy for its intellectual achievement of merging classical notions of mixed regimes with modern republicanism (its constitutionalism, separation of powers, and federalism). If Strauss had reservations about American democracy, Pangle claims, they were primarily concerned with its “cultural shallowness” and “spiritual emptiness” which for him could be overcome through a certain kind of education.

Catherine Zuckert stresses the Platonic aspects of Strauss’s political philosophy. She places Strauss within a particular pedigree of thinkers whom she collectively characterizes as “postmodern,” using the term to describe nontraditional (non-Christian) students of Plato. She asserts that Strauss’s interpretation of Plato is an act of self-reflection as much as it is an act of critique of modernity and is central to the understanding of Strauss’s philosophical project.

Similar to Pangle and Zuckert, Steven Smith sees in Strauss a friend of liberal democracy who returned to Plato’s dialogues to recover its ennobling possibilities.

The debates with respect to Strauss’s reputation do not end here. Views on the role of Judaism in his thought appear to be as diverse. There seems to be as little consensus about Strauss’s commitment to Judaism as there is about his commitment to democracy. Positions,

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11 Steven B. Smith, Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).
which cut across friend and foe, range from denying any significance of Judaism in his thought (Drury) or ignoring the issue outright (Holmes) to dismissing and marginalizing his Jewish concerns as mere exoteric flirtations (Rosen, Pangle) or recognizing but still marginalizing them (Jaffa) to, finally, recognizing and emphasizing the significance of Judaism in his thought (Fackenheim, Novak).  

Since the publication of Kenneth Hart Green’s *Jew and Philosopher*, the view that emphasizes the centrality of Strauss’s Jewish writings to his overall intellectual outlook has been attracting serious attention.  Green made a powerful case for the pivotal role Maimonides played in shaping Strauss’s mature thought by arguing that Strauss’s return to Maimonides and the recovery of the essential teachings of the *Guide for the Perplexed* is the key that unlocks the meaning of his philosophical thinking.  Maimonides is the intellectual model of a Jewish philosopher that shaped and nourished Strauss’s own thinking.  Through his writings and the way he lived, he was able to show Strauss “how it is possible to be both a philosopher and a Jew, preserving commitments to divine revelation and to Jewish morality as well as to unhampered philosophic thought in their primary integrity.”

Strauss came to see Maimonides as a uniquely wise thinker and teacher who arose in the midst of a similar crisis, and who had been able to resolve the crisis by achieving a “perfect,” though unconventional, balance between philosophy, religion, morality, and

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politics… Strauss… presents Maimonides the Jewish thinker as the highest type of philosophic thinker, and as one still eminently worthy of imitation.  

More recently, both Eugene Sheppard and Leora Batnitzky have been exploring the Jewish character of Strauss’s thought and, in the process, greatly contributing to the growing recognition of Judaism’s influence on his writings. The historian Sheppard pays particular attention to the formative period of Strauss’s thought culminating in the publication of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* in 1948. His book focuses on Strauss’s early encounters with Zionism, contemporary Jewish philosophers, Jewish orthodoxy, and his critique of liberalism. He brings out the exilic nature of Strauss’s thought by drawing attention to the way in which his sociology of philosophy parallels Jewish experience in exile.

In her book, *How Judaism Became A Religion*, Leora Batnitzky locates Strauss’s contribution to modern Jewish thought squarely within the American experience. In this work, Batnitzky shrewdly points out the irony about Strauss that both his critics and supporters either overlooked or attempted to resolve, namely, that this avowed non-believer emerges as one of the stronger defenders of the belief in revelation, the most important principle in religious Judaism. She points out that Strauss recognized the irresolvable nature of the Jewish problem and that for him the promise (and it is only a promise) of America lies precisely in its refusal to resolve it.

In her earlier comparative study of Strauss and the Jewish French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, she argued that despite their profound differences, at the heart of their respective philosophies is an attempt to come to terms with what it means to be Jewish in the modern world.

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14 Ibid., xii-xiii.
which entails the insistence for both “on the historical and spiritual importance of Judaism…for understanding the development and indeed the vitality of western civilization.”

In this dissertation I argue that Strauss’s understanding of the history of political philosophy has its roots in the Jewish question. This is the context that profoundly shaped and nourished his ideas and within which Strauss became a political conservative and a philosophical skeptic. He conceptualized this question as a rift between traditional and modern Jewish thought and gave it expression in a number of related ways: as a theologico-political predicament, as a choice between progress and return, and as a tension between reason and revelation. He applied these analytic categories to then reflect on and think through the sources, the development and ultimately the consequences of the history of western philosophy, a history which he understood as a conflict between the ancients and the moderns. Building on recent scholarship, this dissertation makes the case then for the significance and relevance of Strauss as a Jewish political philosopher with a particular point of view that aims beyond merely understanding key figures in the history of Western thought as they understood themselves. Specifically, it argues that his work amounts to a reconstruction – following Heidegger’s footsteps – of Western political thought as the encounter between competing notions of redemption: the Biblical and the philosophical.

The biblical notion of redemption was most eloquently declared by the prophet Isaiah, who envisioned it in terms of peace and harmony among the nations:

And many peoples shall go and say: ‘Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, To the house of the God of Jacob; And He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from

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Jerusalem. And He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:3-4).

Traditional Jewish notions of redemption, which were inspired by this vision and later came to represent the messianic age, were tied up, however, with the promise inherent in the covenantal bond between God and his chosen people. Isaiah, again:

How is the faithful city become a harlot! She that was full of justice [mishpat], righteousness [tzedek] lodged in her, but now murderers… Therefore saith the Lord… I will turn My hand upon thee, and purge away thy dross as with lye, and will take away all thine alloy; And I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counselors as at the beginning; Afterward thou shalt be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and they that return of her with righteousness (Isaiah 1:21-27).

Redemption of mankind, guided by providence through revelation, was thus intimately entwined with the redemption of the Jewish people which in concrete terms meant a return to its original dwelling place – the Promised Land. “Man is originally at home in his Father’s house,” writes Strauss. “He becomes a stranger through estrangement, through sinful estrangement… Repentance is return; redemption is restoration.”18 For the children of Israel redemption meant homecoming, and yet there could be no home (a place of peace, loving bond, and belonging – a place where man can be whole) for the Jewish people without there also being redemption for mankind. Righteousness and justice have no national boundaries, but from the Biblical perspective, the universal promise of revelation works itself out through the providential history of the chosen people.

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Modern Judaism, however, found itself pulled apart by the incompatible forces of tradition on the one hand which counseled faith and patience, and modernity on the other which promoted redemption exclusively through human deeds, through secular history. In general, modern Jewish thought, responding to Spinoza’s critique of religion, opted to abandon the traditional conception of providential history but was unable to reach consensus. On the one hand, liberal Jewish thinkers accommodated Jewish ideals to the emerging liberal state by disclaiming any hope of a return and political restoration. To them, home and thus redemption was made possible for all by the liberal state and its values. The Jewish question could be resolved by rejecting the idea of exile through assimilation. 19 On the other hand political Zionism, alarmed by the persisting force of antisemitism, which proved to be immune from liberal ideals, opted to restore the Jewish homeland and with it redemption for the Jewish people precisely because it found man as such to be irredeemable. 20 In either case, modern Jewish thought, in complete accord with modern philosophical currents that overwhelmed it, invested politics, human deeds and history, not faith, with the power of redemption.

The overt origin of a belief in man’s own redeeming capacity is not Biblical but philosophical. Its clearest articulation is given in Plato’s Republic by a city of harmony and justice or, as Strauss put it, a city with “perfect moral order.” 21 But this perfectly just and redeeming city is constructed on the model of the philosopher’s soul. The city is the soul writ large and because the perfectly just soul is manifested through the rule of reason, the perfectly

19 Marxism, which many Jews adopted as well, was merely a more radical version of this idea.
20 Strauss came to reject the term anti-Semitism as a polite disguise for hatred of Jews that was coined by “some bashful German or French pedant.” Its use (as “antisemitism”) throughout this dissertation is a mere recognition of and capitulation to its conventional understanding and succinct expression.
21 Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 144.
just city is manifested through the rule of the philosopher-king. And for Plato, as Strauss insists, the coincidence of intellectual and political power was a matter of an unlikely chance not necessity. The redeeming city is conceived in speech not in deed. Strauss’s Plato then was skeptical of the redeeming power of reason because he was fundamentally weary of philosophy’s political and social utility. Plato recognized the limitations of philosophy’s redemptive power. And it was this limitation that was consciously rejected and ultimately defeated by modern enlightenment (the movement that permanently reshaped Jewish thought), which imbued human capacities with the powers of which neither Biblical nor Greek thought had ever conceived.

For Strauss, the inability of modern political order to create a world without evil, a world without contradictions – its declared aim – is the final proof of the failure of modern rationalism. Thus the philosopher who is among the blessed humans is nevertheless haunted by doubt, doubt that is generated by his own inability to construct a home for man, a doubt and a suspicion that as long as he cannot refute revelation, revelation will always be a reminder of the powerlessness of man and, in the words of Jacob Klein, his “incompleteness.”

This study of Leo Strauss is then an attempt to reconstruct the main themes of his political philosophy through his conception of the Jewish question. It focuses specifically on the notions of redemption and homelessness as the key to unlocking the meaning of his work. It argues that the Jewish biblical idea of redemption and the Jewish exilic experience (both physical and spiritual), as they are understood by Strauss, are the indispensable framework through which we must understand his political writings. It ultimately concludes that his own often difficult and ironic work does not allow for comforting, redemptive resolutions of the human condition. His writings are a testament to the fact that in the end he was neither the resident of Athens nor
Jerusalem and as such his thought as Jewish thought, and his life as Jewish exilic life is a testament to the homelessness of man in the modern world.

This way of peering into Strauss provides no comfort for his acolytes or his critics. It refuses to side with those who see him as the enemy of modernity and democracy, with those who see him as a defender of reason against revelation, or with those who hold him to be a defender of religion against the pure rational or scientific construction of the world. It refuses to reduce his thought to basic principles and positions that would constitute his intellectual dwelling place. Rather, it presents him as a restless thinker who tried to understand philosophy as it understood itself and as it was understood by those loyal to the Biblical world view, just as he tried to understand the world disclosed by revelation as it understood itself and as it was grasped by reason. He conceived of the dialogue between reason and revelation as an internal dialogue which reveals the irredeemable spiritual condition of modern Jews just as it discloses and articulates the unsettling and unsettled spiritual state of western civilization.
CHAPTER 1
BACK TO ORIGINS: NIETZSCHE, HEIDEGGER AND THE RECOVERY OF CLASSICAL RATIONALISM

“What has the Jew to do with Plato and Aristotle, that he should keep watch at their door to learn wisdom from them?”

It has been well argued that Strauss’s political philosophy, including his interpretation of the ancients, should be read as a sustained encounter - explicit or implicit - with the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Catherine Zuckert, for example, argues that Strauss “explicitly tried to save Western rationalism from Nietzschean-Heideggerian critique”; Steven Smith writes that “Heidegger is the unnamed presence to whom or against whom all of Strauss’s writings are directed”; David O’Connor claims that Strauss’s interpretation of Aristotle “became the central vehicle through which Strauss worked out his own complicated appropriation of and resistance to Martin Heidegger”; Finally, Horst Mewes offers the following: “Strauss’s account of the philosophic origins of political philosophy…is an implicit response to Heidegger’s understanding of Plato’s place in the ‘history of being.’” Building upon a close reading of Zuckert’s and Smith’s analysis I argue in this chapter that Strauss’s encounter with and critique of Heidegger (and Nietzsche), and his subsequent attempt to return to Platonic political philosophy is informed to a large extent by what came to be known as the Jewish question.

**Strauss’s Postmodern Plato**

According to Catherine Zuckert, Strauss keeps company with a group of thinkers whose respective philosophical projects hinge on their idiosyncratic understanding of Plato. She characterizes their enterprise as “postmodern” because the return to Plato and Socrates, first orchestrated by Nietzsche, is informed by a shared belief that “modern rationalism has exhausted its promise and its possibilities.”

They search in Plato for answers to contemporary problems that modern philosophy has been unable to provide. They go back to the origins of Western philosophic tradition as a way of rejecting that tradition and in order to find a different path that could have or should have been taken but wasn’t. As Zuckert put it, “[t]hey are all seeking a way of making a new beginning, of moving beyond ‘modernity’ to something better, by articulating a new and different understanding of the distinctive characteristic of ‘the West’.”

Building on Kant’s argument that *noumena*, or “things-in-themselves”, cannot be known, Nietzsche reopened the question of what philosophy was if it did not lead to knowledge. He turned to the origins of the philosophic tradition, to Plato’s dialogues because, in the first place, Socrates himself was certain that he possessed no knowledge. Nietzsche took this to mean (with exaggeration perhaps) that at the end of the history of philosophy Kant discovered that which Socrates knew at its beginning: knowledge in its comprehensive, philosophic sense was not possible.

In the second place, Nietzsche turned to Plato because of the structure of his writings. Plato’s dialogues were less philosophical treatises and more like dramas which allowed Nietzsche to reexamine the relationship between poetry and philosophy. Nietzsche asserted that

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25 Ibid., 1-2.
the history of philosophy had represented not a rational pursuit for knowledge and wisdom but a subconscious expression of the will to power, and this philosophical dead end, according to him, had potent nihilistic implications for the modern world. Philosophy, as Kant argued, merely amounted to legislation, the imposition of law and order upon the chaotic world, but, as Zuckert explains, Nietzsche “came to suspect” that for Socrates, and most likely for Plato as well, philosophy came to represent the only satisfying or worthwhile way of life. Nietzsche’s hope was that in the future philosophers would impose their individual wills more honestly, in a conscious and intentional way; his philosophers must become creators. Nietzsche then reinterpreted philosophy not as a rational or scientific pursuit for knowledge but as a creative pursuit of the will. For him philosophy amounted to nothing more and nothing less than art.26

Heidegger agreed with Nietzsche’s diagnosis but not with its attributed source. According to him, philosophers did not just assert their individual wills upon the cosmos; they were not merely legislators and organizers of the universe. Instead, “they simply articulated the order or truth that was disclosed at their particular time and place.”27 In other words, Nietzsche gave too much credit to philosophic activity as independent and willful or creative activity. History is the elusive unconcealment of Being, which manifests itself in beings through time and discloses itself only to particular beings, the human beings (Dasein). But human beings must be receptive to the voice of Being in order for the Truth to emerge. Philosophy is one but not the

26 Ibid., 2-3. For Nietzsche’s allusions to philosophy as art see The Birth of Tragedy, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 31: “I am convinced that art represents the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life.” See also the reference to the “Socrates who practices music,” ibid., 98. Emphasis in the original.
27 Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, 3.
exclusive, and perhaps not even the most appropriate, mode of reception. Philosophy, Heidegger says,
is the correspondence to the Being of being, but not until, and only when, the correspondence is actually fulfilled and thereby unfolds itself and expands this unfoldment. This correspondence occurs in different ways according to how the appeal of Being speaks, according to whether it is heard or not heard, and according to whether what is heard is said or is kept silent.  

The problem with the history of philosophy, according to Heidegger, is that philosophers took that which was disclosed to them as “the truth of Being,” as something that is “transhistorical” and “always,” rather than something that is partial, fleeting and temporary. Heidegger articulated this problem in terms of the “forgetfulness” or the “concealment” of Being. According to him, this problem inheres at the very beginning of western philosophical tradition when Plato framed the question of Being in terms of the doctrine of ideas. Plato offered an authoritative interpretation of Being as “what is” thus laying the ground plan for metaphysics and, in the process, portending the future history of ontological amnesia. This historical development in philosophy goes through stages that culminate in modern rational-scientific conceptions of Being that “currently threaten to deprive the world of all intelligibility by making not only all things but also human beings themselves into formless ‘standing reserve’ to be technologically transformed at will”  

Heidegger’s reasons for going back to Plato, according to

29 Zuckert, Postmodern Plato, 4. See Martin Heidegger, “Being and Time,” in Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 42: “On the foundation of the Greek point of departure for the interpretation of Being a dogmatic attitude has taken shape which not only declares the question of the meaning of Being to be superfluous but sanctions its neglect.” See also Heidegger, “Letter Concerning Humanism,” in Basic Writings, pg. 251: “But how is it with meditation on Being itself, that is, with the thinking that thinks the truth of Being? This thinking alone reaches the primordial essence of logos, which was already obfuscated and lost in Plato and in Aristotle, the founder of ‘logic.’” The evidence that Heidegger seeks for his argument he finds in the Socratic question “what is it?” [ti estin]: “It is this form of questioning which Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle developed. They
Zuckert, were similar to Nietzsche’s - to reevaluate and “to overturn” the relationship between philosophy and poetry. But Zuckert stresses that poetry for Heidegger was not a creative act (as it was for Nietzsche) but “a purer and more primary” articulation of Being.30

Strauss, according to Zuckert, followed Nietzsche and Heidegger in their return to the origins of western philosophical tradition, but he arrived at a very different understanding of those origins. In their reading of Plato, Nietzsche and Heidegger were reacting to and ultimately rejecting the Plato of the Neoplatonic Christian tradition. This tradition took the doctrine of ideas and of the soul to be his central philosophic teaching. Strauss’s own reading of Plato was not encumbered by the Christian tradition; his debt belonged to Maimonides and Farabi, the great medieval rationalist scholars. “Strauss’s discovery of ‘Farabi’s Plato’,” Zuckert points out, “gave him a new understanding of the history of philosophy.” Specifically, his study of medieval Jewish and Arabic sources “led him to suspect” that all those Platonic doctrines that Nietzsche and Heidegger took for granted “might be mere public teachings.”31 On Strauss’s reading, then, Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s critique of Plato and the rationalist tradition to which he gave birth was based on an erroneous – because partial – analysis. It became Strauss’s project to respond to their challenge that Western philosophy as we have known it is no longer possible. His primary concern, according to Zuckert, was with philosophy and this is the reason he went

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30 Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, 4.
31 Ibid., 5.
back to Plato, “to discover what philosophy originally was.” Strauss’s explicit project was “to save Western rationalism from the Nietzschean-Heideggerian critique,” or, as she put it later in her book, “Strauss’s studies of classical political philosophy were intended, first and foremost, to constitute a response to this radical historicist critique.”

### Strauss’s Liberal Plato

One of the themes that animates Steven Smith’s work on Leo Strauss is the persistent accusation that Strauss was an enemy of liberal democracy. A dominant source of this view is Strauss’s preference for classic over modern natural right and specifically his “taking the side of Plato and the ancients against the moderns.” Smith directly rebuts one such accusation, which asserts that Strauss’s antidemocratic inclinations and his antimodernism owe their debt to Heidegger. That argument, according to Smith, hinges on the view that “Strauss took over wholesale Heidegger’s critique of modernity, but turned it away from first philosophy or ‘fundamental ontology’ and gave it a more directly political meaning.” Strauss followed Heidegger’s path back to the ancients and found there a justification for political inequality that is based on a teleological cosmology. It is, then, doubly bold for Smith to defend Strauss as a

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32 Ibid., 7.
33 Ibid., 5, 130.
34 See, for example, Drury, *Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*; Holmes, *Anatomy of Antiliberalism*.
35 Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 104.
38 Ibid., 110.
Platonic liberal, someone who returned to Plato not as an enemy of liberal democracy but as its friend.\textsuperscript{39}

According to Smith, Strauss and Heidegger offered different assessments of our difficulties. Reading from \textit{Introduction to Metaphysics} (1959), Smith explains that Heidegger was concerned about the threats to German \textit{Kultur} from both Anglo-American democracy and Soviet communism.\textsuperscript{40} Political distinctions between the two systems were insignificant to him compared to their common, deeper “metaphysical” characteristics. Both represented “modern urban, technological civilization,” which Germany had to resist.\textsuperscript{41} Quoting Heidegger, Smith writes:

“We are faced with a metaphysical point of view...Russia and America are the same; the same dreary technological frenzy, the same unrestricted organization of the average man.” It is the dominance of this kind of technological political order common to both democracy and communism that Heidegger regarded as the root of “the spiritual decline of the earth”...“the flight of the gods”...“the destruction of the earth”...and the “hatred and suspicion of everything free and creative.”\textsuperscript{42}

This conception of the crisis led Heidegger to the fateful decision to embrace National Socialism in 1933. Hitler and his movement offered “an alternative to the two metaphysically indistinct and technologically leveling movements of democracy and communism...”\textsuperscript{43} But it also led him to return to the Greeks, a move that was motivated by the need to understand the roots of the nihilistic character of a technological world and ultimately to overcome it. As Heidegger understood it, the problem of nihilism was built into the Western metaphysical

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 105, 89: “Strauss returned to Plato and classical political philosophy as a possible resource for, rather than an enemy of, political liberalism.”

\textsuperscript{40} As David O’Connor put it, Heidegger’s philosophy was fundamentally “patriotic” in that “it has an inescapable responsibility to and for the \textit{patria}, the fatherland.” See O’Connor, “Leo Strauss’s Aristotle and Martin Heidegger’s Politics” in \textit{Aristotle and Modern Politics}, 168. See also Strauss, \textit{Rebirth}, 42.

\textsuperscript{41} Smith, \textit{Reading Leo Strauss}, 111.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 112.
tradition. “[N]ihilism has been the secret meaning of the West from Plato onward” and “[h]is call for a destruction of metaphysics was offered as a key to our liberation from it.”

Unlike Heidegger, Strauss, according to Smith, returned to the Greeks “not to discover the origins of modern nihilism, but to consider an alternative to it.” He was not concerned with the crisis facing Germany, but a crisis that was facing liberal democracy. Indeed it was not liberal egalitarianism but German historicism that troubled Strauss most. “The crisis of the West…is in the first instance a theoretical one created by the emergence of the German philosophy of history.” It amounted to the fact that modern liberalism abandoned its historical foundations in natural rights philosophy and replaced it with relativistic theoretical assumptions. “Not liberalism but a contemporary misunderstanding of liberalism is at the root of the Crisis.”

Another formulation of the predicament of liberal democracy Strauss gives in his introduction to *The City and Man*:

> The crisis of the West consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose. The West was once certain of its purpose - of a purpose in which all men could be united, and hence it had a clear vision of its future as the future of mankind. We do no longer have that certainty and that clarity.

Smith explains that this and other related passages suggest that for Strauss it was not modern philosophy and its founders who are responsible for the crisis. Rather, it is the subsequent loss of confidence in the theoretical foundations of modern liberalism that unleashed the crisis of the West. Strauss traces this uncertainty of purpose to the powerful influence within the

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44 Ibid., 114.
46 Ibid., 112: “Strauss is less concerned with the problems created by liberal democracy than with those caused by its eclipse.”
47 Ibid.
contemporary social sciences of Nietzsche and Heidegger, “who have made it possible to doubt the essential ‘humanity’ of the West.”

Smith asserts that it is not the emergence of liberal democracy but “the modern inability to defend it, that dictated Strauss’s return to the classics.”

In other words, he went back to Plato and Socrates to find an alternative sustenance for liberalism. But he did so with a sober council against the naïve expectation of finding in the Greek texts readily available solutions. “The point of a return to the ancients is not to find ‘immediately applicable’ answers to current problems, but to gain clarity about the ‘starting point’ that such answers would have to address.”

What were the features of this starting point and how would modern liberalism benefit from its rediscovery? In the first place, rereading Plato, Xenophon, and others enabled Strauss to reconstruct and rearticulate, however tentatively, the pre-scientific, pre-philosophic awareness of natural right, awareness that was readily available to the ancients but was lost to the moderns.

For Strauss, unlike Heidegger, this awareness was primarily moral and political. For him classic natural right referred “to certain fundamental experiences of right and wrong, just and unjust, that are inseparable from humanity.”

Second, Strauss in his reading of the Republic, concluded that Plato’s attitude toward democracy was more sympathetic than the traditional interpretation allowed. “The virtue of democracy is its ability to foster the greatest variety of ways of life, among which must be included the philosopher, who ‘can lead his peculiar way of life without being disturbed.’

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50 Smith, Reading Leo Strauss, 113.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 119. Strauss, The City and Man, 11.
53 Smith, Reading Leo Strauss, 116-117.
54 Ibid., 120.
regime is ‘sweet’ because it affords people the political liberty to do as they like, thereby making possible Socrates and Socratic-style conversations.\textsuperscript{55} Smith concludes that Plato’s hostility to democracy should be understood as deliberate exaggeration of its faults in order to moderate “the excessive Athenian devotion to democracy.”\textsuperscript{56}

Third, beyond Plato’s attitude toward democracy, Strauss saw in his philosophy a profound antidogmatic and skeptical attitude, which is “characterized by an awareness of the limits, the incompleteness, of human knowledge.”\textsuperscript{57} Smith describes Strauss’s Plato as “elusive” and “open-ended” whose indeterminacy is embodied in the dialogical form of writing.\textsuperscript{58} Platonic dialogues, for Strauss, are not a mere stylistic fancy; they are the inscription of philosophy itself, an incarnation or a mirror image of pursuit of knowledge and understanding as a way of life. As Smith put it:

The Platonic cosmos, rather than a rational ordered whole, contains a deep sense of mystery and uncertainty that is imitated by the aporetic character of the Platonic dialogues as a whole.\textsuperscript{59}

Strauss, unlike Heidegger, presented us with a Plato who is “characterized above all by his turn away from the first principles of Being to the opinions or arguments that are said to be directly constitutive of political life.”\textsuperscript{60} The dialogues, then, are seen by Strauss as the philosophic sustenance for a democratic life. Built into them are notions of free inquiry,
tolerance, open mindedness, and skepticism, which, Smith points out, are defining liberal values. “Strauss finds in the dialogue form just the kind of openness that liberalism has most admired.”61

Finally, Strauss saw in Plato the antidote to mass democracy, which he considered threatening to liberalism. Taking for granted that the masses cannot and should not rule, Strauss understood mass democracy not in terms of a regime but in terms of mass culture, which is a culture that “can be appropriated by the meanest capacities without any intellectual and moral effort whatsoever and at a very low monetary price.”62 Given Strauss’s contempt for the masses it is not surprising that some mistakenly view him as an enemy of democracy.63 But his account is shaped by a nobler notion of democracy, which is animated by its Greek origins. His critique, in other words, is an internal critique. Smith writes that what Strauss had in mind in harking back to the original notion of democracy was “an aristocracy that has become universal,” which means, “a society where every person has had the benefit of a liberal education. Democracy is an aristocracy of everybody.”64 Strauss, then, not unlike those other liberal students of the Greeks – Thomas Jefferson and John Stuart Mill, saw in liberal education the ennobling sustenance for democracy.

Liberal education is the counterpoison to mass culture, to the corroding effects of mass culture, to its inherent tendency to produce nothing but ‘specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart.’ Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society. Liberal education reminds those members of a mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness.65

61 Ibid.
63 Ibid; “[O]ne of the most important virtues required for the smooth working of democracy, as far as the mass is concerned, is said to be electoral apathy, viz., lack of public spirit; not indeed the salt of the earth, but the salt of modern democracy are those citizens who read nothing except the sports page and the comic section.”
64 Smith, Reading Leo Strauss, 106.
65 Strauss, Liberalism Ancient and Modern, 5.
Quoting from *On Tyranny*, Smith concludes his argument by saying that Strauss returned to Plato in order to uncover “the elementary and unobtrusive conditions of human freedom.”

I would like to build on Zuckert’s and Smith’s analysis of Strauss’s path back to Plato. But here I would like to stress the Jewish character of his journey. Certainly neither scholar ignores Strauss’s Jewish writings and concerns. This is particularly true of Steven Smith. However, in their analysis of Strauss’s encounter with Heidegger, Nietzsche and Plato, those concerns appear marginal. I want to make them central.

**Nietzsche, Heidegger and Modern Jewish Perplexities**

Let us begin again with Heidegger. As Steven Smith points out Strauss’s writings on major German philosophers are relatively scarce. Heidegger is an exception, but even here Strauss’s treatment of this towering figure is rather “curt.” The only essay-length study by Strauss of Heidegger comes to us via the editorial efforts of Thomas Pangle, who relied heavily on an unpublished lecture, “Introduction to Existentialism.” One editorial decision made by Pangle was “to omit several sentences and to edit for smoothness.” The opening sentence was omitted; here it is:

This series of lectures – a reminder of the perplexities of modern man – should help the Jewish students in particular towards facing the perplexities of the modern Jew with somewhat greater clarity.

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67 Ibid., 108.
68 The version that was published posthumously was titled “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” in Strauss, *Rebirth*, 27-46.
69 Thomas Pangle, introduction to *Rebirth*, xxix.
70 Quoted by Kenneth Hart Green in editor’s preface to *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, xv. It is not at all obvious to me that in this lecture Strauss succeeds in clarifying any perplexities of modern man or modern Jew. The structure of the essay is indeed a “reminder” of our confusion; it reinforces rather than clears up our
This introduction is quite peculiar since the rest of the lecture except for one short paragraph does not address directly issues that might be of concern to modern “perplexed” Jews. It is not surprising that the essay maintains certain integrity and cohesion without those opening remarks. However, with the sentence intact, the essay presents interpretive possibilities that are otherwise overlooked. I would like to suggest that the significance of this opening remark cannot be overstated. It allows us to cast Strauss’s intellectual journey from Heidegger to Plato in a somewhat different light.

The opening (unpublished) remarks announce that Strauss intended this lecture for the modern educated Jews who are perplexed about their situation. He is not explicit about the perplexity; here this issue remains obscure. But to any Jewish reader of this essay (as well as his other Jewish writings) one thing becomes clear: Leo Strauss’s approach to contemporary Jewish issues is rather unconventional. He is less interested in the political, cultural or even the typical religious problems that usually occupy and divide contemporary Jews. His level of analysis is deeper; it reflects a concern for more permanent features of the Jewish situation that, according to him, may shed light on the human condition as such. He recasts the Jewish question as a philosophical problem, one that persists through history in its symbolic significance, a reminder to mankind of its homeless condition and its futile search for redemption.

Strauss in this lecture conveys a sense of historical continuity by the use of the word “perplexed.” The term clearly invokes Maimonides and his great book *The Guide of the Perplexed*, a work that addressed medieval Jews whose central theme was to find reconciliation perplexities. The aim here is not to provide an exhaustive exegesis; rather, the aim is to pull out certain threads that might shed light on Strauss’s return as a Jewish thinker to Plato.
or accommodation between Judaism and Greek philosophy. It also evokes Strauss’s own theologico-political predicament as a young Jew in Weimar Germany who embraced and then abandoned modern Jewish philosophy and Zionism as sufficiently adequate solutions to the Jewish problem. What, then, is the philosophical nature of modern Jewish perplexities? And what does existentialism have to do with it?

Strauss observes that “[e]xistentialism has reminded many people that thinking is incomplete and defective if the thinking being, the thinking individual, forgets himself as what he is.” At first glance he speaks of existentialism as a corrective to a “theoretical man,” or “the purely objective man, who loses himself completely in the contemplation of mathematical objects, who knows nothing about his fellow men and himself, and in particular about his own defects.”

Who is the theoretical man? He is not an altogether modern phenomenon as Strauss immediately points out. We encounter him in the character of Theodorus in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. The modern representation of this man is found in varieties of positivism, a school of thought that says that “only scientific knowledge is genuine knowledge.” The task of philosophy, according to this view, is to articulate a “theory of scientific experience, the analysis of scientific

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71 See *infra* Chapter 5.
72 See *infra* Chapter 2.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid. For Nietzsche, whom according to Strauss Aristophanes already anticipated, Socrates was “the first theoretical man,” a man of reason and optimism, a man who was ultimately responsible for “the belief in universal enlightenment and therewith in earthly happiness of all within a universal state, in utilitarianism, liberalism, democracy, pacifism, and socialism.” In other words, for Nietzsche Socrates was ultimately responsible for the modern belief in its own redemptive power. See Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 7.
Edmond Husserl began to move away from this conception of philosophy. Science, according to him, was merely a “derivative from our primary knowledge of the world of things…a specific modification of that prescientific understanding.”

According to Husserl, “all philosophic understanding must start from our common understanding of the world, from our understanding of the world as sensibly perceived prior to all theorizing.” Positivism theorized about nature but failed to grasp the natural condition from which all human thought arises. Thus it lacked awareness of its own activity. Heidegger understood that Husserl’s phenomenology did not provide an adequate corrective to positivism. The natural condition of man, according to him, is determined by time: by history and temporality. Sensible perception of things as objects was, therefore, itself a derivative of historical dispensation and of personal mortality.

Existentialism serves the positive function of reminding us that philosophy and science are partial and defective if they fail to address questions of meaning, questions of the yearning and needs of the human soul that is destined to encounter death. Existentialism is to theory what Plato’s Socrates is to Theodorus. 

Existentialism, however, proves to be a dangerous remedy to pure theory or to philosophy as rigorous science because its ideas undermine, directly or not, the rational foundation of science. The heart of existentialism, according to Strauss, is relativism or historicism, a position that denies objective grounds to human knowledge or to ethical standards.

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77 Ibid., 31.
79 Strauss, Studies, 31.
80 Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism,” Rebirth, 29; Studies, 31: “Heidegger went much further than Husserl in the same direction: the primary theme is not the object of perception but the full thing as experienced as part of the individual human context, the individual world to which it belongs.”
All human thought is bound by historical horizon. This idea was best modeled by Max Weber whose distinction between facts and values, according to Strauss, left science incapable of justifying itself.

[W]hile science has increased man’s power in ways that former men never dreamt of, it is absolutely incapable of telling men how to use that power. Science cannot tell man whether it is wiser to use that power wisely and beneficently, or foolishly and devilishly. From this it follows that science is unable to establish its own meaningfulness or to answer the question whether, and in what sense, science is good.  

Since science cannot justify itself on rational grounds, the “choice of science is a groundless choice - an abyss.”

Under the subversive influence of existentialism, all great efforts to pursue truth, whether metaphysical or ethical are contextualized and historicized. “This means the abandonment of the very idea of the truth as rational philosophy has always understood it.” In response one can live a meaningful life by accepting the values of one’s society. However, adopting the values of one’s society just because they are the values of one’s society is not a worthy solution for thoughtful men. Cultural relativism engenders intellectual laziness and moral isolationism. It makes “philistinism a duty” and obscures “the difference between true individuals and whited sepulchers.” A more ennobling response to the frightful recognition of human freedom is a commitment to self-generating projects.

Man freely originates meaning; he originates the horizon, the absolute presupposition, the ideal, the project within which understanding and life are possible. Man is man by virtue of such a horizon-forming project, of an unsupported project, of a thrown project.

84 Ibid., 34.
85 Ibid., 35.
86 Ibid., 36.
The existentialist turn toward “authenticity,” toward the nobility of commitment to one’s subjective choices was prepared by Kant. It was Kant’s claim that things-in-themselves cannot be known that ultimately led existentialism to claim that “[m]an cannot understand himself in light of the whole, in the light of his origin or his end.” Kant’s aim, of course, was not to destroy but to save reason from Hume’s subversive critique. He did so by limiting reason to the sphere of experience and to ethics thus finding room for moral law and for the transcendent. Existentialism, according to Strauss, abandoned both ethics and transcendence. It brought to conclusion a process that began with the modern enlightenment, a process of slow recoiling from the traditional acceptance of the eternal order. By abandoning all pursuit for truth in its classical sense, the modern intellectual landscape, occupied as it is by positivism and existentialism, leaves no space for rational philosophy. All other ideas, including liberalism, are marginalized or are ultimately subsumed by the irrational.

The philosopher who explicitly abandoned reason and put a stake through the heart of transcendence was Nietzsche. According to Strauss, Nietzsche, in response to the nihilistic features of 19th century Europe, features that were evident in liberal democracy, socialism and nationalism – the idols of the modern age, anticipated an “age of world wars, leading up to planetary rule.” Such an age required a new ruling aristocracy, “a new nobility, a nobility formed by a new ideal.” These would be the philosophers of the future. Strauss was quite attuned to the affinity between Nietzsche’s task of philosophy and Plato’s notion of the

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87 Ibid., 37.
88 Ibid., 36-37.
89 I retrace this process in Chapter 4.
91 Ibid.
philosopher-king. However, for him there are profound differences in two respects. First, Plato only “intimated” his deepest insights into the social role of the philosophers, whereas Nietzsche stated them explicitly. In other words, Plato was more cautious because he was more sensitive to the social and political context of philosophizing. Second, Nietzsche’s philosopher of the future, unlike Plato’s philosopher-king, “is an heir to the Bible.”92 He has inherited and internalized its moral teachings. So Nietzsche recasts the effects of the Bible in psychological terms. The philosopher of the future is “an heir to that deepening of the soul which has been affected by the Biblical belief in a God that is holy.”93

The philosopher of the future, as distinct from the classical philosopher, will be concerned with the holy. His philosophizing will be intrinsically religious. This does not mean that he believes in God, the biblical God. He is an atheist, but an atheist who is waiting for a god who has not yet shown himself.94 Nietzsche’s objection here is not to holiness per se but to otherworldliness and asceticism, which “alienates man from this world.”95 Nietzsche wants his philosophers to fully commit themselves to earth because this commitment is the necessary condition for “the highest human excellence.”96 Holiness, or piety, is the characteristic of human excellence or nobility, and the awaited god wears human skin. Nietzsche, then, is thoroughly modern (perhaps, even, Christian in his mode of thinking), according to Strauss, in his insistence on domesticating philosophy and having philosophers bring the gift of redemption-through-self-creation to man.97

92 Ibid., 41.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
The philosopher who took Nietzsche’s vision most seriously was Heidegger, “the only man who has an inkling of the dimensions of the problem of a world society.”98 To him world society would be disastrous for the future of humanity. It would mean the victory of a “completely technological West over the whole planet,” a “complete leveling and uniformity,” and it made no difference whether this world society was brought about by “iron compulsion” or “by soapy advertisement.”99 This utopian “night of the world” would mean

unity of the human race on the lowest level, complete emptiness of life, self-perpetuating doctrine without rhyme or reason; no leisure, no concentration, no elevation, no withdrawal; nothing but work and recreation; no individuals and no peoples, but instead ‘lonely crowds.’100

For Heidegger technology was the outgrowth of rationalism whose roots he traced back to Greek philosophy. Rationalism from its classical beginning meant “the attempt to understand the whole.”101 The Greek philosophers assumed that the whole was accessible to human reason “or that the grounds of the whole are essentially intelligible and at the disposal of man as man.”102 This required the further assumption that the ground of being is “always,” eternal, transcendent and “therefore in principle [is] always accessible to man.”103 For Heidegger, as Strauss explains, this presupposition was at the heart of the belief that man can master the whole.

But, according to Heidegger, this Platonic basis of rationalism hinges on a dogmatic and inadequate proposition. “A more adequate understanding of being is intimated by the assertion that to be means to be elusive or to be a mystery.”104 Heidegger found this view, which he

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99 Ibid., 42.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 43.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
considered to be a corrective to Western rationalism, in the Eastern, specifically Chinese, understanding of Being because it lacked the will to mastery. But his hope that the more adequate Eastern conception of Being would save the West from its self-inflicted technological entrapment was dimmed by the recognition that the East, or China, has itself already succumbed to Western rationalism.\textsuperscript{105} The West, consequently, had to search within for the remedy, “it had to make its own contribution to the overcoming of technology.”\textsuperscript{106}

The aim of returning to the roots of the Western tradition for Heidegger was precisely to discover the West's own antidote to rationalism, to discover the “East” within the West. The task was to locate the moment in Western thought prior to the emergence of rationalism, or – which is the same thing – prior to the separation of West and East. Strauss reminded his listeners (and readers) that in the West the challenge to rationalism has traditionally come from the Bible: “The Bible is the East within us, Western men.”\textsuperscript{107} But Heidegger justified the need for the recovery of the Biblical element only as an alternative ontology, as an alternative conception of Being, one that dispels the charm of universal technological domination. It is this that Strauss meant when he said that for Heidegger the Bible represents only one form of Eastern thought. For him recovering the Bible was merely a way of recovering the East within us; it was not taken seriously as the absolute opposite of rationalism – “Heidegger,” said Strauss, “has no place for the Creator God”\textsuperscript{108} – but as a means to unlock the access to Eastern understanding of Being. Heidegger’s radical efforts to uncover the essential character of Being amounted to the merging of its Eastern and Western conceptions. Only thus can we begin to get the glimpse of the elusive

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 46.
nature of Being of beings. Strauss took this to mean, although not without some reservations, as
the synthesis of Plato’s ideas and the Biblical God.\textsuperscript{109} In later years Heidegger abandoned any
attempt to recover the non-rational roots of Western civilization and resigned himself to certain
passivity whereby the final task of philosophy and poetry was to ready us for the god to come.\textsuperscript{110}

Strauss, reflecting on Heidegger’s sentiment, put it like this:

Historicism can...be described as a much more extreme form of modern this-
worldliness... It certainly acted as if it intended to make men absolutely at home in ‘this
world.’ [However, since historicism denied the existence of any objective standards, it]
culminated in nihilism. The attempt to make man absolutely at home in this world ended
in man’s becoming absolutely homeless.\textsuperscript{111}

I would now like to bring this discussion to its focal point. Why was Strauss committed
to rational philosophy? In what sense did he understand philosophy to be rational? And why
was a rejection of modern philosophy (both positivism and existentialism), modern theology, and
the possibility of a recovery of premodern rationalism a significant step for modern “perplexed”
Jews? More pointedly, why was the question of the nature and history of Western political
philosophy – ostensibly the central theme of Strauss’s work – indeed a \textit{Jewish Question}? I will
address these questions in the course of the dissertation. In this chapter I inquire into them by
focusing on Strauss’s difficult relationship with Heidegger and Nietzsche.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid: The essence of Being “may be described crudely, superficially, and even misleadingly (but not altogether
misleadingly) by saying that it is a synthesis of Platonic ideas and the Biblical God: it is as impersonal as the
Platonic ideas and as elusive as the Biblical God.”

\textsuperscript{110} Martin Heidegger, “The \textit{Spiegel} Interview,” in \textit{Heidegger and National Socialism}, ed. Gunther Neske and Emil
Ketering (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1990), 56-57. Philosophy, Heidegger offered, “will not be able to bring about a
direct change of the present state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human
mediations and endeavors. Only a god can still save us. I think the only possible salvation left to us is to prepare
readiness, through thinking and poetry, for the appearance of the god...”

\textsuperscript{111} Strauss, \textit{Natural Right}, 15, 18.
Strauss’s Nietzschean Answer to the Jewish Question

In the first place, I want to suggest that Leo Strauss took Nietzsche’s prophetic vision as seriously as did Heidegger. But he rejected Heidegger’s version of that vision. As Strauss understood it, Heidegger’s ontological analysis of Dasein was indistinguishable from his political commitments. In fact, for Strauss Heidegger’s fusion of philosophy and politics was one, albeit most radical but also most subtle, instantiation of modern Enlightenment’s insistence on nudging philosophy toward public utility. Strauss was unique among the intellectuals who came under Heidegger’s sway to point this out at the time when many defended Heidegger by separating his philosophy from his politics. Strauss took Heidegger’s embrace of National Socialism in 1933 as a reflection of his aristocratic remedy against technological tyranny of liberal democracy and communism. He apparently accepted world society with National Socialism at its helm as the dispensation of Being. To emphasize this later point Strauss wrote that everyone “who had read his first great book and did not overlook the wood for the trees could see the kinship in temper and direction between Heidegger’s thought and the Nazis.”112 Still, despite Heidegger’s tainted association, Strauss’s own assessment of a homogenous world-state was informed by Heideggerian critique. In his famous engagement with the Hegelian philosopher and personal friend, Alexandre Kojev, regarding the nature of modern tyranny Strauss wrote that “unlimited technological progress and its accompaniment, which are indispensable conditions of the universal and homogenous state, are destructive of humanity.” In this state one cannot say that “man can reasonably be satisfied.”113

Not without irony, however, Strauss too explored a remedy to the universalistic logic of modernity in Nietzsche’s aristocratic longings. By reexamining Nietzsche’s writings, Strauss promoted an alternative interpretation to Heidegger’s of the meaning of modern aristocracy. The aim, however, was not political but spiritual; it was to give modern Jews the needed spiritual and intellectual resources to resist assimilation while living in a permanent condition of exile. Aside from the Christ-like imagery of a god in human form that Nietzsche ascribed to the philosophers of the future, it is tempting to suggest that in his lecture on Heideggerian existentialism Strauss was calling upon the confused or “perplexed” Jews, who themselves may no longer believe in a biblical God but who are, nevertheless, heirs to the Bible, to pick the Nietzschean mantle of future aristocracy. Strauss, in other words, was arguably mounting a defense of Judaism by cautiously summoning the Jewish people to assume its ancient biblical role as the “priestly nation” but conceived in post-biblical secular terms for a modern democratic age.

In his lecture, given at Hillel House at the University of Chicago in 1962 titled “Why We Remain Jews” Strauss was explicitly reconsidering the meaning of assimilation along the lines I just suggested. Speaking primarily to a Jewish audience Strauss invoked the words of Nietzsche, himself not a great defender of democracy or Judaism, but who nevertheless envisioned a unique role for the Jewish people in the century to come. For us, who look back and not ahead to the events of the 20th century, Nietzsche’s words have an eerie foreboding feeling. Nietzsche wrote of the “spectacle” of the century to come as depending on the “destiny” of European Jews. Their spiritual training as part of their exilic life gave them “extraordinary” psychic and spiritual resources. “Every Jew has in the history of his fathers and ancestors a

treasure of examples of coldest self-possession and steadfastness in dreadful situations, of bravery under the cloak of wretched submission…” Nietzsche went on to say that the Jews “have never cease to believe themselves called to the highest things, nor have the virtues of all sufferers ever ceased to adorn them.” They “possess by far the greatest experience in all human intercourse, and even in their passions they practice the caution taught by this experience.” He concluded with the following:

And how shall it issue forth, this wealth of accumulated great impressions which Jewish history constitutes for every Jewish family, this wealth of passions, virtues, resolutions, renunciations, struggles, victories of every kind, how shall it issue forth if not at last in great spiritual men and works! Then, when the Jews will be able to exhibit as their work such precious stones and golden vessels as the European peoples of shorter and less profound experience neither can nor could bring forth, when Israel shall have changed its eternal vengeance into an eternal blessing of Europe, then that seventh day will once again be here when the old Jewish God will be able to rejoice in Himself, His creation, and His chosen people – and we all, all will rejoice in Him!115

Strauss recognized the irony in this passage since, as he put it, Nietzsche “had no hopes in this respect; he only thought something through.” Nevertheless, Strauss found in this rather inspiring statement “the most profound and most radical” vision of assimilation.116

Assimilation cannot mean abandoning the inheritance, but only giving it another direction, transforming it. And assimilation cannot be an end, it could only be a way toward that. Assimilation is an intermediate stage in which it means distinguishing oneself in pursuits which are not as such Jewish but, as Nietzsche would say, European, or as we would say, Western.117

I can foresee objections to this claim coming from liberal and Jewish sources. Given the history of antisemitism there is much in Strauss’s sentiment that is dangerous even within the

115 All above references come from ibid., 324-325. For the original see Friedrich Nietzsche, Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudice of Morality, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 124-125.
116 Strauss, “Why We Remain Jews,” Modern Philosophy, 325
117 Ibid.
tolerant liberal society, which nevertheless is unable – because of its commitment to equality – to countenance any form of aristocracy, let alone a Jewish aristocracy. Furthermore, liberal objections have already been made suggesting that Strauss’s elitism is incompatible with modern egalitarian practices and values. Shadia Drury and Steven Holmes offered interpretations of Strauss’s ideas that make him out to be a closet Nietzschean enemy of liberal democracy. But this criticism remains unconvincing; their analysis, I suspect, suffers a certain failure to imagine in liberalism anything but what it is: modern mass democracy.

For one thing, Strauss, as a political philosopher, understood by this term primarily not a philosophical pursuit of politics but a political understanding of philosophy, that is, a recognition that all philosophizing takes place within a political context. This condition creates an important tension between the two that most scholars of Western philosophy ignore, and as a consequence leave the nature of philosophic activity misconstrued. So Strauss’s conception of aristocracy is not political but philosophical; it is an aristocracy of the spirit not of political power. A careful reading of his study of Plato’s Republic shows that far from celebrating the rule of philosopher-kings, Strauss is in fact pointing out the limits of the redeemptive powers of politics, including philosophic politics. The purpose of aristocracy is not to rule but to civilize and to ennoble the human spirit. It has a certain generous (perhaps, Socratic, if we keep Steven Smith’s interpretation in mind) openness and receptivity to the public that is not only compatible with the democratic ethos but is indispensable for reigning in its worst impulses by pointing to its loftier possibilities.

Liberal education is the counterpoison to mass culture, to the corroding effects of mass culture, to its inherent tendency to produce nothing but “specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart.” Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to
ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society. Liberal education reminds those members of a mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness.118

Strauss’s notion of aristocracy as necessary for a democracy is itself not novel. Defenders of democracy have long suspected that freedom in a modern world is threatened less by tyrants than by poorly educated and easily manipulated citizens who are not capable of imagining the meaning of human freedom as anything but a self-serving affirmation of rights.

Steven Smith points out that

Strauss agrees with such aristocratic liberals as Tocqueville and Mill that freedom of thought and opinion is currently endangered by the degeneration of liberal democracy into mass democracy. It is not economic freedom, or equal rights, or democratic deliberation that most excites Strauss, although these are not goods to be despised. It is the freedom to philosophize that is his highest value.119

Behind his argument for an aristocracy within a democracy, then, lies the explicit concern for the spiritual well-being of man. But the less discernable motive behind this argument is to save the modern Jew from the charming embrace of a liberal polity that welcomes him into its fold and, by extension, into the fold of a universal mass society where there are no meaningful distinctions between intelligence and stupidity, greatness and mediocrity (and if there are, they are channeled toward economic activity), and where ennobling traditions wither away. In short, Strauss is not only cautioning his Jewish readers against the charm of assimilation that comes in the guise of scientific, political, economic or cultural competency; he is indeed redefining the meaning of assimilation by reminding the members of his Jewish audience of their history, tradition and Biblical roles, consecrated by God, as the purveyors of righteousness and charity.

118 Strauss, Liberalism Ancient and Modern, 5.
119 Smith, Reading Leo Strauss, 107.
In short, he reminds them of their covenantal responsibilities as the chosen people. Rather than a hope for assimilation with its material comfort, political apathy, and cultural mediocrity, Strauss, then, is reaching out for nobler and perhaps more heroic possibilities that life offers. Can democracy afford such possibilities? Does democracy possess the antidote to its own poison? Is democracy a shelter for the homeless man (a homeless Jew), and his redemption? Strauss provides us with no categorical answers; he is not interested in “preaching up any solution,” as he once said; he merely tried to understand and help others understand “our difficulty.”¹²⁰

For Nietzsche, European Jews were unique not so much for their heritage but for the fact that their heritage was coming into contact with the heritage of Europe through intermarriage. His conception of the nobility of the soul, in other words, was tied up with biology and blood. Not so for Strauss. What made modern Jewish characteristics unique was the creative tension within their souls born out of their exilic experience, the selfsame tension that was at the heart of their perplexities.¹²¹ Or, if I may put it in the following way, Jewish modern perplexity is the internalized mirror image of the greater tension within Western civilization which, as Strauss claimed, is the source of its creative vitality - the tension between reason and revelation.

To emphasize this point I return to Strauss' lecture on Heidegger. In pursuing alternatives to Western rationalism, Heidegger explored possibilities for thinking that were neither philosophical nor scientific. For him the end of philosophic thinking signified the possibility for the unconcealment of Being, which could come through language in poetic but not necessarily Biblical form. Strauss, however, was silent on other possibilities that Heidegger was exploring

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¹²¹ In his Introduction to A Treasury of Jewish Folklore (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975), Nathan Ausubel wrote: “Jews became an intellectual people not because of any innate mental superiority over other peoples, but because of the peculiar nature of their history” (xix).
when he asserted to his listeners that “the limitations of rationalism were always seen by the Biblical tradition.” The bringing up of the Biblical tradition within the context of Heideggerian existentialism could be meaningful in a way that Greek or German poetic tradition could not only if the aim of the lecture was to “help the Jewish students in particular towards facing the perplexities of the modern Jew with somewhat greater clarity.” His simple but, nevertheless, dramatic observation that the “Bible is the Eastern within us, Western men” and thus an alternative to scientific rationalism serves the purpose of imploring his Jewish listeners not to abandon their heritage not despite but for the sake of their perplexities. He turns the ostensible weakness of exilic life into a hidden source of its strength, whereby the modern West sustains and nourishes the creative tension within the modern Jew. Strauss links liberal education – a return to the intellectual and spiritual roots, which are tied up with the destiny of Western civilization – with the Jewish question.

**Strauss’s Recovery of Platonic Rationalism**

Pursuing remedies for Western rationalism was Heidegger’s task not Leo Strauss’s. So while he accepted in broad contours Heidegger’s diagnosis of the problem of modernity and Nietzsche’s visionary speculations about what is needed to address it, Strauss had to reject their abandonment of rationalism and their pursuit of solutions in the irrational (in the will or in poetry). He argued that both Nietzsche and Heidegger failed to see the deeply skeptical nature of Platonic philosophy because they were not sufficiently attuned to its political character.  

122 Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 130: “Responding to the major conclusions Heidegger drew from his analysis of *Dasein in Being and Time* Strauss sought to show that Platonic philosophy was originally and fundamentally Socratic, which is to say, undogmatic. Neither Nietzsche nor Heidegger understood the essentially Socratic character
Heidegger merely made it possible for Strauss to return to the Greeks. Heidegger afforded him “the possibility of a genuine return to classical philosophy, the philosophy of Aristotle and of Plato” but also “a return with open eyes and in full clarity about the infinite difficulties which it entails.” Catherine Zuckert argued that this return enabled Strauss to recast the history of Western philosophy in new light, unencumbered by the neo-Platonic Christian tradition. Steven Smith argued that Strauss’s return to the Greek philosophy enabled him to find a solid foundation for liberal democracy. I am suggesting one additional possibility: Strauss returned to the Greeks and specifically to Socrates in order to uncover the rational ground for the possibility of Biblical faith in revelation, or, more pointedly, of Judaism as enlightened and enlightening Judaism in a way that responds to what Strauss called the “crisis of modernity.” In pursuing Greek philosophy Strauss was in essence trying to preserve perplexities and tensions as the necessary intellectual condition for Jewish exilic life. The skeptical and moderate character of Socratic rationalism opposed as it was in form if not necessarily in substance to a Biblical mode of thinking was gracious enough to leave enough intellectual space for the possibility of and, perhaps even, the necessity for revelation as the most compelling articulation of redemption.

In contrast to Heidegger and Nietzsche, Strauss held philosophy in its classical sense to be simply “the quest for the eternal order, or for the eternal cause or causes of all things.”

Socrates and Plato merely assumed that “there is an eternal and immutable order within which
history takes place, and which remains entirely unaffected by history.”125 Strauss was deeply
dissatisfied with Plato’s theory of ideas, whose doctrine he held to be “utterly incredible” and
“fantastic.”126 In a letter to Kojeve dated May 28, 1957, he wrote that “according to Plato
wisdom is not available. If one takes this as seriously as one must, the vision of the One-
Good…is not available”127 He concluded, therefore, that “[p]hilosophy as such is nothing but
genuine awareness of the problems, i.e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems” and
“as long as there is no wisdom but only quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is
necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems…”128 But Socrates and Plato never
abandoned the pursuit for the eternal and immutable order.129 They were never blind to the
transcendent dimension of human existence as something given or natural, or, as Strauss put it,
they never abandoned “the all-important question which is coeval with philosophy…the question
quid sit deus.”130 The reason why Plato did not abandon the assumption of eternity was his
pervading suspicion of the inability on the part of human beings to organize their own lives or to
be self-sufficient. Put simply, by showing through his theory of ideas what the requirements for
justice and true knowledge were, Plato was hinting at the human incapacity for self-government
without an explicit appeal to some higher standard or a higher law. David O’Connor in his essay
“Leo Strauss’s Aristotle and Martin Heidegger’s Politics” argues that Strauss was not an
Aristotelian because Aristotle had no room for piety as a virtue in the prephilosophic, “natural”
experience. O’Connor writes that for Strauss “man as man is unintelligible without his

125 Strauss, On Tyranny, 212.
126 Strauss, City and Man, 119.
127 Strauss, On Tyranny, 279.
128 Ibid., 196.
129 Strauss, Natural Right, 12.
130 Strauss, City and Man, 241. See also ibid., pg. 34: “Aristotle’s view is less opposed to the Biblical view than it
might seem: he too is concerned above all with the truth of religion.”
awareness of sacred restraints. The gods are always already here in the natural consciousness, a consciousness from which philosophic thinking must ascend, but which it can never simply escape." Classic rationalism, as Platonic, skeptical rationalism is open to the sacred dimension of the city because of what Strauss called the “two faces” of Socrates, the exoteric and the esoteric. It is in light of this assumption, an assumption that is critical to the reassertion of the Biblical faith in revelation, that Strauss devotes much attention in his latter writings to uncovering the pious and legal dimension of Socratic philosophy.

In what follows I will explore the stages of Strauss’s deepening understanding of the Jewish question beginning with his awareness of this question in terms of a theologico-political predicament.

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CHAPTER 2
LIBERALISM, ANTISEMITISM, ZIONISM: MODERN DISCONTENTS AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL PREDICAMENT

In 1930 Leo Strauss published his first major work. Written in German, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* marked in many ways the end of an intellectual period in which he first began to grapple with issues facing modern German Jews. In the “Introduction” written years later for the publication of the English translation, Strauss described the spiritual condition of the author at that crucial formative period. He recounted that the author “was a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the theologico-political predicament.”

The aim of this chapter (and the next) is to answer a number of related questions: What did Strauss mean by this rather cryptic concept? Why did he find himself in this condition? How and why did he come to see the Jewish question in theologico-political terms? Finally, why by the end of this formative period did he feel compelled to wrestle directly with Spinoza’s critique of religion?

I had to devote two chapters to this issue because the nature of the discourse about the Jewish question – especially within Jewish circles – and Strauss’s contribution to it may not be as familiar to those who know his mature work in political philosophy. In this chapter I will trace and explain the way in which Strauss discovered the theologico-political predicament as a spiritual problem of modern Jews that lay hidden beneath modern political and cultural

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133 For a comprehensive analysis of the Jewish question see Alex Bein, *The Jewish Question: Biography of a World Problem*, trans. Harry Zohn (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1990). It should be noted that, as far as we can tell, the term “Jewish question” entered public consciousness in the early 1840’s in Germany; Bruno Bauer may have been the first to use it in print. The problem, however, if not its name, has its origins in the destruction of the Second Temple (perhaps even earlier) and the expulsion of the Jewish people from their ancient homeland.
ideologies. In what follows I will briefly summarize the main ideological attitudes toward and conceptions of the Jewish question as they emerged in the 19th century before turning to Strauss’s own considerations.

Liberalism and the Jewish Question: Discourse of Emancipation, Inclusion, and Assimilation

For liberal and radical intellectuals at the end of the 18th century and throughout the 19th the Jewish question was a part of a political discourse on emancipation. Liberal thinkers and activists, the inheritors of Enlightenment philosophy, understood the Jewish problem simply as a problem of legal equality.134 For them the solution to this problem had less to do with the particular injustices perpetrated specifically against Jews than with formulating national principles of citizenship in a liberal state, which, among other things, would not discriminate against its citizens on the basis of their religious convictions.

In the process of these reforms, however, the Jewish question actually appeared as two questions: one for the non-Jews, the other for the Jews. Emancipation in France, to take the most celebrated case, presented the Jews with a dilemma. The logic of the Declaration of the Rights of Men dictated universal application of citizenship rights to all Frenchmen, but such logic stumbled when confronted with Jewish realities. The representatives to the Assembly were not certain of the status of the Jews within their nascent republic. Were the Jewish people French nationals or, as the tradition held, were they a foreign presence with distinct national

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characteristics and aspirations? Having stumbled upon this question the arguments for or against emancipation quickly turned on the issue of the character of the Jewish people and their religion. In other words, beneath the discourse of emancipation lurked the question of identity.\textsuperscript{135} As it moved forward, the emancipatory process required a certain Jewish reciprocity. As a price for emancipation, liberal France (and eventually other European countries) expected the Jews to shed their attachments to a heritage that was as much political as it was religious. The trend toward political equality implied if not outright demanded complete Jewish assimilation.\textsuperscript{136} “[T]o the extent that Emancipation in Western Europe seemed to offer Jews an opportunity to escape from the particular – the tribal – and sail across the broader waters of humanity at large, it entailed and encouraged a move away from the ancient tie to Erez-Israel [the Land of Israel], certainly away from its central place in Jewish belief and practice.”\textsuperscript{137} Arthur Hertzberg expressed the significance of this transformation as follows,

\begin{quote}

[T]he era of the Emancipation has represented a radical break with the entire past of Jewry. Until the beginning of the new age the Jew conceived of himself as part of a holy community, a divine priesthood and the elect of God, in an attitude of waiting for the Messiah. Since the Emancipation, Jewish thought has been attempting to rebuild a definition of Jewish identity, even with some – or many – bricks borrowed from the old building, but for a different need and from a different perspective: in order to make Jewish existence analogous to the categories by which western man has been defining himself.\textsuperscript{138}

\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}

\textsuperscript{135} Mendes-Flohr, \textit{The Jew in the Modern World}, 114-121.


\textsuperscript{138} Arthur Hertzberg, ed., \textit{The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader} (Atheneum: A Temple Book, 1986), 21. For a similar analysis though with somewhat different emphasis see Julius Guttmann, \textit{Philosophies of Judaism: The history of Jewish philosophy from Biblical times to Franz Rosenzweig} (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 289-290: “During the course of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern period, Judaism was an independent and spiritually all-encompassing culture based completely on religious ground, with the ability to absorb even those philosophic endeavors which lacked a direct relationship to Jewish religion. But modern European culture detached spiritual life from its anchorage in religious tradition, and thus destroyed the foundations of the traditional unity of Jewish culture. Henceforth, Judaism would be bounded by religious life in its narrowest and specific sense, and all other cultural spheres, including philosophy, would be outside its boundaries.”

\end{footnotes}
In return for emancipation the Jews were to undergo their own process of liberalization and, as it were, their own reformation. Judaism was to become less a comprehensive mode of life of a particular people and more an individual affirmation of faith. Conversion into Christianity, the preferred mode of medieval Europe, was no longer a necessary condition for acceptance since, at least in Western and Central Europe, Judaism itself, both in its theology and ritual practice, began to parallel Christianity. The Jews were admitted into European society and culture as individuals at a price of their own, willing assimilation. Thus the question of how and under what conditions could emancipation take place, a question first raised in the context of the French Revolution, forced a large number of Jews – but first and foremost the educated Jews – not only to distance themselves from their millennial aspirations of returning one day to the promised land. For the first time in Jewish history, and as a consequence of external events, Jews initiated a break with the traditional narratives about the meaning of their history and their unique place in the destiny of mankind. To quote Hertzberg again,

The very completeness and unconditionality of [the assimilationist Jews’] surrender to the dominant values of the majority were a program for the final solution of the Jewish question: let the Jew become like everybody else, yielding up his claim to chosenness and being relieved of his role as scapegoat. Let society run on its universal and immutable principles, rooted in reason and natural law, which know neither positive nor negative exceptions for the Jew. Above all, let him disappear from the center of the stage, his own and the world’s, to be one among many equally important small incidents in the history of mankind.139

The process of political emancipation thus became one of the thorny moral and intellectual issues facing the Jewish communities that would persist into the 20th century.

139 Hertzberg, The Zionist Idea, 26-27.
Antisemitism and the Jewish Question: Discourse of Exclusion, Expulsion, and Elimination

Political or nationalist antisemitism was rooted in anti-Jewish sentiments whose antecedents go back to the emergence of Christianity and perhaps even further. Its pedigree is very long and deeply engrained in the psyche of the West. Traditional anti-Jewish sentiments were nurtured in the bowels of European consciousness in large measure by Catholic theology and liturgy. This hostility was preserved, although on a different basis, by the intellectuals of the 18th century. Religious anti-Jewish sentiments did not disappear or even soften with Enlightenment’s ruthless critique of the Church. For the men of this movement the Jews – with their peculiar appearance and obscure religious rituals – were as much an enemy of a rational society, based on universal ethical principles and natural religion, as was the Church but less dangerous because politically powerless.140

To the enlightened philosophes Jews were considered to be uneducated, greedy, clannish and parasitic. Thus Baron d’Holbach “insisted that the Jewish religion was permeated with avarice and self-interest” and Diderot viewed the Jews as “a nation of bigoted obscurantists.”141 Voltaire described them as “an ignorant and barbarous people who have long united the most sordid avarice with the most detestable superstition and the most invincible hatred for every people by whom they are tolerated and enriched.”142 Fichte characterized the Jews as a

141 Sachar, The Course of Modern Jewish History, 45.
142 Mendes-Flohr, The Jew in the Modern World, 305. Hertzberg made a special note of Voltaire’s antisemitism: “[T]here is an edge and nastiness to Voltaire’s comments on the Jews, an insistence that it is hardly conceivable that even reason can reform them, which sets one of the patterns for modern antisemitism: to uphold a universal and secular ideal – e.g., liberalism, nationalism, or socialism – but to exclude the Jews from its purview and effect.” See The Zionist Idea, 27-28.
“powerful nation…in a state of perpetual war with all [European] countries…[a] dreadful nation. …because it is founded on hatred of mankind.” He saw no other way to protect Germans from the Jews except for conquering “their promised land for them and send[ing] all of them there.”

Even the liberal Kant, the moral tour de force himself and the clearest expositor of Enlightenment philosophy, thought it best for the Jewish people to divest themselves of their parochial worship for the sake of a universal religion of reason or, to put it in slightly different terms, for the sake of assimilation. Universal rational morality was the goal of Enlightenment philosophy and any particularity – Jewish particularity being the most evident in its foreignness and therefore the most objectionable – had to be annihilated.

Similar to Kant but with an edgier rhetoric, Jackob Friedrich Fries declared, in 1816, war on Judaism if not on Jews themselves. “Judaism is a residue from the uncultured past, which instead of being restricted should be completely extirpated. In fact, improving the condition of the Jews in society means rooting out Judaism, destroying the whole lot of deceitful, second-hand peddlers and hawkers. Judaism is the sickness of a people who are rapidly multiplying.”

Others, such as Bruno Bauer and Heinrich von Trietschke despite their radically different political ideology tied emancipation of the Jews to their complete assimilation. It is perfectly evident that antisemitic

146 Ibid., 323, 343-344.
sentiments that grew out of the Middle Ages were not abolished by the Age of Reason; instead, they were given the respectability of reason.  

Ideas such as these, prevalent as they were among the Enlightenment philosophers, anticipated the rise of the more radical expressions of antisemitism during the middle and the latter half of the 19th century. The movement that emerged at that time was by and large a reaction to emancipation and coincided with romantic longings that rebelled against the progressive, universalistic principles of the Enlightenment. But it was more than that; it was a radicalization of the Jewish problem through the magnification of its significance. Liberal thought saw emancipation of the Jews as a logical extension of its egalitarian ideology and it saw the Jewish question merely as one of many social and political problems that required attention. But antisemitism, particularly in Germany, saw the Jewish problem as the source of all social, political and cultural problems, real or imagined. Its practical manifestation was the formation of political parties that were dedicated exclusively to the policy of “combating Jews and their influence” and regarded “the solution to the ‘Jewish question’ as a way of solving all the problems of society.”

Antisemitic voices of that period objected to any emancipation of the Jews either because of some perceived injustice that such political act would inflict upon the non-Jewish inhabitants or because emancipation by itself would not solve the Jewish problem. These expressions were rooted in the prevalent sense among the Europeans that the Jewish people was a foreign

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147 Hertzberg, 27: “[M]any of the philosophies of the Enlightenment, despite the ethical universalism and the vague deism or atheism in religion with which they were consciously subverting Christianity, were most reluctant to part with ‘old-fashioned’ antisemitism.”


body, racially and morally inferior, inherently incapable of assimilation, and as such dangerous to the body politic and culture of European societies. Thus Duehring wrote in 1881 that “[a] Jewish question would still exist, even if every Jew were to turn his back on his religion and join one of our major churches... It is precisely the baptized Jews who infiltrate furthest, unhindered in all sectors of society and political life.” Implicit in this suspicion of assimilation was an essentialist conception of what it means to be a Jew. To them the “Jewishness” of the Jews was not represented merely by their religion. Rather, it represented inalienable biological or racial traits that manifested themselves in their moral conduct and behavior.

With this racialization of the Jewish question there developed a profound and ubiquitous strain in antisemitic thought that accused the Jews of power, influence and control within European society and culture of such exaggerated degree that it bordered on cosmic proportions. Voices as diverse as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Richard Wagner and Karl Marx among others railed against the pernicious Jewish influence in political, economic and intellectual spheres of life. Thus Wagner mocked the notion of Jewish emancipation by arguing instead for German emancipation from the Jews. “According to the present constitution of this world, the Jew in truth is already more than emancipated: he rules, and will rule, so long as Money remains the

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150 Geoffrey Wheatcroft, in his penetrating study of Zionism, writes that there was “a pronounced strain in European anti-Semitism which saw Jews as rootless strangers, moral ciphers, national chameleons, taking on the colorations of their surrounding country.” Geoffrey Wheatcroft, The Controversy of Zion or How Zionism tried to resolve the Jewish Question (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996), 32.


152 The term “Semitic” as descriptive of the Jewish people was coined by Wilhelm Marr in 1879. In his pamphlet, “The Victory of Judaism over Germandom”, Marr uses the labels “Semite” and “Jew” interchangeably thus purposefully invoking the image of German Jews not as a religious minority who found in Germany a home but as the racial other, as a “foreign tribe” that does not belong among the Indo-Europeans. See Mendes-Flohr, The Jew in the Modern World, 331-332.
power before which all our doings and our dealings lose their force.”153 In this Wagner was echoing – not in any conscious way – the famous concluding line of Marx in “On the Jewish Question.” “The social emancipation of the Jew,” Marx proclaimed, “is the emancipation of society from Judaism.”154

But unlike Wagner who was an irredentist and a nationalist, Marx was a progressive thinker; he was a product of the Enlightenment. For him the Jewish problem was a symbol of a larger historical class struggle whose resolution was the ultimate promise of modernity. The Jew, as the engine of capitalism, would be emancipated when society would seize to be capitalist and class conscious. At the same time, society would solve the Jewish problem when the Jew would no longer think of himself or strive to be a member of the bourgeoisie and would recognize himself merely as human. From the Jewish perspective, then, the result of Marx’s analysis is of the same pedigree, mutatis mutandis, as Kant’s. For both, emancipation and thus redemption is equated with the annihilation of the particular. The Jewish people and the rest of humanity are redeemed when they make the world exclusively their home.155

Others, however, who objected to the perceived Jewish power and influence in the newly-emerging European order, were objecting to something else. They also viewed the Jewish problem as a symbol. As cosmopolitan in their life-styles and outlook, as middle class in their economic status, and as liberal in their political ideology, the Jews were seen as the embodiment

155 Let us not forget Marx’s own Jewish heritage. Having rabbis for grandfathers must have underscored in his own consciousness the tension between the progressivism and universalism of modern Enlightenment on the one hand, and the particularism and anti-modernism of traditional Judaism on the other. For Marx conceiving of the Jewish people in terms of class identity, as the bourgeoisie, or as self-interested members of the civil society, was the first (and only the first) natural step in his dialectic of emancipation and redemption.
of modernity itself. Jews were responsible for a worldview that directly challenged the old cultural values rooted in the attachment to soil and love of one’s nation. Figures like Wagner were romanticizing a pre-modern, indeed a pre-Christian world, while others were beginning to sound a “final catastrophe” unless the Jews relinquish their power and ambition.\footnote{Mendes-Flohr, \textit{The Jew in the Modern World}, 342.} It would take a few more decades to channel these antisemitic strands into a coherent political platform through the sheer power of will and political propaganda, but by the time National Socialism was at the height of its power, Europe at last could contemplate a final solution to the Jewish problem.\footnote{Indeed already in 1940, Jaques Maritain was arguing that no matter where Jews live, “they will be considered superfluous. What is really being denied them is purely and simply the right to exist.” Jaques Maritain, \textit{Antisemitism} (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1939), 4.} Perhaps the most succinct observation on the Jewish problem as a problem of antisemitism came from the historian, Raul Hilberg, in his classic study of the Holocaust:

\begin{quote}
The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: You have no right to live among us as Jews. The secular rulers who followed had proclaimed: You have no right to live among us. The German Nazis at last decreed: You have no right to live.
\end{quote}

The history of the Jewish problem as antisemitism can be understood, in other words, through its proffered solutions: exclusion, expulsion, and extermination.

\section*{Political Zionism and the Jewish Question: Discourse of Separation and Political Return}

Zionist political philosophy was based on assumptions regarding antsemitism, liberalism, and Jewish exilic life which it integrated into a coherent plan of action. Zionists, in many respects, were disenchanted liberals as well as disgruntled Jews. Liberalism, they discovered, was impotent against deeply ingrained antisemitic attitudes. Consequently, they appropriated the

\footnote{Raul Hilberg, \textit{The Destruction of the European Jews} (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 3-4.}
antisemitic arguments for exclusion and expulsion against the liberal arguments for emancipation and inclusion. But they combined those arguments with an assertive political self-reliance that went against the grain of traditional Jewish messianic passivity. By asserting that the fate of the Jews was ultimately placed in their own hands, political Zionists had severed Jewish destiny from Divine dispensation (as well as from non-Jewish control) and in the process developed their own secular discourse of separation, political restoration, and redemption.

In the first place, political Zionists argued that antisemitism itself was the essence of the Jewish problem, thus turning the concept as it was used by antisemitic movements on its head. Indeed Jewish nationalists borrowed from antisemitic charges and stereotypes that were leveled against Jews and used them to promote their own agenda. As a result, they presented the most articulate and organized Jewish response to antisemitism. Leo Pinsker in his assessment of the Jewish question, echoing antisemitic voices, observed that,

> The essence of the problem, as we see it, lies in the fact that, in the midst of the nations among whom the Jews reside, they form a distinctive element which cannot be assimilated, which cannot be readily digested by any nation. Hence the problem is to find means of so adjusting the relations of this exclusive element to the whole body of the nations that there shall never be any further basis for the Jewish Question.

But Pinsker also thought of Jewish hatred as rooted deeply in human nature and, consequently, the Jewish problem to be an eternal problem. Thus while he (anticipating Herzl) sought a creation of a sovereign Jewish state as a way of extricating Jews from their precarious and unnatural condition, it is not certain that he honestly believed that political sovereignty and with it the normalization of Jewish existence would put an end to antisemitism.

159 Wheatcroft, *The Controversy of Zion*, 32.
161 Ibid., 77, 74.
The underlying problem for Pinsker was less the specific elements of exilic existence – of which anti-Semitism was only one, albeit, the most important, element – than exilic existence as such. Herzl, on the other hand, was less gloomy – perhaps more naïve. Like Pinsker, he also understood the Jewish question to exist “wherever Jews live in perceptible numbers.” And he, too, considered it to be one of the dark problems of humanity, a remnant of the Middle Ages that civilized nations were unable to shake off. But he was also quite confident that creation of an independent state for the Jews would put an end to antisemitism. For him the aim of political Zionism was to solve the Jewish problem – which he described as “a national question, which can only be solved by making it a political world-question to be discussed and settled by the civilized nation of the world in council” – through the restoration of the Jewish state “as a tolerant modern civil state.”

In the second place, Zionists’ attempts to extricate European Jews from their peculiar condition were imbedded in the recognition of and reaction to the failure of liberalism to solve the Jewish problem. Herzl observed that liberal reforms did nothing to stop the tide of antisemitism and persecution; Jewish “equality before the law, granted by statute, has become practically a dead letter.” Similarly, the theme of Max Nordau’s speech to the First Zionist Congress was a characteristic attack on the abstract and cold logic of liberal universalism. For him Zionism represented a new, nationalist, answer to the failure of emancipation.

163 Herzl, The Jewish State, 75.
164 Ibid., 83.
166 Herzl, The Jewish State, 85.
167 The emancipation of the Jews was not the result of a conviction that grave injury had been done to a people, that it had been shockingly treated, and that it was time to atone for the injustice of a thousand years: it was solely the
Pinsker admonished liberal Jews who embraced emancipation and, with it, assimilation by reminding them of the persistence of antisemitism:

For the sake of the comfortable position we are granted, for the flesh-pots which we may enjoy in peace, we persuade ourselves, and others, that we are not Jews any longer, but full-blooded sons of the fatherland. Idle delusion! You may prove yourselves patriots ever so true, you will still be reminded at every opportunity of your Semitic descent.\footnote{168}

But Pinsker and other political Zionists could make their case against liberalism “only by interpreting the whole of postexilic [Jewish] history as an otherwise insoluble struggle with antisemitism.”\footnote{169} Indeed, for Herzl assimilation was not a major problem because of antisemitism.\footnote{170}

In the third place and intimately connected with assimilation, Zionism represented a historically fateful rejection of Jewish passivity and political impotence that resided deeply within the Jewish psyche due in no small part to its religious tradition. It was an explicit movement against Jewish exilic existence because such existence rendered Jews politically impotent in the face of antisemitism. Zionism was indeed the first secular Jewish movement. In its basic ideas, although it claimed religious neutrality, it violated one of the oldest religious principles of Judaism: the patient expectation of the coming of the Messiah. Zionism was a rebellion against the result of the geometrical mode of thought of French rationalism of the eighteenth century… The Emancipation of the Jews was an example of the automatic application of the rationalistic method. The philosophy of Rousseau and the Encyclopedists has led up to the declaration of human rights. The strict logic of the men of the Great Revolution deduced Jewish emancipation from this declaration. They formulated a logically correct syllogism: Every man is born with certain rights; the Jews are human beings; consequently the Jews by nature possess the rights of man. In this manner the Emancipation…was proclaimed in France, not out of fraternal feelings for the Jews but because logic demanded it. Popular sentiment indeed rebelled, but the philosophy of the Revolution decreed that principles must be placed above sentiment. May I be permitted to say something which implies no ingratitude: The men of 1792 emancipated us only for the sake of logic.” Max Nordau, “Speech to the First Zionist Congress” reprinted in Arthur Hertzberg, ed. The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader (Atheneum: A Temple Book, 1986), 236. In this important speech Nordau was restating an observation already found in Pinsker’s famous pamphlet. See Road to Freedom, 82.

\footnote{168} Pinsker, Road to Freedom, 87.\footnote{169} Hertzberg, The Zionist Idea, 16.\footnote{170} Herzl, The Jewish State, 77, 92.
attitude of waiting. It was a negation of the concept of the Messiah who, according to tradition, will come ‘soon, in our own days’… ‘To hell with waiting and bowing’ was the beginning of one of the early Zionist songs. To hell also with begging the nations, with kowtowing and bending the knee, to hell with toleration and meekness, to hell with the whole timidity of the ghetto generation. This was the mood of the new movement.\(^{171}\)

Waiting and praying for divine redemption, for a Messiah, and passively accepting one’s suffering as God’s punishment could no longer be taken as such on traditional rabbinic authority. Political Zionists found traditional Jewish attitudes not only distasteful but demeaning and dishonorable. Asserting political action, diplomacy and if necessary violence as an option for honor was an intellectual departure from exilic \([\text{galut}]\) consciousness and a radical break with an ancient tradition. But by doing so the new Jewish movement appealed, at least rhetorically, not to any modern critique of religion, although that was a necessary precondition for their own secular attitude (a topic which will be discussed in the next chapter). Instead, it appealed to the Jewish past itself, to a pre-exilic past stripped, of course, of any religious content, to a past that was interpreted in strictly political terms. We can see this sentiment reflected in Pinsker’s impassioned plea to his Jewish brothers to regain their ancient sense of honor:

> What a pitiful figure do we cut! We do not count as a nation among the other nations, and we have no voice in the council of the peoples, even in affairs which concern us. Our fatherland is the other man’s country; our unity – dispersion, our solidarity – the general hostility to us, our weapon – humility, our defense – flight, our individuality – adaptability, our future – tomorrow. What a contemptible role for a people which once had its Maccabees!\(^{172}\)

To this challenge, though not directly, Herzl would reply in the closing lines of his *The Jewish State*: “The Maccabees will rise again.”\(^{173}\) This rhetorical invocation of ancient, idealized political glory of the Jewish people and their military triumphs was the emotional wellspring that

\(^{172}\) Pinsker, *Road to Freedom*, 87.
appealed to those Jews who were already spiritually homeless, convinced them to break with whatever attachments to tradition they still may have had, and ultimately led to the political success of Zionism. It certainly appealed to the young Leo Strauss who, however, would go on to doubt the Zionist claims with respect to the Jewish question and to challenge its intellectual disregard of the religious tradition, which had been at the heart of Jewish identity and its conception of redemption.

**Strauss’s Zionism: Discourse of Confrontation, Critique and Revaluation**

It has been said of Leo Strauss that his approach to the Jewish question is idiosyncratic in that it focuses on the religious question of Judaism rather than on the political question of the Jews.¹⁷⁴ There is certainly some merit to this claim although the distinction is misleading in two ways. In the first place, as I have shown, there is no consensus or a single authoritative body of work on the Jewish question that could be accepted as a standard against which idiosyncrasy could be established. It is a question whose precise character and origin has usually been determined by political, economic and cultural interests. Historically, in other words, assessment of this question reflected ideological commitments.

In the second place, for Strauss the political question of the Jews, i.e., their precarious exilic condition as a homeless and dispersed people, could not be severed from the religious question of Judaism; each affected the understanding of the other and, to him, any attempt to separate the two was a signal of a profound misunderstanding of the Jewish historical predicament. But his is not a peculiar argument; one finds this strain of thought in cultural and

religious Zionism, and, in particular, in the Zionist thought of German Jews. Strauss’s novelty may be in the fact that ultimately he found none of the Zionist arguments sufficiently compelling to resolve the Jewish problem.

By the time Strauss “converted” to political Zionism at the age of seventeen he had already drifted away from the religious conservatism of his parents. One can surmise that, not unlike many other intellectually inclined Jews of his generation, reading Plato and especially Nietzsche in the German Gymnasium had a profound and, from the Jewish traditional perspective, subversive effect on his curious mind. For him becoming a Zionist, then, did not constitute a conscious secular break with the Jewish religious past. Instead, the intellectual break had already occurred and was the necessary precondition for his becoming a Zionist. Zionism must have afforded the young Strauss, like many other marginal secular German Jews, the possibility of remaining Jewish, in some sense of the word, without the trappings of religious belief. In this, however, Strauss belonged to the main stream of German Zionists for whom Zionism represented less of a program for independent statehood and political action than a way of asserting their Jewish identity in the face of antisemitism and assimilation.

German Zionists – unlike, for example, Russian Zionists – tended toward spiritual and the theoretical rather than the practical aspects of Jewish nationalism. Few, for example,

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175 Nietzsche’s influence on early Zionists is explored by Jacob Golomb in his Nietzsche and Zion (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). For Strauss’s own relationship to Nietzsche see Chapter One of this dissertation.
177 Michael A. Meyer, in his Jewish Identity in the Modern World (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 61, wrote that for a Western Jew “[t]o become a Zionist…was to transcend the pernicious effects of enlightenment and antisemitism while utilizing their benefits.” On German Zionist experience see Stephen M. Poppel, Zionism in Germany 1897-1933: The Shaping of a Jewish Identity (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1977).
undertook to resettle in Palestine prior to the Second World War.\textsuperscript{178} German Jews were more adrift spiritually because of the effects of emancipation and because of the strong influence of German culture upon their psyche.\textsuperscript{179} Strauss’s concerns, then, represented the larger concerns of German Jewry. This, however, is not trivial. German Jews, despite their relatively small numbers, have played a seminal role in modern Judaism; indeed, it is the birthplace of much of modern Jewish thought as well as much of what constitutes modern Jewish religious practice and liturgy. The ideas and practices that began in Germany in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, in fact, would go on and thrive in the Jewish community in the United States.

Furthermore, to the extent that German Zionists belonged to the broader Zionist movement, Strauss’s early writings also exhibit much that was of concern even to the mainstream Zionists. These concerns (summarized above) revolved around the issues of antisemitism, assimilation, and tradition, and as far as they represented a problem, it was so as constitutive elements of exilic existence. But Strauss would come to question the Zionist response to the predicament of European Jews. The Zionist (specifically, political Zionist) solution to the Jewish problem—its rejection of exile—was precisely the point at which, for Strauss, the Jewish question began to reveal itself in all its slippery complexity. Zionism, which offered an intellectual alternative to religious orthodoxy on the one hand and assimilation on the


\textsuperscript{179} The extent of German cultural influence upon German Jews is illustrated in the following observation: “We live scattered in the midst of a great culture, which we imbibe…with our mother’s milk. Culturally we can be Germans only. Goethe, Schiller, and Kant have been our teachers, and we cannot change our nature at will…” Quoted in Poppel, \textit{Zionism in Germany}, 56. It is noteworthy that this observation was made not by a liberal, assimilated Jew but by one of the leaders of the German Zionist movement.
other, may have prevented Jews like Strauss from completely abandoning their Jewish identity; ultimately, however, it did not solve the Jewish problem. The implications of this conclusion would manifest themselves in his latter writings. The shortcomings of Zionism would eventually lead Strauss to reconsider not only the efficacy of the Zionist solution to the Jewish problem but the efficacy of any political attempt to provide a home to – and thus redeem – mankind.

**Rejection of Exile and Tradition**

Strauss’s early characterization of Jewish exilic life is clearly indebted to Pinsker’s.\(^{180}\) Leo Pinsker famously and vividly described the exiled Jews as the living dead. “Among the living nations of the earth”, he wrote, “the Jews occupy the position of a nation long since dead.” But while they were forced to give up all the trappings of political existence, they did not cease to exist spiritually as a nation. The world saw in this people the uncanny form of one of the dead walking among the living. The ghostlike apparition of a people without unity or organization, without land or other bond of union, no longer alive, and yet moving about among the living, this eerie form scarcely paralleled in history, unlike anything that preceded or followed it, could not fail to make a strange, peculiar impression upon the imagination of the nations. And if the fear of ghosts is something inborn, and has a certain justification in the psychic life of humanity, what wonder that it asserted itself powerfully at the sight of this dead and yet living nation?”\(^{181}\)

Strauss held exilic life to be a mixed blessing. He echoed Pinsker’s sentiment of equating political life with a sense of reality. On one occasion he described the Jewish world as “the world of a ‘ghost people.’”\(^{182}\) On another occasion he wrote that, “[i]n the galut, the Jewish people lived as a *Luftvolk* [‘people living on/in the air’]; they lacked “the ground beneath [their]

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180 Strauss’s admiration for Pinsker is evident, among other things, from his description of *Autoemancipation* as “the most impressive statement of political Zionism.” See “Why We Remain Jews,” *Jewish Philosophy*, 318.

181 Pinsker, *Autoemancipation*, 77-78.

182 Strauss, *The Early Writings*, 68.
feet in both the literal and the figurative senses, and [they depended] on all of the contingencies of the behavior of other peoples.”^{183} He also held that the lack of any national, political center also foreclosed the possibility for collective action. Strauss blamed Jewish religion in general and various Jewish customs for reinforcing this condition. Messianic emphasis on the miraculous affected a certain political passivity and the traditional Jewish preference for separation and isolation reinforced a sense of the abnormal in Jewish exilic condition.

But Strauss also recognized that the abnormality of exilic life ironically sustained in the Jewish people “a strong will to existence.” Judaism functioned to preserve this national will by keeping faith in a political future. Similarly, Jewish segregational practices reinforced a sense of a national existence despite a lack of a political center. Indeed the scattered nature of the Jewish community in exile availed the Jewish people from universal annihilation. This, then, was the essence of galut for Strauss: “it provides the Jewish people with a maximal possibility of existence by means of a minimum normality.”^{184}

In contrast, political Zionism represented for Strauss an “entering into reality”, a “tendency to gain access to normal historical ‘reality’ (land and soil, power and arms, peasantry and aristocracy).”^{185} The young Strauss saw in Zionism an agent that would allow the Jewish people to regain its honor by entering into political life. The genius of Herzl, in his view, was the politicization of the Jewish people.^{186} But for Strauss gaining political reality, i.e., political independence also meant a break with traditional Jewish religion. In other words, imbedded within the Zionist critique of exilic life was a critique of Jewish orthodoxy.

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^{183} Ibid., 85.
^{184} Ibid., 85. Emphasis in the original.
^{185} Ibid., 68.
^{186} Ibid., 128.
There was a certain hostile edge to Strauss’s early critique of Jewish orthodoxy, more a representation of internal political cleavages within the German Zionist movement than any ideological conviction on his part. His rhetorical posture was clearly vociferous. He called, for example, for an alliance between Zionism and liberalism against orthodoxy, proclaiming that “[t]oday, the enemy is on the Right!” On a different occasion Strauss wrote that “Zionism has a single enemy, and that enemy is Orthodoxy. To Orthodoxy, we the non-Orthodox are traitors and infidels.” He even went as far as to call it “our fiercest and most vicious enemy,” who employed dishonest and evasive means to achieve its objective: “submission of the Jewish people to the Torah.”

On a deeper level Strauss’s confrontation with orthodoxy was a challenge to Jewish religious tradition as such. This challenge was rooted in a profound recognition that modernity has undermined the Jewish tradition, and that this process justified the Zionists to “distance” themselves from it. The corrosive effect was such that not even modern orthodoxy could claim the inheritance of that tradition. “[W]hen Europe criticized itself, that is, its Christianity,” Strauss wrote, “it eo ipso criticized Judaism. That this critique made an impact on the Jewish context is illustrated historically by the fact that the Jewish tradition, insofar as it was unable to reconstruct itself with regard to this critique, succumbed to Europe’s attack.” He continued,

[T]he result of the critique in question is the limitation it puts on the claim to validity of tradition. In the present day, even on the Orthodox side, one no longer argues, proceeding from the Bible, against the propositions of natural science… [A] tradition that, because of a critique launched against it, has relinquished certain claims (claims that presumably arose from it not without inner necessity), indeed, a tradition that has reconstructed itself so that it is no longer even able to make those claims – such a

187 Ibid., 118, 127, 124, 125.
188 Ibid., 128.
189 Ibid., 108. Emphasis in the original.
tradition, if it is honest, will have to admit that it is no longer the old, unbroken tradition.”

Two issues are at stake here. In the first place, Jewish orthodoxy, not unlike the Church doctrine, found itself on the defensive from modern science, and to the extent that it explained itself in modern scientific terms it could no longer honestly speak for the Jewish tradition, which claimed the Revealed Law to be its source and sustaining power. In the second place, even if orthodoxy still stood its traditional grounds, its claims could no longer be taken for granted. Thus Strauss could honestly say that “it [was] impossible for us to accept the law.” But to him this was not an emancipatory proclamation from the yoke of tradition; instead, this was a regretful recognition of a loss, a mourning of sorts. He recognized that there were things in the Jewish tradition that were non-negotiable if this tradition was to maintain its unique identity. And to the extent that Zionism rejected Jewish tradition while in the process of saving Jews from assimilation (one of its stated goals), it was caught up in an intellectual incoherence because the rejection of tradition constituted a simultaneous act of assimilation. For Strauss, political Zionists failed to recognize that their movement was already in large part compromised by assimilation because the condition for the possibility of secular Jewish politics was already established by Germans and other non-Jewish Europeans. In other words, to make their arguments for an independent Jewish state compelling to Jews and non-Jews the Zionist leaders did not, for the most part, draw upon Jewish traditional sources; rather, the language and ideas they employed appealed to a new political force that emerged in 19th century Europe, namely,

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190 Ibid., 108.
191 Ibid., 120.
192 Ibid., 120.
nationalism. Zionism was a nationalist movement for the Jewish people, not unlike the one that united and liberated Italy and brought about a unified Germany. Zionists, as one scholar wrote, represented a new group in Jewish life, the product of assimilation and emancipation, and the severest critics of both. Zionism...is the result of the nationalist as well as emancipatory movements which dominated the century and without which the Zionist movement could not have come into being... The new leaders of the Jews...were intellectuals rather than businessmen. Zionism is the reaction of the Jewish intellectuals to the failure of emancipation. Even in Russia these intellectuals were postassimilatory Jews. It was by the virtue of their ‘assimilation’ that they were able to analyze and understand the Jewish situation in new terms.\(^{193}\)

By making a similar argument, Strauss was beginning to come to grips with the fact that because of its implicit assimilationist character and thus a false sense of homecoming, Zionist politics could not simply redeem the Jewish people.

**The Persistence of Antisemitism**

The ideology of progress that dominated Western thought since the 18\(^{th}\) century led many Jews in Germany and France to conclude that through emancipation and assimilation the Jewish question was gradually being resolved, that Jews were increasingly accepted into European society without necessarily shedding their Jewish identity, however transformed it may be. For the assimilationists the emergence of radical antisemitism in Germany (as well as the Dreyfus affair in France) by the late 19\(^{th}\) century was viewed merely as a bump on the road, a minor detour in the general historical trend toward normalization. By taking a nationalist stand against antisemitism, political Zionists explicitly rejected liberal attempts to solve the Jewish problem. Indeed they recognized the failure of liberalism in its inability to address antisemitism. And while political Zionists had a graver view of antisemitism, they too, following Herzl, believed

that with the return of Jews to their sovereign political existence, antisemitism would cease to be a problem.

Strauss, however, would come to doubt this faith in the withering away of antisemitism. As did Pinsker, he recognized in it a deeply ingrained human passion, an incurable disease independent of political regimes, international structures or the general level of civilization. In a polemical essay against Simon Dubnow’s sociological interpretation of history, Strauss suggested that historical facts clashed with the ideology of progress; the Jewish question, he argued, was not affected in any meaningful sense by whatever progress may have been taking place at the time. Strauss accused Dubnow, who argued for Jewish cultural autonomy as a solution to the Jewish problem, of failing to read in antisemitism simple hatred, “either groundless or grounded in the lowest urges.”

The value in Dubnow’s work on Jewish history, for Strauss, was in its martyrology, the enumeration of unmitigated Jewish suffering. Setting aside the fact that this part of Dubnow’s study undermined his ideology of progress, Strauss found here an important, although disturbing ingredient that sustained Jewish exilic life. Antisemitism, he claimed, taught that hatred was a constitutive element of human existence, but also that it could and, in the case of the Jewish exilic life, did serve a salutary function. Martyrology, Strauss wrote, has the vital function of keeping alive in us the deep hatred that facilitates our existence in this world of hatred, and that takes for us the place of an army and of fortresses; and because…it is the cognitive preservation of an essential form of the life of our people, namely, suffering as such…

194 Strauss, The Early Writings, 103-104.
195 Ibid., 103.
196 Ibid., 104.
On this disturbing account, where suffering and hatred were intimately intertwined, Strauss drew the following point: first, absent a political existence hatred (or passion in general) was the most powerful tool that could animate people’s will to existence, and, second, suffering became a constitutive element of Jewish exilic identity. He went on to suggest in a rather heterodox manner that reading suffering into the essence of history rendered sociological explanations and liberal remedies inappropriate and absurd. Strauss scorned the liberal conceptual appeal to democracy and universal rights as means of fighting hatred,

The conception of the peoples of the world as none other than the cruel tormentors of the defenseless is as absurd from a sociological viewpoint as it is meaningful and unavoidable here, where the peoples of the world are considered as the mere correlate of the suffering of the Jewish people, that is, as those who cause that suffering. In this context, the notion that is opposite to force [Gewalt] is not ‘right’ [’Recht’], but the experience of force. Any appeal to a league of nations or to democracy, any assertion of a claim not to be tormented, is here invalidated as embarrassing. All that remains is selicha.

It is important to reiterate the lessons Strauss learned from antisemitism since they cut across the grain of conventional wisdom. Two related lessons stand out here but only one is explicit. He spelled out that emotions of hatred and experiences of suffering were primal in the human condition and under certain circumstances (as in Jewish exilic life) could, if understood properly, sustain identity. The second lesson is more subtle and, I would argue, anticipates, though not fully, a claim Carl Schmitt would make in The Concept of the Political. There Schmitt distinguishes, under normal condition, between the sphere of politics where enemies are fought but are not necessarily hated and the private sphere, the only sphere where the emotions

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197 The parallel between this and Nietzsche’s account of ressentiment as a source that animates weakness into power is inescapable. Strauss is using the lessons of antisemitism to illustrate the unnatural condition of Jewish exilic life.

198 Ibid., 104. Selicha is the Hebrew word meaning “forgiveness”.

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of hate and love are appropriate. Strauss’s argument that hatred plays a salutary effect in the life of exilic Jews only serves to emphasize the utter lack of normalcy in their existence; it should not be taken as a celebration of passions. His rejection of exilic life at this stage and his support for a Jewish state seems to be an argument against hatred. Both the young Strauss and Schmitt see the political life as essentially a life of moderation. Politics does not do away with enemies but it does avail against passions and lowest human urges.

And yet it is not clear that Strauss completely embraced this view. Politics may indeed moderate hatred but did it moderate antisemitism? Was antisemitism a historically unique case of human hatred? When Strauss observed that it was simple hatred either groundless or grounded in the lowest human urges, Strauss was pointing to its irrational nature. Unlike the liberal mind, which saw in antisemitism an atypical expression of modernity, Strauss understood it as a deeply engrained aspect of the human psyche independent of historical causality, a kind of reality principle that had to be recognized honestly and with courage. In other words, antisemitism possessed a certain independence from the progressive historical process (imagined or real), and to the extent that it was identified as the theme of the Jewish problem, it had no solution. Its significance for Strauss, however, was of a subordinate nature. Assimilation proved to be a more serious issue for the Jews and to the extent that antisemitism figured into his thought as a problem worthy of contemplation it was in terms of its impetus to assimilate.200

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200 This was the crux of his critique of Freud’s defense of Judaism. Strauss became ambivalent about Freud’s Jewish loyalty not because of his basic (and infamous) claim about Moses’ identity but because of the motive for the claim. For Strauss, Freud committed a “supreme act of assimilation” when he suggested in 1937 that the relationship between Jews and Moses was identical to the relationship between Germans and Jesus. According to Strauss, Freud
The Challenge of Assimilation

For the young Strauss the central theme of the Jewish question was the challenge of assimilation posed to the traditional meaning of Jewish history and to the existence of the Jewish people as Jews. In this he stood apart from mainstream political Zionists for whom antisemitism was the essence of the problem and whose political action against that phenomenon became its dominant ideology. Indeed Strauss’s implicit (for it is never announced) shift of emphasis would occasion his critical distancing from the movement, although, throughout his life he remained a passionate supporter of Zionism and the Jewish state.201

Two themes dominated his thinking on assimilation. One theme, which is in evidence both in his early and late writings, articulates assimilation as a radical agent of thought and of socio-cultural referencing that penetrated deeply into Jewish intellectual life. The other theme is more subtle; it emerges later and is expressed most explicitly in his lecture “Why We Remain Jews.”202 There Strauss exposes an additional difficulty that lies hidden behind assimilation’s power as a historical fact. The Jewish problem as assimilation is a problem of the will; the will to submerge oneself into a universal culture whereby the question of one’s Jewish identity and the stigma attached to it is expunged from mundane social contact and erased from human memory. On this view, a Jewish person wills himself out of existence and becomes merely a German or a French national; or better yet, he sheds any particularity and becomes merely human whereby he is never homeless in the world.

did this because he was “too concerned” with and “remained vulnerable” to antisemitism. See “Freud on Moses and Monotheism” in Jewish Philosophy, 286-287, 295-296.
201 See, for example, Strauss’s defense of the Jewish state in his letter to the editors of National Review, reprinted in Jewish Philosophy, 413-414.
202 In Leo Strauss, Jewish Philosophy, 311-345.

68
Assimilation for Strauss is as much a psychological problem as it is a problem of historical fact. Behind the social reality there is a problem of the soul and the extent to which there is a mutual reinforcement between history and psyche a perceived need emerges to de-link modern Jewish life from its traditional sense of a people apart with a unique religious identity and historical destiny consecrated by a Covenant. These two themes, one national-political the other individual-spiritual, express the moral, political and intellectual ambiguities that describe the Jewish condition but also point beyond their particular circumstances.

In a polemical essay against the Zionism of Max Nordau we see Strauss struggling with assimilation as a corrosive force that invaded Jewish life in Europe and threatened its existence. He recognized that as a stand against Jewish exilic existence assimilation and Zionism shared a goal. Both aimed at bringing Jews back into political life with two important, indeed, decisive differences. First, assimilation rather than negate exile, which was the goal of political Zionism, radicalized the illusion of normalcy in exile; second, it abandoned the traditional character and national aspiration of the Jews by bringing them into political life as individuals rather than as a people.

Assimilation has basically no other motive than the egoism of Western Jewish individuals. It worsens the illusionism of the galut, expressed in the belief in the ‘mystical’ redemption by the Messiah, by secularizing the ideas of the galut that, for all their mysticism, had a very sober vital function. Assimilation takes away from the Jews the self-assurance of ghetto life, and gives them instead the illusionary surrogate of trust in the humanity of civilization. Its politics, not unlike that of the galut, is limited to the needs of the moment. But it is less useful inasmuch as it completely deludes itself about the attitudes of the host nations, believing that the Jewish question can be resolved once and for all by shutting one’s eyes to it. It is nothing but a ‘sacrifice of fidelity, of dignity, of historical consciousness.’

203 Strauss, The Early Writings, 85-86. Emphasis is in the original. In this quote Strauss was summarizing Nordau’s argument, but the content of this essay and Strauss’s other remarks on the topic leave little doubt that on this issue Strauss was in general agreement with Nordau; the disagreement lies elsewhere.
Assimilation attempted to gain political reality for European Jews at a price of traditional Jewish political self-understanding.\(^{204}\) Such a deal was not only ironic but also illusory because liberalism in general, failed to grasp the essential character and power of antisemitism. Assimilation, as he put it, “denied the existence of the Jewish question while Zionism acknowledges it.”\(^{205}\) For Strauss, assimilation proved to be a failed aspiration because it gave up too much and achieved too little.

Entrance into political reality through assimilation was prepared by political and intellectual developments outside the Jewish world.\(^{206}\) It was occasioned by liberalism through the separation of the social, moral and the political from the sacred dimension of human life.\(^{207}\) In the context of liberal emancipation, assimilation was supposed to have only a “formal” function or, to put it in other words, a merely political and social role. It was supposed to bring Jews back to reality by enabling them to participate in the political and social existence of the host nation while still maintaining their traditional religious “content.” In this scenario the role of Jewish religion was to create a vital tension within Jewish life. The Jews were to resurrect

\(^{204}\) Strauss, *The Early Writings*, 68.

\(^{205}\) Ibid., 87.

\(^{206}\) Strauss hinted very strongly that for assimilation to succeed in the 19th century there had to have been a certain German-Jewish intellectual and cultural symbiosis, a two-sided a priori (and ongoing) preparation for social integration. In this Strauss reflected certain antisemitic views current in his day which railed against the “Judaization” of the German culture. However, he did not fully pursue this theme beyond some cursory remarks. See for example the following quote from “Paul de Lagarde” in *The Early Writings*, 94: “How was it possible for Jews to become emancipated in Germany? The Jews, [according to Lagarde], owe their admission to the circumstance that the Jewish spirit has gained mastery over Germany; for liberalism is nothing but secularized Judaism. Indeed!” See also “Response to Frankfurt’s ‘Word of Principle’” and “The Holy” in *The Early Writings*, 68, 75-76.

\(^{207}\) Strauss, “Preface,” *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 3: “Liberal democracy had originally defined itself in theologico-political treatises as the opposite, not of the more or less enlightened despotism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but of ‘the kingdom of darkness,’ i.e., of medieval society. According to liberal democracy, the bond of society is universal human morality, whereas religion…is a private affair.”
politically, externally that is, while preserving a religious sense of the exilic within them.\textsuperscript{208} Strauss does not elaborate – at least not yet – on the significance of this tension, let alone on how it would manifest itself in the relationship between the Jewish collective and the liberal state. But what is being suggested here is that individual political renewal required internalization and de-politicization of the idea of exile, a separation, if you will, between political and social homecoming, and spiritual and intellectual homelessness.

Suffice it to say that such an arrangement did not hold. The radicalism of assimilation cut through this idealized barrier between the internal-religious and the external-secular aspects of Jewish life. Secularism abolished all pretenses to the idea of exile and with this abolition came an acculturation, indeed a Christianization, of the Jewish religion. Once the religious notion of homelessness or \textit{galut} no longer appealed to German Jews, the content of their soul was “flooded” by German culture. As Strauss put it,

Germanization in the profane sphere gave rise to tendencies that transformed from within the entire religiosity of German Judaism. From this religiosity the ‘content’ received an entirely different ‘conception,’ that is, the ‘content’ changed completely its character… One simply cannot absorb somewhat deeper German things without absorbing along with them, among other things, a dose of specifically Christian spirit.\textsuperscript{209}

Clearly, as a Zionist, Strauss was concerned with the real possibility that in Germany Judaism had been injected with specifically German religious (i.e., Protestant), cultural, and philosophical influences. He seemed to be suspicious (with Nordau) that the content of German Jewish religiosity – what has come to be known as Reform or Liberal Judaism – was itself a product of external Christian, rather than internal Jewish, intellectual origin. Traditional

\textsuperscript{208} Strauss, \textit{The Early Writings}, 68. At times Strauss was using the term “Germanization” instead of “assimilation,” which should serve as a reminder of the German-Jewish context of his early writings.

\textsuperscript{209} Ibid., 68-69.
Judaism, despite its orthodox religiosity, was still profoundly “Zionist” in its national aspirations even though its means were – necessarily so – politically impotent. But assimilation stripped traditional Judaism of its nationalist dimension. Furthermore, Judaism in its new post-emancipatory understanding was narrowed to merely ethical “missionism,” a liberal reformulation of the entire meaning of Judaism.\(^{210}\) Thus for Strauss any recovery of the Jewish “content”, devoid of any healthy infusion of Jewish orthodoxy – the selfsame orthodoxy that political Zionists and Strauss himself have rejected – on the part of his fellow Zionists was already problematic. “[H]ave they no fear of the terrible danger of infusing into the ‘content’ their Scheler or whomever else they happen to be carrying around in their heads? A little of reflection on this problem is strongly urged.”\(^{211}\)

And yet this Jewish content, which orthodoxy is supposed to supply, itself came under suspicion as a consequence of assimilation. Recovery of a religious world view that was authentically Jewish was inherently problematic for Strauss because it would require “an ‘explicit’ act of faith.” This notion of a declaration or a confession of one’s belief in God is “something ‘non-Jewish,’ that is, something that would have been absurd in the life of the earlier times.”\(^{212}\)

In the enclosed world of the past, the separation between “life” and “belief” would have been absurd. A people that, according to its tradition, became a people through God’s own hand was unable to separate its life from bearing witness to its origin; this people virtually had no life without knowledge of God.\(^{213}\)

\(^{210}\) Ibid., 85.
\(^{211}\) Ibid., 69.
\(^{212}\) Ibid., 70. Emphasis in the original.
\(^{213}\) Ibid.
In other words in traditional Judaism existence of God was given; His providence constituted an integral part of a comprehensive worldview of ancient Israel whereby any explicit affirmation of faith was not thinkable.

It is not entirely clear to what extent Strauss was already idealizing the ancient Jewish experience. Nor is it clear from these remarks which period of “the earlier times” he has in mind. It is certainly true that the Scriptures are quite abundant with stories of the ancient Hebrews seduced by Baal worship and losing their way from the straight and narrow path of justice and devotion; they are repeatedly called upon to reassert their piety. What is clear, however, is that Strauss was less interested in recovering Jewish “content” for its own sake than he was in “the needs of the contemporary Jewish situation” in which this thoroughly un-Jewish expression of faith was unavoidable.

In invoking the experience of the Jewish community of “earlier times,” times prior to emancipation as having had a pre-articulate, pre-theoretical sense of God, Strauss was beginning to put forth a religious phenomenology, which would form one important theme in his mature political philosophy. Strauss was distinguishing here between an original sense of religious experience which is pre-reflective and pre-theoretical, on the one hand, and its derivative, on the other. The former requires no expression of faith, the latter puts faith at the center of religious experience. Strauss made this argument in 1923 and it is clear that he was already exhibiting the influences upon him of Martin Heidegger whose lectures he attended as a young Ph.D. in

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216 See for example the distinction between “natural understanding” and “theoretical understanding” of the world that Strauss discusses in *Natural Right and History*, 78-90.
The similarity in their respective phenomenology is quite striking. Late in his life Strauss explained that Heidegger radicalized Husserl’s phenomenological insights that natural understanding “must start from our common understanding of the world, from our understanding of the world as sensibly perceived prior to all theorizing.” Heidegger radicalized this view by arguing that pre-theoretical understanding includes not only sensible objects but also the experience of the sacred and that this experience is not natural but historical. He thus denied our ability to fully understand past experiences; the past is only available to us for creative reinterpretations. Strauss would ultimately reject Heidegger’s historicism not only because it foreclosed the possibility of philosophy in its original Socratic sense, but also because it explicitly denied our ability to access the original experience of the sacred through revelation.

Strauss’s analysis of the Jewish question offered him sufficient evidence that Jewish exilic experience transcended historical particularities in no small part because imbedded in this experience was the Jewish insistence on the sacred and transcendent origins of its history, origins that constituted and sustained the Jewish people. It was the ability to draw upon this experience as witness to revelation that was threatened by assimilation.

In his analysis of assimilation Strauss was beginning to reveal not only the intellectual and moral difficulties of the Zionist stance against tradition and assimilation, but his own ambiguity toward the theoretical assumptions of Zionism and its stance against exile. Indeed, he was beginning to fundamentally rethink the nature of the Jewish problem. His analysis as a

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217 The impact that Heidegger had on the young Strauss was famously recounted by him in a number of venues throughout his career. See, for example, *Jewish Philosophy*, 450: “Nothing affected us as profoundly as in the years in which our minds took their lasting direction as the thought of Heidegger.”


219 Ibid., 30-31.

220 I discuss Strauss’s relationship to Heidegger in greater detail in Chapter One of this dissertation.
Zionist revealed the extent to which the Jewish problem was tied up with its exilic existence. But while rejecting orthodoxy, essentializing antisemitism and radicalizing assimilation, Strauss was also distancing himself from Zionist ideology. In the process of problematizing liberal and Zionist solutions to the Jewish problem he was beginning to reassess his stance against the Jewish tradition. He was beginning to reflect more deeply on the fundamental characteristics of Judaism, on its history and on the future of Jews in modern society.

The Theologico-Political Predicament: Discourse of Ambivalence and Ambiguity

In an unpublished lecture on Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, which was as much an observation on the condition of modern Jewry as it was a critique of psychoanalytic hermeneutics, Strauss noted the following about its author: “He is a man who knows that he is a Jew, that he belongs to the Jewish people, and that the root of his problem is the fact that he cannot believe what his ancestors believed.”

Freud, despite his radical atheism and heterodoxy, remained a self-conscious, if not a practicing, member of the Jewish community. By identifying himself as a Jew, Freud was following the proverb: “Adorn the Sparta which was given to you at birth.” It was Freud’s stubborn loyalty to his people that earned Strauss’s respect. Freud was a good Jew precisely because he accepted his fate, his place in a chain of generations that linked him to his ancestry, even though the identity of its ancestral founder and lawgiver, according to his own argument, may have been foreign.

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222 Ibid., 286. Strauss does not provide a citation for this proverb and I have not been able to find its source.
223 Ibid., 295. This thesis has been mined for its anti-Zionist implications by Edward Said in his *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003).
Strauss was using the occasion of this lecture to articulate the themes he began to explore during his Zionist period as a Weimar Jew. Namely, he focused on the spiritual difficulty of modern Jews for whom neither traditional Judaism, Zionism, nor liberalism offer sufficient answers. This difficulty can be characterized by a particular tension that simultaneously pulls in opposite directions: the Jewish heritage and tradition on the one hand and the broadly universal, liberal and secular society on the other. This tension is the dominant structure of a modern Jewish experience whose tentative identification with both nodal polls reflects an intellectual and moral ambiguity. For modern Jews questions of identity, foreignness, marginality and the need for acceptance and belonging became social, political as well as philosophical issues of central import. This inability to identify fully with Jewish religion, the one source that has traditionally defined and sustained the Jewish people became the feature of the Jewish problem for Strauss. He thus transformed Pinsker’s equation of this problem with the persistence of antisemitism to associating it with an internal spiritual dimension of modern secular, liberal Jews.

In his later writings on this topic Strauss described his own intellectual transformation and the condition of modern western Jews as a “theologico-political” predicament. The spiritual dimension of this predicament became a recapitulation of the transformation that occurred in Western thought in general. Strauss came to define the struggle for liberal democracy by early modern thought in “theologico-political” terms, by which he meant, not as an option against political despotism of the Enlightenment but as an option against theological despotism of the Middle Ages. Theological despotism existed because religion – Christianity – served as the bond of medieval society. That society expressed itself most characteristically through the
Crusades, a political act whose necessary performance was the destruction of Jewish communities in their path.\textsuperscript{224}

Liberalism, on the other hand, conceived the social bond in terms of universal morality, or law. By doing so, liberalism constituted the first serious attempt to normalize Jewish life in exile. But this normalization came at the expense of the theological notion of exile. Liberalism substituted normalization for tradition. Its philosophy possessed the theoretical and practical tools that could enable Jewish integration into society. A liberal state could achieve this goal first and foremost by distinguishing between private and public spheres of human life. Thus all the significant distinctions between Jews and non-Jews which in the past stood in the way of integration were privatized and depoliticized. In Germany, as Strauss observed, such an arrangement led most Jews to believe that liberalism had solved the Jewish problem: “German Jews were Germans of the Jewish faith, i.e. they were no less German than the Germans of the Christian faith or of no faith at all.”\textsuperscript{225} Normalization of exile became a homecoming and redemption of sorts.

For Strauss, the public-private distinction was the defining feature of a liberal regime. But from the Jewish perspective this characteristic strength of liberalism simultaneously constituted its failure. As he saw it, there were two fundamental problems with the liberal solution. In the first place, as we have already seen in his early work, liberalism demanded from the Jews a historical break with their traditional theolico-political aspirations and with their traditional narratives about the meaning of Jewish history and the unique place the Jewish people occupied among the nations. In the process of politicizing Jews as individuals it depoliticized

\textsuperscript{224} Strauss, “Preface,” Spinoza’s Critique of Religion (SCR for the rest of the chapter), 3.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 4.
Judaism. In short, the liberal solution to the Jewish problem demanded a radical transformation of identity, which is another way of saying that the Jewish problem could not be solved on liberal terms as long as Jews remained who they were.

In the second place, the public-private structure of the liberal society necessarily preserved and indeed perpetuated antisemitism. It is precisely in this distinction, as Strauss noted, that the Jewish problem reappears.\(^226\) The liberal regime may have depoliticized antisemitism, but as long as this regime remained “liberal,” it could not remove it from the human heart. “The prohibition against every ‘discrimination’ would mean the abolition of the private sphere, the denial of the difference between the state and society, in a word, the destruction of liberal society; and, therefore it is not a sensible objective or policy.”\(^227\) By concluding that liberalism failed to solve the Jewish problem Strauss was also harking back to that old Greek proverb,

> It is impossible not to remain a Jew. It is impossible to run away from one’s origins. It is impossible to get rid of one’s past by wishing it away. \textit{There is nothing better than the uneasy solution offered by liberal society, which means legal equality plus private ‘discrimination.’} We must simply recognize the fact, which we all know, that the Jewish minority is not universally popular, and we must recognize the consequences which follow from that.\(^228\)

Liberalism, then, cannot solve the Jewish problem for two reasons. It inherits antisemitism by transforming it, and it transforms Judaism by promising to normalize the life of the Jewish people. It loosens the bond between the Jewish people and its tradition, weakens their


\(^{227}\) Ibid., 315. The distinction between political and social antisemitism hinted at here by Strauss is similar to the one made by Hannah Arendt in \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism}, 54: “political antisemitism developed because the Jews were a separate body, while social discrimination arose because of the growing equality of Jews with all other groups.”

resolve to withstand antisemitism and consequently precipitates the urge to assimilate. In a liberal society a Jew, according to Strauss, must escape anything that is recognizably Jewish, yet he can never fully escape discrimination. Ambiguity – living in a tension between polarities – becomes the essence of modern, liberal Jewish life. But by saying that “there is nothing better” than the liberal solution Strauss seemed to also recognize the liberal confines that surround modern Jews. Whatever wisdom and answers Strauss will seek in Greek philosophy and biblical Judaism, they will have to fit into and be absorbed by the essentially liberal nature of the modern world.

Zionism, in its own way duplicated the theologico-political predicament of liberalism. Zionism, in other words, had its own ambiguity, which Strauss was particularly interested in uncovering. He respected political Zionism as a moral force against the liberal will to assimilate. “It helped to stem the tide of ‘progressive’ leveling of venerable, ancestral differences; it fulfilled a conservative function.”229 But at the same time “the establishment of the state of Israel has not removed ‘the problematic ambiguity attached to the Jewish existence everywhere and at all times’.”230 On the one hand, Zionism was not divorced from the traditional Jewish hopes of a return to its ancestral home and a reestablishment of their ancient kingdom with all its theocratic practices. On the other hand, Zionism in its strictly political expression never thought of its project as a Restoration. Its modestly secular, yet ambitious, aim was merely to “[cleanse] the Jews of their millennial degradation, with the recovery of Jewish dignity, honor or pride.”231

231 Strauss, “Preface,” SCR, 4-5. See also “Why We Remain Jews,” Jewish Philosophy, 319.
Both Pinsker and Herzl “started from the failure of the liberal solution” but continued to think of
the Jewish problem in liberal terms, as a “merely human problem.”

From the beginning, then, Strauss was dubious that political Zionism was a coherent and –
from the traditional Jewish perspective – legitimate alternative to liberalism. It narrowly
defined the Jewish problem as the problem of antisemitism to which neither tradition nor
assimilation offered a satisfactory answer. In its response to the Jewish problem, Zionism
occupied intellectual middle ground between tradition and liberalism. As a stance against
tradition its goal was to normalize Jewish life by returning Jews to their political existence. The
Ancient Israelite desire to have a king “to judge us like all the nations” (First Samuel, 8:5) played
itself out in the modern context of establishing a nation-state, “an act or a progress, in a way, of
Jewish assimilation.”233 As a stance against assimilation, Zionism offered a national rather than
an individual solution, “a reassertion of the difference between Jews and non-Jews.”234 Each
position was sustained by intellectual dependence on these opposite polarities. Return to
independent political life was a return to ancient national pride stripped of its religious content.
Political Zionism nationalized the liberal, secular Jew while stripping Judaism of its Messianic
pretenses.235 In the final analysis, the Zionist response to individual assimilation was
assimilation on a national scale.

Cultural Zionism, on the other hand, was an attempt to “[mediate] between political
Zionism and tradition by understanding the Jewish religion, from the start, as a product of the

toward Judaism see Jerold S. Auerbach, Are We One?: Jewish Identity in the United States and Israel (Piscataway,
NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 113-140.
234 Ibid., 326.
235 Strauss, The Early Writings, 86-87.
spirit of the Jewish people.” As such it was a corrective to strictly political Zionism, whose “mind was in no way employed, or even the heart was in no way employed, in matters Jewish.” The essence of cultural Zionism was to argue for a Jewish state with a Jewish spiritual content. According to this view, the Jewish state could not be strictly an ahistorical, ethnically dependant political entity. “[T]he community of descent, of the blood, must also be a community of the mind, of the national mind; the Jewish state will be an empty shell without a Jewish culture which has its roots in the Jewish heritage.”

But here, according to Strauss, cultural Zionism stumbles. Its attempted reconciliation proves to be profoundly unstable and dishonest. Implicit in this reconciliation is the proposition that the Jewish religious heritage is a human product, a product of the Jewish national mind. Strauss argues against this notion on grounds that Judaism claims a certain universality that cannot be a product of a particular culture. There is an inherent contradiction between religious universalism and cultural particularism. Unless there is a universal culture, any religion that claims universal validity must be understood as “given.” Furthermore, according to Strauss, any cultural understanding of Judaism, an understanding that posits its religion as a product of the human mind, renders transcendence utterly meaningless and, consequently, makes Judaism a secular phenomenon. Against this view Strauss presses the following point: at its deepest level the Jewish culture is constituted by and has always understood itself to be constituted by its sacred texts the origins of which, according to tradition, are not human but divine. Therefore, when cultural Zionism is honest with itself it must admit that “Judaism cannot be understood as a

236 Ibid., 203.
239 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 42.
The substance of Judaism is “not culture but divine revelation.” Thus Strauss concludes that “[w]hen cultural Zionism understands itself, it turns into religious Zionism. But when religious Zionism understands itself, it is in the first place Jewish faith and only secondarily Zionism. It must regard as blasphemous the notion of a human solution to the Jewish problem.”

The theologico-political ambiguity of cultural Zionism is indeed a symbolic microcosm of the theologico-political predicament of Zionism as such. Just as the reconciliation attempted by cultural Zionism proves to be fragile in the face of the intellectual resoluteness and honesty of its two radical alternatives: political and religious Zionism, so does Zionism itself proves to be an unstable intellectual middle between tradition and assimilation, between belief and unbelief.

The process that led Strauss away from the Jewish tradition, away from modern liberalism and, ultimately, away from Zionism brought him back face to face with Jewish traditional claims. The circle, as it were, has been completed and it is here that the Jewish

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241 Strauss, “Preface,” SCR, 6. Also see The Early Writings, 203-204. It is worth pointing out that his rather cursory remarks about religious Zionism betray a certain lack of familiarity with its position. One of its key theorists, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, for example, made it clear that Jewish nationalism, even in its most secular expressions is a manifestation within the Jewish soul of divine dispensation. For him the “human solution” was an expression of the divine will within the Jewish people as a whole. He called upon the Jewish people to return to “Eretz Israel” [The Land of Israel], a historical process that would signify the beginning, not the conclusion of the messianic event. For Kook the severing of the national from the religious aspects of Judaism was a profound misunderstanding of its character. Judaism as a whole could only live up to its inner spiritual truth in the Land of Israel. A Jew, he writes, “cannot be as devoted and true to his own ideas, sentiments, and imagination in the Diaspora as he can in Eretz Israel. Revelations of the Holy, of whatever degree, are relatively pure in Eretz Israel; outside it, they are mixed with dross and much impurity.” In this respect the Jewish nation is unlike other nations. “It is a grave error to be insensitive to the distinctive unity of the Jewish spirit, to imagine that the divine stuff which uniquely characterizes Israel is comparable to the spiritual content of all the other national civilizations. This error is the source of the attempt to sever the national from the religious element of Judaism. Such a division would falsify both our nationalism and our religion, for every element of thought, emotion, and idealism that is present in the Jewish people belongs to an indivisible entity, and all together make up its specific character.” In Hertzberg, The Zionist Idea, 420, 425. I owe this reference to Ori Soltes.
242 Strauss, The Early Writings, 204: “Cultural Zionism leads up to the question that is posed by and through the Law, and then it capitulates, yielding either to resolute belief or to resolute unbelief.”
problem begins to manifest its universal and symbolic character. Liberalism could not solve the Jewish problem because of its inherent public-private structure and because it confused the solution with the problem, namely, assimilation. Political Zionism could not solve the Jewish problem because of its narrow political interests; Cultural Zionism diagnosed the problem correctly as a spiritual problem but did not offer a solution that was authentically Jewish. Religious Zionists understood the problem and offered the only coherent response – a return to traditional Judaism, including a return to the Land of Israel; however, this solution could not appeal to those Jews who under the influence of the Enlightenment have irrevocably severed the umbilical cord of tradition and who, on the grounds of intellectual probity, could not return. Whereas Zionism began with the break with tradition, Strauss’s analysis points back to a tradition that, given modern intellectual history, is simply not available. As he put it, “[t]he attempt to solve the Jewish problem has failed because of the overwhelming power of the past.”

Thus the Jewish question reemerges: “how the people [are] to live from now on”?245

There are two related issues imbedded in this question. First, by the virtue of abandoning Zionism, Strauss began to wrestle with “the possibility of Jewish existence in exile.”246 Second, Strauss began to realize that what shows up at first as a mere Jewish predicament reveals itself, in the end, as a universal choice between belief and doubt.

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244 Strauss, “Why We Remain Jews,” Jewish Philosophy, 320: “What shall those Jews do who cannot believe as our ancestors believed?”
245 Strauss, The Early Writings, 202. The question merits special attention. Its ancestry is found in the first book of Plato’s Republic (344e) where the question of justice is caught up in the ambiguous space between a philosopher and a tyrant.
246 Sheppard, Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile, 7.
Political Zionism, wishing to ground itself radically, must ground itself in unbelief. The argument between political Zionism and its radical opponents [traditional Judaism] must be conducted solely as a struggle between unbelief and belief. This struggle is ancient; it is [to quote Goethe] ‘the eternal and sole theme of the entire history of the world and of man.’

Consequently, it became imperative for Strauss to reevaluate the Enlightenment and, specifically, Spinoza and his critique of religion as the necessary condition for the possibility of a return to tradition. This confrontation, a confrontation between reason and revelation would inform explicitly or implicitly much of his mature work.

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247 Strauss, The Early Writings, 204.
CHAPTER 3
JEWISH PHILOSOPHY AS THE DIALECTIC OF ESTRANGEMENT AND RETURN

“To renew the past for present life has always been an essential obligation for the Jewish historian, philosopher, and theologian. Never before has this task been both so indispensable and so difficult.”

The previous chapter focused on Strauss’s assessment of the Jewish problem as an expression of a certain historical and intellectual dynamic among liberalism, Zionism and Orthodoxy. Whereas modern Jewish convention, while mostly eschewing Orthodoxy, advanced liberalism and Zionism as distinct solutions to the age old problem, Strauss – by pointing to their failure – revealed its enduring nature. The Jewish problem persisted albeit transformed. The question of how the Jewish people were to exist in the modern world turned out to be a question about spiritual as much as the physical survival. On the one hand, liberalism while morally a formidable option – because of its emancipatory impulse – was explicitly assimilationist in its political philosophy and was simultaneously impotent against the ever present specter of antisemitism. On the other hand, Zionism while a great political achievement of the Jewish will was intellectually far less compelling. It harbored within itself a radical philosophical cleavage that, according to Strauss, needed to be reopened in order to reveal the true nature of the Jewish problem.

By subordinating the problem of antisemitism to the problem of assimilation, Strauss managed to distance himself from liberalism and Zionism and at the same time to reconstruct the Jewish problem as essentially a problem of spiritual identity. Orthodoxy made its reappearance as a viable option for modern Jews only as a consequence of this dialectic of rejection. In other

words, Orthodoxy merited a second look for Strauss after modern politics – liberal and nationalist – failed to redeem the Jewish people by solving the Jewish problem of physical and spiritual homelessness.

The option for Orthodoxy, however, could be exercised by individuals if two additional obstacles were overcome. In the first place, modern Jewish theology conjured up a number of arguments whose purpose was to redefine Judaism in ways that would make it congruous with various modern philosophical developments. By doing so, modern Judaism opened up the possibility for the reluctant, ghettoized Jews to remain Jewish, while availing them of the cultural, social and political benefits granted by the liberal and enlightened Europe. It provided the necessary theoretical arguments for the kinds of practical adjustments that would come into play as a consequence of the French Revolution. By pointing toward a certain duality of existence, what Moses Mendelssohn (to take an early example) had achieved for the Jews in his *Jerusalem* was not unlike what St. Augustine had achieved for Christians in his *City of God.*

But beyond this duality, modern Jewish religious thought, in effect, stated that assimilated Jews can remain Jewish, or they can return to Judaism, because Judaism now understands itself in an updated light, as reconciliation between Enlightenment and tradition. Strauss, however, wants to show that similar to Zionism, which, despite its virtues, collapses into liberal assimilationism, so modern Judaism ends up sacrificing much of traditional Judaism to the claims of modern philosophy. Thus the way to orthodoxy is reopened when a modern “return” to Judaism is

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249 Mendelssohn borrows from the doctrine that is famously associated with Jesus – “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and unto God what is God’s” (Mark 12:17) – and reinterprets it to guide the Jewish community into a new age: “[N]o better advice than this can be given to the House of Jacob: Adopt the mores and constitution of the country in which you find yourself, but be steadfast in upholding the religion of your fathers, too. Bear both burdens as well as you can… Preserve…stand fast in the place which Providence has assigned to you; and submit to everything which may happen, as you were told to do by your Lawgiver long ago.” Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power of Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), 104.
exposed not as an unmitigated blessing but as a disguised, or not so disguised, expression of assimilation.

The Jewish problem, according to Strauss, is more radical than has been understood so far. Thus for a return to be a legitimate return to the Jewish tradition, it is not enough to show the intellectual pitfalls of modern Jewish thought. What is needed in the second place is a reconsideration of the ground in which modern Jewish thought initially planted its roots. What is needed is a second look at what Strauss calls radical Enlightenment. Thus he opens the age old conflict between Enlightenment and Orthodoxy – a conflict that he thinks has long been forgotten – first, to understand anew the nature of the modern critique of religion, and, second, to reveal the tainted logic of that critique. The return to Jewish tradition and with it the solution to the Jewish problem can be successfully orchestrated only if the Enlightenment critique of religion is shown in theory to be a failure, if in fact it is shown to be sophistry. Thus having expressed doubts in liberal and Zionist efforts to address the issue Strauss turns his attention and takes another look at the original doubt, the doubt about Jewish tradition as an option for modern Jewish life.

**Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: Critique of Modern Notions of Return**

I would like to take as a point of departure for this discussion the following quotation of Strauss:

> The present situation of Judaism – leaving aside, therefore, the fundamental constitution of Judaism, which is not affected in or by this situation – is determined by the

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250 Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 22: “The critique of the present, the critique of modern rationalism as the critique of modern sophistry, is the necessary beginning, the constant companion, and the unerring sign of that search for truth which is possible in our time.”
Enlightenment…the movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries initiated by Descartes’ *Meditation* and Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, as their source

I take the distinction Strauss makes between the “present situation” and “the fundamental constitution” of Judaism to be significant to his argument. What is this distinction? When Strauss refers to the “fundamental constitution” of Judaism he seems to have in mind – although he never explicitly states this – the basic claims or teachings of Judaism that are found in Jewish sacred texts. These claims, among which are creation of the universe, revelation of the Law, the moral teachings of the prophets, and the affirmation of the special status of the Jewish people, constitute the traditional teachings of Judaism. I take it that this is what Strauss refers to whenever he invokes the term “orthodoxy” or “tradition.”

By referring to the “present situation” of Judaism Strauss directs the reader to the modern historical experience of the Jewish people, which is dominated increasingly by external, i.e., non-Jewish influences. This situation owes its existence to the intellectual developments that have taken place for the most part since the 17th century and which he broadly describes as the Enlightenment. By making this crucial distinction, Strauss is signaling that his aim is to uncover the underlying intellectual weakness of Enlightenment and to reveal orthodoxy (“the fundamental constitution of Judaism”) to be unharmed by its critique.

The heart of the Enlightenment was a self-conscious and deliberate rejection of traditional authority. Figures with diverse agendas such as Bacon, Descartes and Hobbes were united in their rejection of Scholasticism and Aristotelian metaphysics as they forged new bases for science and politics. The epistemological and political position that they carved out declared

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251 Ibid.
a radical independence from traditional sources of knowledge and power, including religious
sources, and this assertion of independence garnered these new philosophers a legitimacy that
was quite independent from the actual validity of their arguments.²⁵² The new movement which
began with Descartes’ resolution “to seek no other knowledge than that which [he] might find
within [him]self, or perhaps in the great book of nature”²⁵³ and which reached its zenith with
Kant’s “Saper Aude” was sufficiently exciting because it was liberating. The prestige of these
and other thinkers was sufficient enough to compel Jews who were familiar with their works to
submit their own tradition to the judgment of this modern philosophy. According to Emil
Fackenheim, it was precisely because of modern philosophy’s claim “to both radical autonomy
and total impartiality” that Jews would “allow philosophy to be the judge of Judaism.”²⁵⁴

According to Strauss, the Enlightenment dominates modern religious thought. Consequently, modern or “present” Judaism in all its variations is very much a product of a
movement whose foundational principle was a radical break with tradition. Strauss characterized
this new Judaism – transformed by modern Jewish theology – as “a synthesis between rabbinical
Judaism and Spinoza.”²⁵⁵ To recover (or uncover) the constitution of Judaism, then, one must
first understand and consequently get out of the present situation. This is the task of the critique
of modern Jewish theology; it is indeed the consummation of modern Jewish theology, of a

²⁵² For example, Francis Bacon asserted the following: “It is idle to expect any great advancement in science from
the superinducing and engrafting of new things upon the old. We must begin anew from the very foundations, unless
we would revolve forever in a circle with mean and contemptible progress.” Francis Bacon, “The New Science,” in
²⁵⁴ Fackenheim, Jewish Philosophers, 43.
²⁵⁵ Strauss, “Preface” SCR, 27.
movement that turns against itself. But the recovery of the fundamental constitution of Judaism must also show that this constitution is indeed an intellectually legitimate alternative to its opposite – radical Enlightenment. To prove that Judaism is an intellectually compelling alternative to enlightenment is the task of the critique of Spinoza.

Strauss was particularly aware of two philosophically significant elaborations of modern Judaism, the rational, represented by Moses Mendelssohn and Herman Cohen, and the existential, represented by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. Return to orthodoxy is possible only when the synthesis that is at the heart of their respective philosophies is untangled, that is, when the truth claims of the Enlightenment and traditional Judaism are understood afresh for what they are – as two irreconcilable antinomies. This can only be done when the claims of modern Judaism to sustain Jewish identity are found to be inherently inadequate.

**Judaism as Religion of Reason: Moses Mendelssohn**

The thinker who was most responsible for a systematic, fully developed expression of Judaism as a religion of reason was Hermann Cohen.²⁵⁶ Cohen, however, represents the high point and a fulfillment of a tradition in modern Jewish thought that began with Moses Mendelssohn. Strauss of course recognized this achievement and considered Mendelssohn the father of modern Judaism.²⁵⁷ What was this achievement?

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Mendelssohn was the first Jewish thinker to delineate modern Judaism according to the requirements of modern philosophy. He was the first to reinterpret Judaism in terms that were compatible with the claims of the Enlightenment. In the first part of Jerusalem, as elsewhere, Mendelssohn articulated, in a tradition of Locke, a classical vision of a liberal society which separated state from church authority and granted each a proper role in the moral education of mankind. In the process he also argued, not unlike Spinoza, for freedom of philosophy from political and ecclesiastical supervision, and he advocated, on grounds of his liberalism, the freedom of the Jewish people from oppression.\(^{258}\)

But he also wanted to show that his argument, based as it was exclusively on the authority of reason, did not violate, as was suggested, the basic principles of his own religious tradition.\(^{259}\) Consequently he advanced a rather novel conception of Judaism. Judaism, according to Mendelssohn, consisted of three essential parts. First, imbedded in Biblical teaching were rationally known eternal truths which were necessary for human happiness, truths about “God, His rule, and Providence.” As he put it, “The supreme Being has revealed them to all rational creatures through concepts and events inscribed on their souls with a script that is legible and intelligible at all times and in all places.”\(^{260}\) Second, Judaism possessed historical truths as accounted in the Bible and accepted on faith, which “disclose the fundamental purpose of the people’s national existence.”\(^{261}\) Finally, there were the ceremonial laws, “[l]aws, precepts, commandments, rules of conduct…peculiar to this people” the observance of which “was to

\(^{258}\) Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 16-23, 44, 42.
\(^{259}\) Ibid, 56-57.
\(^{260}\) Ibid, 97.
\(^{261}\) Ibid, 98.
bring happiness to the entire nation as well as to its individual members.”262 By making this distinction, Mendelssohn not only showed that Judaism consisted of a universal as well as a particular dimension, but that Jewish particularism was consistent with its universalism. Among the important conclusions that Mendelssohn was aiming at was to show that in Judaism there was no conflict between religion and reason, “no rebellion of our natural cognitive faculty against the stifling authority of faith.”263 Consistent with traditional Jewish belief, Mendelssohn maintained the view that Judaism understood revelation in terms of Law rather than of principles of faith.264 But by claiming that Biblical moral teachings were nothing less than the teachings of reason and therefore naturally available to all, he narrowed the scope of the revealed Law to apply exclusively to Jewish ceremonial life. Thus he denied special status to the Jewish people as the chosen people with the unique responsibility to bear witness to the sacred event that took place on Mt. Sinai.

Mendelssohn thought that he could prove the non-contradiction between Biblical teachings and truths of reason because for truth to be truth there could be no contradiction between its rational and its revealed dimensions. Indeed true revelation is based on or is dependent upon the religion of reason because it is in the nature of rational truths not to be bound by revelation due to its essentially exclusive nature. Julius Guttmann described this relationship in the following terms.

262 Ibid, 98.
263 Ibid, 154.
264 Ibid, 61: “I believe Judaism knows nothing of a revealed religion in the sense in which Christians define this term. The Israelites possess divine legislation – laws, commandments, statutes, rules of conduct, instruction in God’s will and in what they are to do to attain temporal and eternal salvation. Moses, in a miraculous and supernatural way, revealed to them these laws and commandments, but not dogmas, propositions concerning salvation, or self-evident principles of reason. These the Lord reveals to us as well as to all other men at all times through nature and events but never through the spoken or written word.”
Of necessity, eternal truths, which by definition are basic for the happiness and blessedness of man, should be equally available to all men. If revelation were truly necessary for making them known, it would contradict the goodness of God, for he would then be revealing them to only a portion of mankind and the rest of the human race would be left without such revelation. The particularity of revelation attests to the fact that it is not revelation, but reason which is the universal source of knowledge, and is the only path that God has provided towards the eternal blessedness of religion.”

Strauss found Mendelssohn’s conception of Judaism highly problematic. To him Mendelssohn’s synthesis of reason and revelation amounted to betrayal of the special nature of Jewish history and self-understanding. Mendelssohn, who managed successfully to live a double life, one as an orthodox Jew, the other as an enlightened European, according to Strauss, did not think through carefully the process and the implications of this reconciliation. Its success depended on an implicit acknowledgement of the superiority of modern philosophy, with its expansive view of reason, over the Jewish tradition. In the face of the radical Enlightenment’s assault on Jewish religion, Mendelssohn, rather than critically evaluate and question the premises upon which such assault was made, took them for granted and, consequently, in redefining Judaism engaged in a form of apologetics. What troubled Strauss, according to Kenneth Hart Green, was that Mendelssohn and his followers never asked, in the first place, whether Enlightenment philosophy was itself rational and thus whether the Jewish attempt to conform with its principles was also rational and thus necessary; whether, in the second place, modern scientific conclusions were as compelling as they were claimed to be; and finally, whether

265 Guttmann, Philosophies of Judaism, 297.
266 This success did not extend to Mendelssohn’s progeny; most in due time converted to Christianity.
modern philosophy could fairly and credibly judge Judaism at all in any authoritative way.\textsuperscript{267}

Consequently, Strauss found it questionable

\begin{quote}
whether Judaism and modern reason could ever be synthesized in the way proposed by Mendelssohn, if only because of the specific hostility of modern reason to Judaism as a revealed religion, and the essential hostility of Judaism to any unqualified and complete ‘system’ of rationalism. Thus Strauss discovered that Mendelssohn was forced by modern reason to sacrifice almost everything unique to Jewish teaching.\textsuperscript{268}
\end{quote}

By arguing that there was no conflict between the teachings of Judaism and the teachings of the Enlightenment, Mendelssohn, according to Strauss, forced Jewish thought to conform to the requirements of modern reason. But in this first encounter between modern philosophy and Jewish orthodoxy Strauss also saw a lost opportunity, which amounted to a failure on the part of Judaism “to learn how to defend itself against the charges brought by modern philosophy, and hence” a failure “to think through what it itself believed \textit{in contrast with} modern reason prior to committing itself to a synthesis.”\textsuperscript{269}

His attitude toward Mendelssohn and much of what he called “moderate Enlightenment” can be summed up in the following judgment:

\begin{quote}
[A]s far as the moderate Enlightenment is concerned, it had to pay for its attempt to mediate between orthodoxy and radical enlightenment, between belief in revelation and belief in the self-sufficiency of reason, with the contempt from which it cannot now be rescued even by the greatest fairness of historical judgment."\textsuperscript{270}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{267} Green, “Editors Introduction,” in Leo Strauss, \textit{Jewish Philosophy}, 17.
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid..
\textsuperscript{269} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{270} Straus, \textit{Philosophy and Law}, 23.
Strauss’s tough judgment of Mendelssohn did not extend to Hermann Cohen. This is despite the fact that Cohen, who overshadowed Mendelssohn in intellect and influence, still stands within the Mendelssohnian tradition of rational religion. One could certainly say that within Jewish philosophy, Cohen represents the culmination of Enlightenment thought. He symbolizes the height of the German-Jewish cultural synthesis, the height of Jewish faith in the supremacy of German culture and in political liberalism, surpassing Mendelssohn’s own advice to live simultaneously in both worlds.271 As Strauss put it,

Cohen’s goal was the same as that of the other Western spokesmen for Judaism who came after Mendelssohn: to establish a harmony between Judaism and culture between Torah and derekh erez. But Cohen pursued this goal with unrivaled speculative power and intransigence.272

Cohen updated Mendelssohn’s reconciliation of Enlightenment and Judaism by redefining Judaism in terms of the highest achievement of German culture, in terms of Kantian moral philosophy. Emil Fackenheim described this symbiotic relationship the following way.

Ever since Kant produced his moral philosophy the theme ‘Kant and Judaism’ has existed in the minds of Jewish philosophers. This theme…has…a central core: the identity of, and difference between, the categorically commanding voice of Kant’s moral reason, and the no less categorically commanding voice of the God of Judaism. But Kant’s rational autonomy is the core of philosophical modernity, and the categorically commanding God is the core of the divine-Jewish covenant; hence the theme ‘Kant and Judaism’ bids fair to remain alive so long as there is both Judaism and modern philosophy.273

By claiming to understand religion in general and Judaism in specific through his conceptual framework of reason, Cohen was shifting the ground of religion away from the

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271 Emile Fackenheim wrote that “such was Cohen’s trust in both these worlds, and in their inherent affinity, that he had no inkling or premonition that disaster was imminent.” See Jewish Philosophers, 42.
272 Strauss, “Introductory Essay to Herman Cohen,” Jewish Philosophy, 269. Derekh Erez should be understood as “convention” or “custom;” it literally means “the way of the land.”
273 Fackenheim, Jewish Philosophers, 46.
authority of history. Religion, if it is to be true, must not only be integrated into the system of reason, but also derive from reason. In what sense, then, according to Strauss, was Cohen’s Judaism filtered through his neo-Kantian rationalism? Or to put it differently, what was Judaism teaching that can be construed as rational from the perspective of Cohen’s neo-Kantian philosophy?

Cohen’s articulation of Judaism, above all, was informed by his fierce aversion to mysticism. To him Judaism exhibited rationalism through its ethical universalism. This is evident primarily in the teachings of the prophets whose notions of God as ‘uncanny’ broke decisively with mythical traditions. “Only in the Jewish prophets does religion disengage itself from the entanglements of myth, and the ethical interest motivates this religion from beginning to end.”

This formulation of Judaism as a religion of reason was quite influential on the young Strauss. Arguing against Rudolph Otto’s position that the history of religion moves within the irrational from the mythically uncanny notion of deity to the theologically canny one, Strauss asserted that biblical prophecy is “characterized by the fact that pre-prophetic ‘religion’ is passionately rejected not for being ‘uncanny’ but precisely for being canny, for being all too canny. And the result of this rejection of the canny is the ‘rationalism’ of the prophets.” The Biblical source for this claim is Amos 9:7.

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274 Cohen, Religion of Reason, 2-3, 4: “[R]eason is meant to make religion independent of the descriptions supplied by the history of religion. We do not shrink from the argument that reason must rule everywhere in history. However, history in itself does not determine the concept of reason. The concept of reason has to engender the concept of religion.” Also, “[E]ven if I am referred to the literary sources of the prophets for the concept of religion, those sources remain mute and blind if I do not approach them with a concept, which I myself lay out as a foundation in order to be instructed by them and not simply guided by their authority.”

275 Guttmann, Philosophies of Judaism, 358.

276 Strauss, Early Writings, 112-113.
O Sons of Israel, are you not to me like the Ethiopians, declares YHWH? Have I not brought up Israel from the land of Mizraim [Egypt], and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Armenians from Kir?

Strauss concluded that “this shudderingly harsh tearing away of the national God from His nation” was indeed the way from myth to religion and, according to Cohen, the move from canny to uncanny is identical with the rationalization of religion.277

But Strauss’s substantive agreement with Cohen about the rational nature of prophetic Judaism seems to end here. For Cohen derived certain interpretive conclusions about God, revelation and the messianic age that would trouble Strauss deeply for they did not constitute a return to anything that was recognizably Jewish in the traditional, orthodox sense.

In the first place, Cohen’s argument required him to accept the Biblical God only to the extent that this God underwrote or guaranteed the ideals of his ethical principles, which were essentially a product of his own socialist commitments. Thus Cohen’s love of God was really a love of a moral ideal.278 “My enthusiasm for Judaism,” he wrote, “is rooted in the conviction that our idea of God is of ethical value; in the context of my scientific insights stands my Judaism.”279 Cohen, in other words, conceived of the Jewish God in Kantian terms as a postulate of practical reason. Strauss wrote that for Cohen

God’s uniqueness excludes His having existence, existence being essentially related to sense perception… [T]he idea of God, God as idea and not a person, is required in the first place in order to establish the indispensable harmony between nature and morality: the ethically required eternity of ethical progress, the ethically required prospect of an

277 Ibid., 113. See also Zank’s introductory essay to the Early Writings, 7-8, 40.
278 Guttmann, Philosophies of Judaism, 366.
279 Quoted by Strauss, Early Writings, 117.
infinite future of ethical progress, is not possible without the future eternity of the human race and therefore of nature as a whole; God ‘secures the ideal.’”

The second source of Strauss’s difficulty with Cohen’s interpretation of Judaism lies in his understanding of revelation. Cohen dispensed with the traditional understanding of revelation as a miraculous event witnessed by the Israelites. Revelation for him did not constitute a historical event but merely God’s creation of reason. In the process of symbolically idealizing creation as a rational principle, Cohen, consistent with his Kantian commitment to autonomy and freedom, deemphasized or altogether erased the need for absolute obedience – “what traditional Judaism considered the core of faith” – from the basic teachings of Judaism. Asserting that revelation as a whole can be understood on rational grounds dispenses with the embarrassment of justifying it externally through tradition and miracles. Thus based on Cohen’s argument one could claim that the “truth of traditional Judaism is the religion of reason, or the religion of reason is secularized Judaism.”

Evident throughout Cohen’s interpretation of Judaism is his idealism, the commitment to interpret Judaism in light of what he considered to be its highest possibilities. Nowhere is this more evident than in his prophetic messianism, which is “the most tremendous idea from which ethics must borrow and absorb.” Cohen thus took a relative newcomer to the principles of traditional Judaism, namely, messianism and made it its most significant feature. But in the process he also submitted it to a radical reinterpretation in the way that undermined Jewish traditional national-political meaning for the sake of the universalistic demands of his social

281 Ibid, 267.
282 Ibid, 272.
284 Quoted in Fackenheim, Jewish Philosophers, 50.
progressivism. For Strauss Cohen’s motive was a noble one because it was driven by the present and past suffering of Israel, and it was this sensitivity that justified his socially progressive and universally categorical orientation toward the future that ultimately led him to discuss the “the idea of the Messiah and mankind.”

The universalism of the prophets, which comprehends in one thought and hope all nations, is ‘a thought of the boldest and world-political courage’; the prophets thus became ‘the originators of the concept of world history,’ nay, of ‘the concept of history as the being of the future,’ for they placed the ideal, which is opposed to all present and past reality, not beyond time but in the future. Mankind as one, because unified in its highest aspiration, never was or is, but will be; its development never comes to an end; that development is progress. By turning toward the future the prophets completed the break with myth that had been achieved by monotheism, the message of the unique God as the God of morality.

Cohen’s work, not unlike that of Mendelssohn’s, was an attempt to defend and to justify Judaism as a way of shoring up confused German Jews who were either giving up on Germany by becoming Zionists or were giving up on Judaism altogether by becoming German. His was yet another alternative that addressed the Jewish dilemma and tried to reconcile the demands of culture and philosophy with the demands of tradition. But Strauss was forced to conclude that Cohen’s way to Judaism was deeply flawed because, similar to Mendelssohn, its synthesis of Jewish tradition with philosophy was in fact a capitulation of Jewish tradition to philosophy.

Thus, for example, in the process of conceiving God as the creator of reason, who is Himself but an idealized function of a rational mind, Cohen, according to Strauss, transformed beyond recognition all the traditional principles of Jewish religion. Revelation – the essence of Judaism – was internalized as a rational concept, discovered or postulated by reason alone, and

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286 Ibid.
this moment of internalization simultaneously announced the rejection of the objective externality of the transcendent God. God Himself became “a product of the human mind, at best ‘an idea of reason’.”

Cohen’s process of internalization is at bottom not a defense of Judaism but the disavowal of its most fundamental principles and as such proves the persistent dominance of the Enlightenment over modern Jewish thought.

Similarly, in his progressive messianic aspirations toward universal humanity and universal social justice Cohen was evincing his liberalism more than his Judaism. For Strauss Judaism is concerned with return and not with progress. “‘Return’ can easily be expressed in biblical Hebrew; ‘progress’ cannot.” Therefore, Jewish life is primarily a life of recollection and to the extent that it is a life of anticipation and of hope, it is a life of hope for redemption through restoration. Jewish life in its traditional expression not only expects to preserve the unique status of the Jewish people, it anchors this expectation in theologico-political restoration; Zionism, properly understood as physical and spiritual homecoming, is the redemptive expectation of traditional Judaism. To the extent that Cohen reinterpreted Judaism for the sake of returning to the Jewish fold, his progressivist assumptions undermined this attempt since they implied certain superiority to the ancient tradition.

Cohen, then, was announcing something new, something that was not altogether recognizably Jewish; he was not, in the end, returning to Jewish tradition.

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287 Strauss, “Preface,” SCR, 8. See also Cohen, Religion of Reason, 5: “What holds true for every science holds no less true for religion. Insofar as religion, too, consists of concepts and is based on concepts, its ultimate source can only be reason.”

288 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 24.

289 Strauss, “Progress or Return,” The Rebirth, 228.

290 Ibid, 229.
Strauss, we can say, grew weary of Cohen’s neo-Kantian philosophy as the foundation for modern Judaism. He had noticed that Kant’s philosophy, while it may have been the fulfillment of the Enlightenment project, also signaled a transformation to post-Enlightenment German idealism, which, in turn, was already beginning to hint at its own destruction through the discovery of history. Thus Strauss came to suspect that Cohen’s “explicit reservations against the tradition in the name of freedom, of man’s autonomy,” which “is neither the original nor the final justification of the Enlightenment” but “a product of later development of German idealism,” signaled that his idealized liberal Judaism, rooted as it was in modern rationalism could not be a welcome intellectual and political development for modern Jewry.291 Judaism as a religion of reason, in the sense that Cohen understood it, was not sustainable because the model of rationality upon which it was constructed was itself showing signs of the irrational. At the same time that Cohen was constructing his religion on grounds of modern reason rather than history, modern reason was discovering its own historical foundations with political consequences that, according to Strauss, would prove to be detrimental to the survival of the Jewish people. Consequently, Strauss found Cohen’s philosophical assumptions about man and history to be unjustifiably optimistic. His was essentially a 19th century thought, which was incapable of speaking to the cataclysmic events to come. “The worst things that he experienced were the Dreyfus scandal and the pogroms instigated by czarist Russia: he did not experience communist Russia and Hitler[‘s] Germany.”292

292 Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” *Jewish Philosophy*, 399. See also Green, introduction to *Jewish Philosophy*, 18: “[I]t was Strauss’s view that Cohen’s philosophic teaching about man and history aroused exaggerated hopes about the modern liberal order, because it was not grounded in a sober assessment of the true achievements of modern man in politics and in science.”
Nevertheless, I suspect that Strauss was also quite intrigued by aspects of Cohen’s philosophical view, expounding on Maimonides, that the ultimate truth was a synthesis between Plato and the Prophets. 293 But whereas the idea may have been intriguing, Cohen’s execution of this idea in his own work was profoundly flawed. In reading Plato and Kant as belonging to a continuous philosophical tradition Cohen did not sufficiently distinguish between them assuming an intellectual continuation between the ancients and the moderns. Strauss, however, was not so sanguine about our knowledge of the ancients concluding that, not unlike Mendelssohn, Cohen’s synthesis of Judaism with philosophy whether Platonic or Kantian was rather premature. Not only was Cohen guilty of taking the claims of modern philosophy for granted, but also his understanding of the truth as a synthesis became a stumbling block for a genuine return to and understanding of traditional Judaism and classical philosophy on their own terms. 294

Despite these difficulties, Strauss was nevertheless impressed with Cohen’s principled attachment to both philosophy and Judaism. As he recalled late in life, Cohen presented him a blueprint or a pattern for the possibility of a genuinely philosophical and Jewish life. 295 Indeed, Strauss’ thinking about the possibility of Jewish exilic life is inescapably indebted to Hermann Cohen. Cohen famously objected to Zionism on the grounds that it tried to normalize Jewish life. In the process it violated what he considered to be the prophets’ messianic ideal of the Jewish people as the moral standard bearers of humanity. For him this moral ideal corresponded to the prophets’ political ideal, an ideal of human federation. “The prophets were not

293 Ibid., 398.
294 Ibid, 399: “More disillusioned regarding modern culture than Cohen was, we wonder whether the two ingredients of modern culture, of the modern synthesis, are not more solid than the synthesis.”
295 Strauss, “A Giving of Accounts,” Jewish Philosophy, 460: “Cohen attracted me because he was a passionate philosopher and a Jew passionately devoted to Judaism.”
philosophers, but they were politicians, and in politics they were more consistent idealists than Plato himself. In politics, they were, with all their patriotism, messianic world citizens. Their own state was for them merely a stepping-stone to the federation of mankind."

Cohen interpreted the fall of the ancient Jewish state as the necessary historical step – already anticipated by the prophets – in that direction. In his famous exchange with Martin Buber about the nature and meaning of Zionism and messianism in Jewish history, Cohen wrote:

The downfall of the Jewish state is, in our view, the best example of historical theodicy. The same Micha who coined the phrase ‘God asks of you: only this, to act justly’ (6:8), also coined the providential metaphor: ‘And the remnants of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples, like dew from the Lord’ (5:6,7). It is our proud conviction that we are to continue to live as divine dew in the midst of the peoples and to remain fruitful among them and for them. All of the prophets place us in the midst of the peoples and their common perspective is the world mission of the remnant of Israel.

Strauss’ critique of Zionism and his vision of Jewish exilic life have an uncanny similarity to Cohen’s. The cornerstone of Zionism, as Strauss has pointed out on a number of occasions, is a quote from Hillel, a first century BCE rabbinic authority: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if not now, when?”

This nugget of ancient Jewish wisdom shows up both in Leon Pinsker and in the Bilu Manifesto (1882), a proto-Zionist organization that took part in the First Aliyah (emigration) from Russia to Palestine. It became the Zionist motto, a call for the Jews to take things into their own hands and to act. But Strauss shrewdly pointed out that this is not the full quote and that what Pinsker and others left out is more telling about the essential characteristic of Zionism and its radical departure from traditional Jewish self-understanding than what was quoted. The following sentence was left out: “And if I am only for

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298 Strauss, “Introduction,” SCR, 5; Also see “Why We Remain Jews,” *Jewish Philosophy*, 318.
myself, then what am I?” Strauss interprets the included sentences but provides no explanation for the sentence that was excluded beyond saying that the act of omission itself “constitutes the definition of pureblooded political Zionism.” But the meaning of the missing sentences is not opaque. The normalization of Jewish life, the explicit aim of political Zionism, must come at the expense of what the omitted words represent, and we get a clearer notion of what they represent if we read them in the context of Cohen’s argument with Buber regarding the special status of the Jewish people in world history. Jewish life can never be normalized because their destiny is, to quote Cohen who follows the biblical injunction, “to continue to live as divine dew in the midst of the peoples and to remain fruitful among them and for them.” The destiny of the Jewish people is to live an exilic life, a homeless life, a life without redemption until all mankind is redeemed. And he conceived of this redemption in terms of a universal, rational, socialist world order. The destiny of the Jewish people is to redeem the world by aligning its goals with the ideals of Judaism. Cohen’s idealism represents the culmination of enlightenment faith in the power of man to do good, but to get there Cohen had to travel a great distance from traditional Jewish teachings.

Strauss ultimately rejected Cohen’s modern faith in the power of man to redeem himself not because of his faith in God’s redemptive promise (the orthodox position) but because of his growing lack of faith in humanity. Still his conception of the Jewish problem as a problem of exilic life is indebted in no small part to Hermann Cohen. We can say that Strauss appropriates Cohen’s analysis of the Jewish exilic existence without Cohen’s illusions. And we can say that in the end Strauss repays the debt in his own understated way. “Introductory Essay to Herman

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299 Ibid., 318.
Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*” is one of the last essays that Strauss wrote. *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* in which the essay appears as the concluding chapter is the last book of collected essays supervised by Strauss before his death. The last sentence of the essay says: “It is a blessing for us that Hermann Cohen lived and wrote.”

**Judaism as Existential Theology: Franz Rosenzweig**

The understanding of Judaism as a religion of reason was challenged by a development in modern Jewish thought which in many respects paralleled or reflected the general developments in Western philosophy. The driving force behind the new movement was Franz Rosenzweig.

Within the tradition of modern Jewish theology, Rosenzweig is held to be one of the most influential figures in European and North American Judaism as well as one of the most difficult to understand. His most important work, *The Star of Redemption*, is “one of the more intractable texts in the entire canon of modern religious thought.” Peter Eli Gordon describes him as “a philosophical modernist, a principled non-Zionist, and an esoteric thinker without apology,” who also became a “charismatic force for the interwar flourishing of German-Jewish culture.” His thought whose “deeper meaning continues to elude comprehension” represents the “most enduring monument to Jewish philosophy” in the twentieth century.

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304 Ibid., 122
Rosenzweig himself felt compelled to clarify his new thinking once it became evident that his work was being misread. He balked with indignation at the idea that *The Star of Redemption* was a Jewish book. Instead he called it “merely a system of philosophy” whose aim was “thinking’s complete renewal.”\(^{305}\) At the heart of this renewal and thus at the heart of his philosophy was a complete rethinking about the relationship between Man, God and the World. Its affinity to Judaism (and to Christianity) lies only in its use of Biblical idioms in their broadest sense: Creation, Revelation, and Redemption.\(^{306}\) “I received the new thinking,” he wrote, in these old words, thus I have rendered it and passed it on, in them. I know that to a Christian, instead of mine, the words of a New Testament would have come to his lips… But, to me, these words. And yet this is a Jewish book: not one which deals with “Jewish matters,” for then the books of the Protestant Old Testament scholars would be Jewish books, but one for the old Jewish words come in order to say what it has to say, and precisely for the new things it has to say. Jewish matters are, as matters generally are, always already past; but Jewish words, even of old, take part in the eternal youth of the word, and the world is open to them, then they will renew the world.\(^{307}\)

Like many other German-Jewish intellectuals of the time, including Strauss, Rosenzweig came under the considerable influence of Hermann Cohen. But because of his different philosophical commitments, Rosenzweig would formulate a conception of Judaism radically different from Cohen’s.

Cohen was arguing against any naturalistic explanation of religion asserting that reason as opposed to the senses, which are common to all animals, is the source of religion: “Religion has nothing in common with…instinctive drives; its origin is reason.”\(^{308}\) But this suggests – and


\(^{306}\) Ibid., 90: “Only because and in so far as both [Judaism and Christianity] renew the ‘revelation to Adam,’ only to that extent is the new thinking Jewish or Christian thinking.”

\(^{307}\) Ibid., 92.

\(^{308}\) Cohen, 6.
Cohen affirmed it – that religion as a concept of reason is also a manifestation of the human mind; it is the product of the internal creative functioning of man. This formulation, according to Strauss, betrayed the original understanding of religious experience, experience of God, as something external, something that presents itself to man from outside something that confronts him in the form of revelation.

New thinking in Judaism initiated by Rosenzweig restored this external reality of the divine. In his forward to *The Star of Redemption*, Nahum Glatzer, referring to Rosenzweig’s earlier work (“Atheist Theology”), wrote that Rosenzweig was quite critical among other things of the Cohen-like “emphasis on the idealized people of Israel (as opposed to Israel the recipient of revelation at Sinai).” Instead he called for, in Glatzer’s words, “a renewal of ‘the offensive thought of revelation’; offensive, for it points to the divine breaking into the lowly, human, sphere, or…the ‘intrusion of the spirit into the non-spirit.’” Thus the revelation on Mt. Sinai cannot be “interpreted” in a Kantian manner “into the autonomous moral law.”

Furthermore, Cohen’s rationalism, or idealism, contradicted not only tradition but ongoing individual experience as well. But experience has to be properly understood. Rosenzweig’s target was not Cohen’s neo-Kantianism but German Idealism as such, and specifically its insistence on seeing our relationship to the world in cognitive or mental terms rather than something that is lived or experienced with all our being.

Rosenzweig prepares the ground [for his own philosophy] by a polemic attack against Hegel and German idealism as a whole, a philosophy that dared to ignore individual man, his anxiety, his fear of death, his loneliness, letting him vanish in the concept of the all-embracing World-Mind. The existentialist in Rosenzweig posits the priority of being

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before thought, contesting the idealist assumption that all of existence, being based upon thought, can be grasped by thought.\(^{310}\)

Rosenzweig identified in German idealism the last stage in Western philosophy’s tendency to reduce all experience to an essence. The pursuit of the essence of things, or the “what is?” question, has characterized philosophic enterprise from the start. Behind this philosophical enterprise lies the rejection of common sense, which takes for granted that a thing is what it is. Philosophy would become superfluous if common sense sufficed. Thus when philosophy asks about essences it rejects the assumption that a thing is merely what it is. “The world, by no means, may be world; God by no means God; man by no means man; but all these must ‘actually’ be something quite different.”\(^{311}\) According to Rosenzweig, the philosophical pursuit for essence in the West can be understood in terms of three reductionist epochs: the cosmological antiquity, which reduces all experience to “the world”; the theological Middle Ages, which reduce all experience to God; and, finally, the anthropological modern era, which reduces all experience to man. It is in the “what is?” question “applied to ‘everything’ [that] lies the entire error of the answers.”\(^{312}\)

As to the question of the essence of things there can only be tautological answers. God is only what is divine; man only human; the world only world. However deeply one digs into them, one will still find again and again only these things themselves. And this holds equally for all three. The concept of God does not by any means have any special status. As a concept of God it is no more attainable than the concepts of man and of the world. The reverse: the essence of man and the essence of the world – the essence! – is no more within reach than the essence! – of God. About all of them we know equally much or equally little. That is to say, everything and nothing. We know in the most exact way, know with the intuitive knowledge of experience what God, what man, what the world “is,” each taken separately; and if we did not know that, how could we talk about it, and,
above all, how could we “reduce” the two given ones to the given other, or deny the two other given possibilities of reduction.  

His aim was to show that our experience resists reducing these three basic aspects of experience to one another. We cannot ground thinking in either the self, nor God, nor the world.

Recognizing this fact opens up the possibility for new thinking in philosophy.

Experience, no matter how deeply it may probe, will discover again and again in man only what is human, in the world only what is worldly, in God only what is divine. And only in God that which is divine, only in the world that which is worldly, only in man that which is human. Finis philosophiae? If it were [the end], so much the worse for philosophy! But I do not think that things will be as bad as that. On the contrary, it is at this point, where philosophy to be sure would come to an end of [its way of] thinking, that experiential philosophy…can begin.

Of significance to new thinking is the element of time of which old thinking “knows nothing.” The new thinking “knows, just like the old-age [thinking] of common sense, that it cannot know independently of time – which was the highest claim to glory that philosophy up to now assumed for itself.” When we experience God, the world, and man we experience them in terms of past, present, and future. Reality as a whole “has its past and future…to be sure, an everlasting past and an eternal future.”

Thus, according to Rosenzweig, reality, understood

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313 Ibid., 76-77. See also Strauss, “Preface,” SCR, 9: “Philosophy as hitherto known, the old thinking, so far from starting from the experience of God, abstracted from such experience or excluded it; hence, if it was theistic, it was compelled to have recourse to demonstrations of the existence of God as a thinking or a thinking and willing being. The new thinking as unqualified empiricism speaks of God, man and the world as actually experienced, as realities irreducible to one another, whereas all traditional philosophy was reductionist…. Unqualified empiricism does not recognize any…Without and Beyond as a reality, but only as unreal forms, essences, or concepts which can never be more than objects, i.e. objects of mere thought.”


315 Ibid., 82.

316 Ibid., 83.

317 Ibid., 85.
and experienced in terms of the world, God, and man (what they do to one another and how they interact with each other) “cannot be severed from its temporality.”

Rosenzweig’s new thinking, emerging as it does from experience, asserts three important points. First, reality has to be understood in terms of three irreducible constitutive elements, or, Beings: World, God, and Man. Second, when reality is experienced, what is experienced is an encounter of each Being with one another. Specifically, “God meets World in creation, God meets Man in revelation, and Man meets World in redemption.” This notion of experience presupposes the “separateness of ‘Being’” because only then experience, which Rosenzweig describes as “bridge building,” can be meaningful. Third, reality is experienced historically or through time in terms of past (creation), present (revelation), and future (redemption). Without these three existential elements – the ontological, the experiential, and the temporal – there can be no knowledge, understanding, or wisdom.

God himself, if we want to comprehend him, conceals himself; man, our very self, shuts himself in; the world becomes an apparent puzzle. Only in their relationships, only in creation, revelation, redemption, do they open up.

Just as he objected to the description of The Star of Redemption as a “Jewish book,” Rosenzweig refused to describe what he was doing as “philosophy of religion” if for no other reason than that “the word ‘religion’ does not occur in [The Star of Redemption] at all!” But more importantly, from the perspective of experience, religion is epiphenomenal. To him

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318 Ibid., 84.
320 Ibid., 131: “Creation denotes the irrevocable past (facts into which we are born), revelation signifies the immediate present (of divine as well as human love), and redemption points to the future (that is, the divine completion of our necessarily purposive but necessarily finite activity).”
322 Ibid., 69.
“religion” is something “specialized” and “founded.” Judaism and Christianity were not originally “religions” but historical and ongoing forms of revelation, i.e., particular modes of experiencing reality. “Judaism and Christianity had never initially been specialized and never in the long run something that had to become and be founded. They were originally something wholly ‘unreligious,’ the one a fact, the other an event. All around them they saw religion, religions. They themselves would have been most highly astonished also to be addressed as one.”

The way in which Judaism and Christianity are represented in *The Star of Redemption* is determined by Rosenzweig’s existential philosophy. Both are understood in terms of a temporal experience of revelation, in terms of the meeting between God and Man in the World. But, as he recognized, this representation of both Judaism and Christianity fundamentally breaks with their own self-understanding. New thinking demands a considerable rethinking of the traditional interpretations of both. The representation of Judaism and Christianity proceeds in both instances not from their consciousness of themselves, in the case of Judaism not from the law, in the case of Christianity not from faith, but rather from the external, visible form through which they wrest their eternity from time, in Judaism from the fact of the people, in Christianity from the event that founded the community. Only out of these do the law and faith here become visible. Thus on a sociological basis Judaism and Christianity are placed side by side and up against each other. The result is a representation that does not do full justice to either, but, which having paid this price, goes beyond the usual apologetics and polemics in this area – indeed, for the first time.

As already discussed, Rosenzweig was lukewarm to the reception of *The Star of Redemption* as a Jewish book or as a “book about the part of Jewish youth that in various ways

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323 Ibid., 91-92.
324 Ibid., 94.
endeavors to find its way back to the old law.” He did not think of his work in terms of a return to Judaism, certainly not as a return to what for many became sterile rituals and practices. This was a book about renewal. Nevertheless, Strauss interpreted this theology of renewal in terms of a return, indeed, as “the most powerful idea” within the “movement of return in modern Judaism.” He gave two reasons for this view.

In the first place, Strauss considered Rosenzweig’s conscious use of Biblical tropes within his philosophical system – “revelation” being the most significant – as a way of connecting new thinking to the Biblical tradition. Present experience of God – of “God’s revealing Himself to man, His addressing man, [which] is not merely known through traditions going back to the remote past and therefore now ‘merely believed,’ but [which] is genuinely known through present experience which every human being can have if he does not refuse himself to it” – can lead back to Judaism only if it is interpreted in Biblical symbolic terms, that is, in terms of the Jewish tradition.

In the second place, according to Strauss, Rosenzweig contributed to the movement of return by his sharp critique of the most powerful challenger to Biblical claims – the Western philosophical tradition. A return to Judaism requires “the overcoming of…the perennial obstacle to the Jewish faith: traditional philosophy, which is of Greek, pagan origin” and which “has reached its pinnacle in Hegel’s system.” Thus the essential shortcomings of Hegelian philosophy reveal the essential limitation of reason. “Although reason had once been advanced

325 Ibid., 68.
326 Green, introduction to Jewish Philosophy, 25.
328 Ibid., 9: “The absolute experience will not lead back to Judaism…it does not recognize itself in the Bible and clarify itself through the Bible, and if it is not linked up with considerations of how traditional Judaism understands itself and with meditations about the mysterious fate of the Jewish people.”
as the great hope of modern man, what has actually been wrought by it, according to this view, is mediocrity, conformity, isolation, hopelessness, and even nihilism.” Following the path paved by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Rosenzweig came to see traditional philosophy (old thinking) as abstract, sterile and, ultimately, dehumanizing. Hegel’s sophisticated interpretation of human history as a rational unfolding of freedom through an all-encompassing dialectical process rang hollow in the face of the individual’s deep sense of the meaninglessness of life and the need for redemption. Rosenzweig’s own rejection of old thinking and his bold assertion of the new were announced dramatically in the opening chapter of The Star of Redemption. There, using poetic language, he accused philosophy of failure to consider the existential and thus the inescapable condition of all thought, namely, human mortality. With this claim, of course, Rosenzweig was already anticipating Heidegger’s devastating critique of Western rationalism, a fact that has not escaped Strauss’s comparison of the two thinkers. However, the main point for Strauss was this: Rational objections to revelation collapsed with the ruins of the Hegelian system. Thus for Rosenzweig, “the perennial battle between reason and revelation, between unbelief and belief has been decided in principle, even on the plane of human thought, in favor of revelation.” As Rosenzweig put it,

330 Green, introduction to Jewish Philosophy, 26.
331 Ibid.
332 Rosenzweig, The Star of Redemption, 3-4: “All cognition of the All originates in death, in the fear of death. Philosophy takes it upon itself to throw off the fear of things earthly, to rob death of its poisonous sting, and Hades of its pestilential breath… With its finger outstretched, it directs the creature, whose limbs are quivering with terror for its this-worldly existence, to a Beyond of which it doesn’t care to know anything at all. For man does not really want to escape any kind of fetters; he wants to remain, he wants to-live. Philosophy, which commends death to him as its special protégé, as the magnificent opportunity to flee the straits of life, seems to him to be only mocking.”
This happened when Hegel included the history of philosophy in the system. It seems that reason can go no further than to place itself visibly as the innermost fact known to itself, now as part of the system’s structure, and of course as the concluding part. And at the precise moment when philosophy exhausts its furthest formal possibilities and reaches the boundary set by its own nature, the great question of the relationship of knowledge and belief which is pressed upon it by the course of world history seems now, as already noted, to be solved.\textsuperscript{335}

Strauss’s relationship with Franz Rosenzweig is as multi-dimensional as his relationship with Hermann Cohen. Rosenzweig, together with Nietzsche and Heidegger, pointed the way for Strauss’s own reconsideration of the tension between reason and revelation. Specifically, he opened up the possibility of a return to Judaism by exposing the insufficiency of reason to refute revelation. But Strauss, impressed as he was with Rosenzweig’s new thinking, was not convinced on two accounts.

First, new thinking was wrought with philosophical and perhaps even moral difficulties. Strauss was dissatisfied with Rosenzweig’s critique of Western rationalism as though it was a monolithic tradition, a continuum from Parmenides to Hegel. This assumption allowed Rosenzweig to conclude mistakenly that the limitations of Hegel’s philosophy amounted to the limitations of traditional philosophy as such and, therefore, a victory for revelation. This conclusion, according to Strauss, was premature. The failure of German idealism could also lead to rehabilitation of either modern Enlightenment or of pre-modern philosophy, namely (and still), the enemies of revelation. In other words, Rosenzweig’s mistaken conception of Western philosophical tradition led him to the faulty assumption that we possessed sufficient intellectual means to overcome it. It took Heidegger’s more radical notion of new thinking to draw out the proper implications of this revolution in thought. “[W]ith the questioning of traditional

\textsuperscript{335} Rosenzweig, The Star of Redemption, 6.
philosophy the traditional understanding of the tradition becomes questionable.”

Furthermore, Strauss was particularly dissatisfied with Rosenzweig’s “apparent abandonment of faith in reason, and his move toward a sort of irrationalism.” By doing so Rosenzweig unwittingly was keeping company with unsavory characters. The questioning of rationalist intellectual tradition which properly began with Nietzsche and culminated with Heidegger, would inevitably lead to dire political and moral consequences. “It was obvious,” wrote Strauss, “that Heidegger’s new thinking led far away from any charity as well as from any humanity.” Strauss, of course, was already suspecting that this philosophical turn toward the irrational was manifestly the failure of *modern* philosophy, rather than a collapse of the entire rationalist tradition. Abandonment of reason was a consequence of the internal collapse of Enlightenment thought.

Second, according to Strauss, Rosenzweig’s return to traditional Judaism did not achieve its purported aim because of the modernist assumptions upon which that return rested. Rosenzweig understood the significance of Jewish experience “sociologically,” based on the priority of the Jewish people over the priority of the Torah. Traditional Judaism on the other hand has always understood Jewish experience based on the priority of the Torah. Thus Resenzweig could not accept the traditional conception of the Law nor could he accept the traditional belief in immortality. His Jewish philosophy

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337 Green, introduction to *Jewish Philosophy*, 27.
succeeded in overcoming Hegel and with it German idealism, but it did not overcome the radical Enlightenment of Spinoza. “The Judaism to which he returned was not identical with the Judaism of the age prior to Moses Mendelssohn.”

The modern movement of return failed because of its explicit (Mendelssohn and Cohen) or inadvertent (Rosenzweig) commitment to Enlightenment. The point of departure for Rosenzweig, the last important philosopher in the tradition of return, was not a fight with the radical Enlightenment but with post-Enlightenment German idealism. In the process of overcoming Hegelianism rather than returning to the Jewish tradition modern Jewish philosophers inadvertently rehabilitated the Enlightenment. Consequently, “in the entire course of the return movement, there has not ensued a fundamental reflection on the quarrel between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy.”

Strauss was very much aware of the place he occupied within this movement of return and the important intellectual task that he took upon himself. Thus he concluded,

[I]f therefore it turns out that not only every compromise between orthodoxy and Enlightenment, but also every synthesis of these opposed positions, is finally untenable; if therefore the alternative ‘orthodoxy or Enlightenment’ may today no longer, or rather, may today not yet be evaded; then one must first of all, and at the very least, climb back down onto the level of the classical quarrel between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy, as onto a level on which battle was done and could be done about the one, eternal truth… The quarrel between orthodoxy and the Enlightenment that is thus possible without further ado must be resumed – or rather…the quarrel between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy, already longstanding and still ever-continuing, must be understood anew.”

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342 See Allan Arkush, “Leo Strauss and Jewish Modernity,” Leo Strauss and Judaism, 120: “Thus, the Jew seeking to do teshuvah [return] can obtain no guidance from the thought of the most celebrated Jewish thinkers of recent generations. These thinkers have all stopped short of affirming the unalterable basis of Jewish tradition. They have been deterred from doing so by their firm and lingering allegiance to ideas rooted in the Enlightenment, ideas that cannot be blended with Judaism without turning it into something new and fundamentally different.”
343 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 27.

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Spinoza, Enlightenment and Tradition: Critique of Radical Estrangement

Spinoza’s influence on modern Jewish philosophy and on Strauss is pivotal. As the first philosopher who, on the basis of modern science, on the basis of modern rationalism, systematically undermined biblical foundations, Spinoza acquired for Strauss the status of being the first modern Jew who on grounds of intellectual probity had broken with his Judaism. He had rejected all of the foundational pillars upon which traditional Judaism (and revealed religion in general) stood as superstition born out of fear, ignorance, and greed in the hearts of those who believed their “phantoms of imagination, dreams, and other childish absurdities, to be the very oracles of Heaven.” Armed with years of scientific and philosophical education, Spinoza came to see in Biblical religion a violation of the most basic principles of reason and an appeal to the lowest instincts of the uneducated masses.

As though God had turned away from the wise, and written His decrees, not in the mind of man but in the entrails of beasts, or left them to be proclaimed by the inspiration and instinct of fools, madmen, and birds. Such is the unreason to which terror can drive mankind!

Specifically, Spinoza rejected the enduring significance of the Jewish Law, revelation as the ground of prophecy, the election of Israel, the divine authorship of the Torah, and, most radically, God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. First, he reinterpreted God in

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345 Strauss, of course, recognized that with respect to Biblical critique Spinoza had his predecessors. None, however, were as bold or as comprehensive.
346 The break with Judaism “was affected in a classic manner by a solitary man – Spinoza… Spinoza denied the truth of Judaism: Judaism, which includes, of course, the Bible, is a set of prejudices and superstitious practices of the ancient tribes… [Consequently, he] ceased to regard himself as a Jew.” See Strauss, “Progress or Return” Rebirth, 230.
348 Ibid.
thoroughly naturalistic terms, as a Substance, possessing the “infinite attributes of Thought and Extension,” and lacking “all traditional psychological and moral characteristics.”

As Steven Nadler put it,

Spinoza’s conception of God strikes right at the heart of the account of creation in Genesis…according to which God purposively brings order out of tohu v’vohu, chaos. Spinoza’s God is the cause of all things, but only because all things follow causally and necessarily from the divine natures – that is, from Nature itself.  

Second, Spinoza originated the distinction, which Mendelssohn simply accepted, between divine and ceremonial laws in the Bible. Divine law, according to him, is no more than natural law whose universal truth is known by the faculty of reason. Its aim is the “supreme good” which consists of true knowledge or wisdom. In other words, the aim of the divine law is moral and intellectual perfection. Spinoza thus denied that the Scriptures contain unique wisdom – as found for example in the teachings of Solomon – which was imparted to the Jewish people through revelation by arguing that this wisdom simply accords with natural reason.  

Ceremonial laws, on the other hand, are conventional not natural; they are commandments addressed to a particular people within specific historical and political circumstances. Their aim is temporal benefits, nothing more.

In all the five books commonly attributed to Moses nothing is promised…beyond temporal benefits, such as honors, fame, victories, riches, enjoyments, and health. Though many moral precepts besides ceremonies are contained in these five books, they appear not as moral doctrines universal to all men, but as commands especially adapted to the understanding and character of the Hebrew people, and as having reference only to

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351 Ibid., 20.

352 Spinoza, Theologico-Political Treatise, 57-68.
the welfare of the kingdom… Such laws merely had reference to public welfare, and aimed not so much at instructing the Jews as at keeping them under constraint. The consequence of this view of ceremonial laws was that, according to Spinoza, the Jewish people were not bound by them beyond their political existence, i.e., in exile. By reinterpretting the Biblical law in terms of nature and convention, Spinoza in essence rejected the entire rabbinic tradition in Judaism which subscribes to a position that does not separate the moral law from the religious law. “Spinoza departs from Jewish tradition…from a naturalizing standpoint. What he calls Divine Law is the supreme moral law, and it is distinct from Jewish religious (or ceremonial) law. And the Divine Law, while revealed by Scripture, is in principle discoverable and justified by reason alone.”

Third, Spinoza denied the miraculous nature of Biblical prophecy, claiming that the Hebrew prophets possessed highly active imaginations. Put another way, Spinoza explained prophecy in a thoroughly naturalistic way. The prophets were “endowed with unusually vivid imagination, and not with unusually perfect minds,” a condition that he found to be quite natural. “Men of great imaginative power are less fitted for abstract reasoning, whereas those who excel in intellect and its use keep their imagination more restrained and controlled, holding it in subjection, so to speak, lest it should usurp the place of reason.” Furthermore, the prophets taught a simple message of piety and obedience couched in a style easily digested by the credulous masses.

353 Ibid., 70-71.
355 Spinoza, A Theologico-Political Treatise, 27.
356 Ibid.
357 Ibid., 9.
Fourth, Spinoza rejected the Biblical claim about the election of the Jewish people. There was nothing intellectually or morally unique about the Hebrews to merit such self-regard. The gifts of knowledge and virtue “are contained in human nature itself, so that their acquisition hinges only on our own power, and on the laws of human nature. It may be concluded that these gifts are not peculiar to any nation, but have always been shared by the whole human race…”

The election of Israel can only make sense as a political doctrine. The Israelites were “elected” in the sense of having good laws and institutions that gave them a superior social organization and government.

Nations…are distinguished from one another in respect to the social organization and the laws under which they live and are governed; the Hebrew nation was not chosen by God in respect to its wisdom nor its tranquility of mind, but in respect to its social organization and the good fortune with which it obtained supremacy and kept it for so many years…[T]he only respect in which the Hebrews surpassed other nations, are in their successful conduct of matters relating to government…therefore their choice and vocation consisted only in the temporal happiness and advantage of independent rule.

Finally, Spinoza rejected the traditional Jewish claim that the Torah was divinely inspired. This must be the inevitable conclusion if God is understood as the immanent force of nature; if the most important characteristic of revealed law is its rationalism and, therefore, its naturalism; if prophecy is stripped of all miraculous nature; and, finally, if the concept of Jews as the chosen people is reduced to a mere political doctrine. Spinoza denied that Moses wrote the Pentateuch under divine inspiration as traditionally had been held. Based on numerous contradictions and inconsistencies, he came to the conclusion that the Scriptures had most likely been compiled by Ezra, a historian who lived in exile generations after the narrated events. The Bible, in other words, was not a divine but a historical document. Its source was not divine

358 Ibid., 45.
359 Ibid., 46-47.
inspiration but human effort driven by complex social and political motives and circumstances. This conclusion opened up the possibility of reading the Bible the way scientists “read” nature—empirically.\textsuperscript{360} By no longer taking its sacred nature for granted, Spinoza set in motion the “historical method” of studying the Bible, or what Strauss in his early writings called “Bible Science” (\textit{Bibelwissenschaft}).\textsuperscript{361}

This act of rebellion against one’s own tradition constituted the background against which all subsequent Jewish philosophers would reconstruct their notions of Judaism and redefine a place for the Jewish people in the modern world.\textsuperscript{362} In the most profound sense Mendelssohn, Cohen, Rosenzweig, as well as Strauss operate in Spinoza’s shadow. But Strauss distinguished himself not only in his critique of his predecessors’ reconstructive efforts, but also in his willingness to reevaluate the validity of Spinoza’s own claims. Post-Enlightenment Jewish thought was problematic for Strauss precisely because it took at face-value all of Spinoza’s arguments. In their attempts to redefine traditional Judaism in light of his challenge, Mendelssohn, Cohen and Rosenzweig were thoroughly beholden to the principles and methods of the Enlightenment. Subsequent to the collapse of their efforts “it became…necessary to examine the \textit{Theologico-political Treatise} with a view to the question of whether Spinoza had in

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\textsuperscript{360} Nadler, “Spinoza and the Naturalization of Judaism,” 25-29.
\textsuperscript{361} Strauss, \textit{SCR}, 35: Spinoza’s critique of religion “is the true foundation of Biblical science in the modern sense. It is for this reason and only for this reason that Spinoza’s work is of fundamental importance.” For a more comprehensive discussion of the meaning of the term “Bible Science” see editor’s note in Leo Strauss, \textit{The Early Writings}, 161.
\textsuperscript{362} Spinoza’s shaping of modern Jewish thought has been so significant that Kenneth Hart Green described him as “the hidden ‘lawgiver’ of modern Judaism.” See his introduction to \textit{Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity}, 12.
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Orthodoxy could be an option for return “only if Spinoza was wrong in every respect.”

And yet when Strauss set out to investigate what exactly Spinoza did or did not achieve, he was not at all aware of the far-reaching implications of his findings. By uncovering the fundamental flaws of Spinoza’s argument and, with it, the fundamental flaws of Enlightenment itself, Strauss was able to initiate a recovery not only of the premodern understanding of Judaism but the original understanding of philosophy as well. At this early stage, however, it was not yet clear to him that his reconstructive efforts would bear any fruit. He was still under the impression that modern man was entrapped by modern thought. He has not yet discovered the liberating implications of historicism: namely, that modern thought shows itself to be unnecessary in the sense of abandoning reason for the sake of relativism, that it did not – could not, really – reconcile all past historical contradictions, that in its grasping of history, nature, and even its own philosophical tradition, the claims of modern thought ultimately amounted to clever (although meaningful) interpretations and nothing more.

Strauss’s analysis points out three fundamental motives from which Spinoza constructed his critique of religion: epistemological or theoretical, moral, and political. Establishing these proper grounds or motives does not only allow Strauss to defend Spinoza against the charges of betrayal of Judaism, levied against him most powerfully by Hermann Cohen, but also provides him with an opening to explore the intellectual conundrum of the Jewish question and ultimately

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364 Ibid, 15.
365 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 135-136.
points him in the direction of Maimonides’s understanding of the theologico-political predicament.

**Spinoza’s Epistemological Motive**

Epistemological motive dominates *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, written between 1925 and 1928, and published in German in 1930. In this early study Strauss observes that Spinoza’s primary and ultimate purpose in writing the *Treatise* was to liberate “men’s minds from those prejudices which the theologians have implanted.” Spinoza saw the liberation from prejudice as the necessary condition for the possibility of philosophical freedom. The need for liberation stems from his conviction that revealed religion and philosophy were irreducible opposites with incompatible origins and mutually exclusive aims, and thus that neither could claim superiority over nor demand submission from the other. Spinoza’s emphasis on the liberation of philosophy from theology and not the reverse may have had its origins in the recognition of the historical fact that the most egregious violation of this standoff came from the defenders of revealed religion, both Jewish and Christian. It was primarily the “skeptics” of reason’s power who linked philosophy and revelation by subsuming the former to the latter. Philosophy was made the handmaid of theology.

Historically, attempts to justify revelation at the court of reason, while significant, did not hold as strong a purchase among the theologians and were not as widely accepted. This explains the rather scant attention Spinoza gave Maimonides’ “dogmatic” position regarding the certitude

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367 Strauss, SCR, 112. See also the “Preface,” SCR, 28: “[I]n the *Treatise* Spinoza addresses men who are still believers and whom he intends to liberate from their ‘prejudices’ so that they can begin to philosophize; the *Treatise* is Spinoza’s introduction to philosophy.”

of reason, although Strauss managed to extract an entire chapter devoted to Spinoza’s critique of Maimonides. Maimonides represented a unique position in this context since he held a minority view, one that, according to Spinoza, advocated a philosophical supervision of the Scriptures. Indeed one is hard pressed to see that Maimonides was taken by Strauss, if not by Spinoza, to represent an orthodox position at all. According to Strauss, the main target of Spinoza’s critique, albeit not explicit, was Protestant Christianity as expressed specifically by the fideistic doctrines of John Calvin and his 17th century disciples.

Spinoza’s critique of orthodoxy, as outlined by Strauss, amounted to, first, an internal critique based on Biblical exegesis. In many respects this was the more novel critique since it attempted to delink the Scriptures from orthodoxy’s dominant interpretation that revelation is superior to reason. Second, critique of the Bible based on reason, or external critique, which was a more radical critique of its teachings, most importantly, critique of miracles. Based on his analysis of these critiques, Strauss arrived at what, for him, was an unsettling conclusion, namely, that Spinoza and the Enlightenment failed to deny orthodoxy its epistemological legitimacy.

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369 Strauss, SCR, 190. Strauss’s relation to and his deep connection with Maimonides is discussed in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

370 Ibid., 109, 192: “The critique carried out in the Theologico-political Tractate is directed less at Maimonides’ ‘dogmatic’ position than against the ‘skeptical’ position of the orthodox, and in point of fact less against Jewish orthodoxy than against the Christian orthodoxy of the Reformation.” Furthermore, “[i]t is highly probable that Spinoza knew Calvin’s position directly… Calvin’s position, as the foundation of the orthodox position which Spinoza is contesting, is the predestined object of the critique.” Spinoza uses an obscure rabbinic source, Jehuda Alpakhar, as his explicit target (See ch. xv of TPT). Steven Smith points out that Alpakhar was a central figure in taking a stand specifically against Maimonides’ allegorical reading of the Scriptures and generally in objecting to “the intrusion of philosophy into Judaism.” See his Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, 66. Smith, perhaps following Strauss, also questions whether the relatively “harmless” (Smith’s description) Alpakhar was the real target of Spinoza’s attack.
What Spinoza took for orthodoxy were post-Biblical systematically developed prejudices based on superstition that took hold not only of the masses but of theologians as well. Superstition constituted a threat both to philosophy and to Scripture (or “the ancient religion”). Against philosophy superstition represented a “product of imagination and of passions, which antedates intellectual freedom, and liberation from which can be achieved only by the effort of reason.” Against the Scriptures superstition represented “the decayed form of the old, original and true religion, which has been brought about by the striving of priests after power. Here superstition stands revealed in a piety reduced to outward show and by the introduction of more and more new ceremonies and mysteries.”

Ostensibly, then, Spinoza had this dual task of emancipating both the Scriptures and philosophy from the corrosive superstitious domination of orthodoxy, although ultimately he had little use for the Bible beyond its utility for teaching morality and political moderation. One of the persistent, and perhaps neglected, themes in Strauss’s theologico-political problem is the theme of piety and its relation to philosophy. It is not a stretch to suggest that one of his less evident accomplishments was to redefine piety, along Platonic philosophical lines, whereby piety was not the alternative to but a compelling, if not a certain, possibility of a life in pursuit of wisdom. We see an early expression of this theme here as Strauss grapples with Spinoza’s critique of orthodoxy and the abiding influence this critique has had on modern Jewish thought.

Strauss’s analysis proceeded as follows: Given Spinoza’s aim of philosophical freedom or to liberate philosophy from Biblical theology, his critique cannot begin from philosophical or

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371 Strauss, SCR, 252.
372 Ibid., 252-253.
373 See Chapter Six of this dissertation.
rational grounds since this would imply the kind of freedom from Biblical authority that he has not yet established. The critical standard has to be the Scriptures itself, both Jewish and Christian. Strauss is careful to point out that Spinoza’s critique of orthodoxy, at least at this stage, cannot be reduced to a critique of the Scriptures; this critique will come later. Here the critique of orthodoxy is based on the Scriptures, whereby they are the standard of the critique. His aim is to show that there is nothing in the Biblical teachings that forbids philosophical independence. This means that Spinoza set himself the ambitious task of wresting the Scriptures from the dominant orthodox interpretation, which claims that the Bible is grounded not in reason but in supra-rational revelation. Both Jewish and Protestant orthodoxy claim that the Scriptures assert the superiority of revelation over reason precisely because they assume human fallibility. Thus the orthodox “demand that human reason, corrupted by the fall, be subject to scripture.”

Spinoza was determined to prove the fallacy of this claim. The implication of the orthodox position, according to him, was to strip the Bible of any interpretive possibilities other than its literal meaning because “[e]very human interpretation is as such false and falsifying: mere figments of the human mind, which set themselves up in the place of the pure word of God.” Given orthodoxy’s claim of the revealed status of the Scriptures, its lessons and its message must have a literal meaning because God’s pure word must be understood by all those to whom revelation was made. Spinoza accepted this original position as the authoritative Scriptural view. But unlike the orthodox, who move from there to an expansive view of Biblical authority to include supervision over philosophy, Spinoza, by insisting on literalism, was

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374 Strauss, SCR, 114.
375 Ibid.
reestablishing what he saw as “the genuine authority of Scripture.”

Through this effort he was seeking “to limit the authority of Scripture to its own realm, and thus to make philosophy independent of the authority of Scripture.”

But what did Spinoza see as the realm of the Scriptures? What does the Bible teach in its literal meaning, the kind that is universally accessible, i.e., the kind that does not require reason for interpretation? To begin with, whatever the Bible teaches, its lessons cannot be contradictory because contradictions require explanations and this implies reason’s independent and superior status, something that orthodoxy explicitly denies.

If it is to the Scriptures alone that we are to refer in the last analysis for a decision on truth or untruth, if reason is subject to the Scripture, and therefore it is not reason which is to sit in judgment and decide, then the teachings of the Scriptures must be in full harmony with one another and devoid of all contradictions.

However, the Bible does not explicitly assert that it is not self-contradictory and indeed Spinoza took pleasure in bringing to light numerous contradictions within the Scriptures. Since these contradictions cannot be explained away rationally or “meddled with,” as Strauss puts it, the teachings that contradict one another cannot be taken as revealed. “The conclusion to be drawn is that the Scriptures cannot be true and divine in every instance, but only in what is throughout taught without contradiction.” As Strauss points out, based on this finding, Spinoza reduced the Biblical message to “obedience to God’s will, [and] the fulfillment of the

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376 Ibid.
377 Ibid.
378 Ibid., 115.
379 Ibid. See also Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, Chs. II, IX, X, XV.
380 At the heart of Spinoza’s critique of Maimonides is precisely his contorted attempt to rationally explain all Biblical contradictions, in the process violating its simple or literal teachings. See ibid., 117.
Divine commandment to justice and charity.\textsuperscript{382} The purpose of the Scriptures, then, is not theoretical knowledge but obedience and piety. “The Scriptures are not the foundation of philosophy, for philosophy seeks not after piety, but truth.”\textsuperscript{383} Specifically, Spinoza concluded that the consequential teachings of the prophets were moral not speculative, and that even those were perfectly rational in terms of their political impact.\textsuperscript{384}

The sphere of reason is, as we have said, truth and wisdom; the sphere of theology is piety and obedience. The power of reason does not extend so far as to determine for us that men may be blessed through simple obedience, without understanding. Theology tells us nothing else, enjoins on us no command save obedience, and has neither the will nor the power to oppose reason: she defines the dogmas of faith…only in so far as they may be necessary for obedience, and leaves reason to determine their precise truth: for reason is the light of the mind, and without her all things are dreams and phantoms.\textsuperscript{385}

By so narrowly delineating the proper bounds of Biblical lessons, Spinoza believed that on Scriptural grounds he was freeing philosophy from theological shackles to pursue its own purpose, namely the truth. Thus by the conclusion of this argument Spinoza thought he was able to carve out two separate and distinct domains in which both the Bible and philosophy could claim sovereignty without mutual interference.

As his mature work suggests, Strauss found sympathy with Spinoza’s conclusion with respect to the incompatible but equally valid claims of reason and revelation and made it his own, although, not on strictly epistemic grounds.\textsuperscript{386} Still, Strauss was not convinced by the way Spinoza reached this conclusion. By looking at the underlying assumptions of his argument,

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\textsuperscript{382} Ibid., 116.  \\
\textsuperscript{383} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{384} As Strauss put it, “[t]he utmost that he finds himself able to say in praise of Scripture as a whole is that on the subject of morality Scripture teaches nothing other than what the light of nature, which all men hold in common, teaches us of itself.” See ibid., 252.  \\
\textsuperscript{385} Spinoza, \textit{A Theologico-Political Treatise}, 194-195. See also ibid., 8-11.  \\
\textsuperscript{386} See, for example, Strauss, “Progress or Return?” in \textit{Rebirth}. \\
\end{flushright}
Strauss was able to show that far from presenting an internal critique of orthodoxy, based on Biblical sources, Spinoza’s argument was shot through with unjustified or unsupported rationalist assumptions, the end result of which, as Strauss concluded, was to deny both the Scriptures and philosophy their independence from each other. Spinoza’s argument, in other words, subverted his initial and primary intent.

Strauss was able to show the various ways in which Spinoza’s assumptions undermined his own claims. First, by insisting on piety and obedience as the only common Biblical thread and its exclusive teaching as supra-rational teaching, Spinoza was forced to blur all meaningful distinction between the two Testaments which neither the Mosaic Law on the one hand, nor the “Word on the Cross” on the other would sanction.387 “[B]y treating the Old Testament and the New as equal in value…the specifically Jewish and the specifically Christian elements are reduced to a minimum.”388 The insistence on an equal validity of the two Testaments, according to Strauss, was neither born out nor supported by them; it was arbitrary, and Spinoza could hold this view only by violating his own dictum, namely, that freedom of philosophy must first be guaranteed by a critique of orthodoxy on the basis of the Scriptures. Specifically, the affirmation of the necessity of coherence and consensus of revelation within and between the two Testaments was not based on anything Biblical but on a rational assumption of consensus and the principle of non-contradiction as the criterion of truth.

Second, Spinoza’s assertion of equivalency did more violence to the Hebrew Scripture than to the New Testament because it was based on the Pauline doctrine of spiritual understanding of the Scriptures, most evident in the First Epistle to the Corinthians (Ch. 15)
whereby God’s revealed Word is said to be written into the human heart. This “peculiarly Christian principle” necessarily obviated the need for the revealed Law, rendering the Torah and, with it, Judaism superfluous. More importantly though, this “spiritual interpretation” of the Scriptures was not the supra-rational conception of obedience but a product of a rational principle:

The spirit that understands Scripture in the spiritual sense, that grasps the spiritual intent of the Scriptures, is reason. Not only is Scripture far from asserting that the human mind has been corrupted by reason of original sin, it must indeed on the basis of Scripture be asserted that the law revealed by God to mankind by the mediation of prophets and Apostles is nothing other than the law that is taught also by human reason.  

Third, this entire line of critique was misguided because by taking literalism and thus Biblical contradiction as his starting point, Spinoza was already denying Scriptural authority. The orthodox position, which also roots its claims in the Scriptures, does not see contradictions as a problem because it asserts faith in revelation to be the only basis for a genuine or necessary – as opposed to arbitrary – interpretation. If Spinoza truly began his liberation of philosophy from theology on Scriptural grounds he would have had to “forbid to himself all pursuit of speculation, as he forbids it to the orthodox, for active obedience is the one thing needful.”

Finally, according to Strauss, Spinoza’s critique of orthodoxy on the basis of Scriptures extended much further than merely liberating philosophy from the tutelage of theology “to the corroboration of philosophic truth by the Scripture.” This position led away from the separate but equal status of philosophy and the Bible and placed revelation in the service of reason or science, a position that Spinoza himself ascribed to Maimonides. And although Spinoza charted

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389 Ibid., 118 and 117: “[T]he critique based on Scripture leads of itself to the finding that what is common to the whole of Scriptures is rational morality.”
390 Ibid., 121.
391 Ibid., 119.
his own philosophical course away from Maimonides both in terms of his belief in the superiority of modern over Aristotelian science and in terms of his abandoning Judaism, this did not prevent Strauss from describing him as Maimonides’ disciple.\(^{392}\) In a later publication Strauss seemed to reinforce this view when he wrote that Spinoza “certainly preferred ‘dogmatism,’ which admits the certainty of reason, to ‘skepticism,’ which denies it: the former ruins the Bible…, whereas the latter ruins reason…”\(^{393}\)

At the center of Strauss’s objections to this entire line of critique was the inescapable fact that Spinoza violated the stringent conditions he imposed on himself of liberating philosophy from theology on grounds of Scripture alone. By restricting Scriptural teachings exclusively to the non-contradictory passages, a position he was forced into by his insistence on literalism, and therefore diluting its lessons only to that which both have in common, namely, obedience and piety, Spinoza was not relying so much on the Bible as on his own speculative rationality. This can only mean that Spinoza, throughout his critique, already presupposed, without clearly justifying, the priority, autonomy and the superiority of reason over revelation.

Whereas Spinoza’s critique based on Scriptures was aimed at orthodoxy for the sake of philosophical freedom, his critique based explicitly on reason was a radical attack not only on orthodoxy but extended to the Scriptures themselves. The most significant aspect of this critique, according to Strauss, was an assault on the possibility of miracles which was meant to strike at the heart of the idea of revelation.\(^{394}\)

\(^{392}\) Ibid., 251.
\(^{394}\) Strauss, *SCR*, 126: “Through this rejection [of miracles] revealed religion, as founded on mere experience, is also condemned in its entirety.”
What are miracles? Miracles, according to Spinoza, are events whose causes could not be determined by witnesses through reference to natural causation. They are events “of which the causes cannot be explained by the natural reason through a reference to ascertained workings of nature.” They are taken by believers to be non-natural or supra-natural occurrences, whose aim were to “gain an understanding of God’s essence, existence, or providence.” As such they serve as empirical evidence for the unbelievers to impel them toward wonder and piety and as testimony to the veracity of prophetic predictions.

Spinoza took issue with this popularly held claim. He asserted that such a position was an interpretive violation of the rational order of nature rooted in ignorance of natural causes. “[M]iracles are only intelligible as in relation to human opinions, and merely mean events of which the natural cause cannot be explained by reference to any ordinary occurrence, either by us, or at any rate, by the writer and narrator of the miracle.” In other words, miracles were an epistemological rather than an ontological category and it created, at least for him, an “absurd” situation whereby random, uncommon and unusual events, rather than the stable, universal and predictable laws of nature became the signposts of Divine wisdom and power.

"[I]t is plain that the universal laws of nature are decrees of God following from the necessity and perfection of the Divine nature. Hence, any event happening in nature which contravened nature’s universal laws, would necessarily also contravene the Divine decree, nature, and understanding; or if anyone asserted that God acts in contravention to the laws of nature, he, ipso facto, would be compelled to assert that God acted against His own nature – an evident absurdity."
Instead, Spinoza argued that the power of nature was identical with the power of God. He took the ontological position that denied any agency external to the natural world order and thus the possibility of miracles as supra-natural and supra-rational phenomena by conceiving of substance as an infinite, as “that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself.” There were no good reasons, according to him, to limit the power and extent of nature’s laws to some but not to all purposes because

as the efficacy and power of God, and as the laws and rules of nature are the decrees of God, it is in every way to be believed that the power of nature is infinite, and that her laws are broad enough to embrace everything conceived by the Divine intellect; the only alternative is to assert that God has created nature so weak, and has ordained for her laws so barren, that He is repeatedly compelled to come afresh to her aid if He wishes that she should be preserved, and that things should happen as He desired: a conclusion, in my opinion, very far removed from reason.

Thus he attempted to construct a system that could account in a clear and distinct way for the infinite whole and that would provide a rational alternative to what he considered to be a contradictory and obscure account found in the Bible. Indeed, for Spinoza the immutable laws of nature were a far greater proof of God’s majesty, wisdom and power than an account based on miracles. “[T]he laws of nature…extend over infinity, and are conceived by us as, after a fashion, eternal, and nature works in accordance with them in a fixed and immutable order; therefore, such laws indicate to us in a certain degree the infinity, the eternity, and the immutability of God.”

This rather clever argument was not, however, sufficient to sway Strauss, sympathetic as he may have been with Spinoza’s position. Acceptance or rejection of miracles as supra-natural

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400 Spinoza, _The Ethics_, 45.
401 Spinoza, _A Theologico-Political Treatise_, 83-84.
402 Ibid., 86.
events depends on two distinct and irreconcilable attitudes toward human ability to know the
causes and ends of nature, and consequently leads to two radically distinct notions of human life.
Spinoza and the radical Enlightenment represent one view, which recognizes in modern science a
progressive yet provisional and incomplete understanding of natural causation. To accept
miracles, on this view, is to assume as fully known “the limits and power of nature” and to
conclude that a given event as miracle is beyond that limit, i.e., supernatural. Given our
epistemic limitations, so says the voice of the Enlightenment, a more reasonable position would
be to simply accept our provisional ignorance regarding the inevitably complex causes of events.
It is the

characteristic of reason, which knows nothing of supernatural acts of God, but which has
knowledge of many natural causations, to assume in each case that a natural nexus of a
kind hitherto unknown is in operation, rather than to assume the presence of a miracle. Even the recall to life of a corpse already in process of decay…would be for Spinoza
nothing other than a problem. From his insight into “human weakness” there follows for
him indeed not a readiness to assume miracles, but rather suspension of judgment.\(^{403}\)

Furthermore, those who believe in revelation, take miracles as they were recorded in the
Bible as real events: Jews and Protestants, for whom “[m]iracles do not happen at present time,”
know them only as they were reported. But to accept these accounts on face value would be
credulous. The authors’ “preconceived opinions, their emotions, their interests exercise an
influence on their reports. These factors must be taken into account when we interpret reports on
miracles, so that we may arrive at sharp discrimination between the matters of fact which
underlie the account, and the prejudices which influence the account, which are not founded on
the matter of fact recounted.”\(^{404}\) Nor can we tell from these accounts “to what extent the

\(^{403}\) Strauss, SPR, 133.
\(^{404}\) Ibid., 133-134.
miracles actually occurred and to what extent they are figments of imagination.”⁴⁰⁵ On both historical and epistemological grounds, then, the modern rational mind finds no room for miracles.

Orthodoxy represents an alternative view which sees in modern philosophy’s (such as Spinoza’s) critique of miracles and of a life grounded in faith an expression of hubris, blasphemy and sin. The orthodox reject in principle the suggestion that belief in revelation constitutes superstition, ignorance or prejudice – indeed, the opposite is true. It is the modern, or positive, scientific attitude that is prejudicial and that blinds the rational mind to the truth and wisdom of revelation. The believer sees and understands everything that the unbeliever does but because of his faith he sees and understands more.⁴⁰⁶

As Strauss makes clear, it is precisely Calvin’s version of orthodoxy – the real target of Spinoza’s critique – that represents most strikingly this view and the one that is also most immune to Spinoza’s critique. Calvin takes the notion of the Biblical God as the Truth beyond any and all discussion. The knowledge of this God is written both in the hearts of men as well as in the structure and the governance of the universe. Any refusal to acknowledge this truth is a sign of weakness and wickedness of independent human understanding.

Man is therefore in need of better support than that of natural light. He needs the Word of God, as the witness borne by God about Himself, which is offered in the Old and the New Testaments. Man is convinced of the authority of Holy Writ by the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that spoke through the mouth of the prophet vouches, by being effective in us, for the truth of Scriptures.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 134. See also, 141.
⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 145.
Calvin’s skeptical attitude toward human independent rational capacities rejects any investigation or understanding of God’s essence or of what Strauss elsewhere called the most important philosophical question – namely, *quid sit Deus.* But he rejects it not on grounds of the limits of human understanding but on grounds of piety. “Knowledge of God is not the knowledge by which we comprehend that there is a God, but the knowledge which serves to honor God. Where there is no piety there is no knowledge of God.” Thus Calvin does not concede “that the first step is to establish what God is, or, at the least, what the relationship is between God and man, what God requires of man; the first step, i.e., a step preceding one’s living piously, is to ask the question, Does it obey God?”

Obedience and piety are prior to and necessary for life because, according to Calvin, there is no distinction between what is natural and, therefore, available to unassisted human reason and what is supernatural and requires faith. Formally, then, his position is not different from Spinoza’s. But for Spinoza theology is none other than physics: existence is wholly natural and at least in theory explainable through human effort. For Calvin, on the other hand, existence is completely miraculous: physics is none other than theology, or more precisely, Biblical theology. The meaningful categories for him with regards to the functioning of the cosmos are not natural/miraculous but usual/unusual or familiar/unfamiliar both of which are vouchsafed by God. The causal laws of nature which the scientific mind is seeking to discover (just as the extraordinary events depicted in the Bible) are nothing but constant, ongoing instantiations of God’s providence. Thus Calvin’s “doctrine is to be understood only on the basis of faith, and on

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410 Ibid., 196, 213.
the basis of faith it is necessary. It is true because it does justice to God’s honor, and therefore at
the same time it provides the man who ponders it with the ‘best and sweetest fruit’… Any other
view of the world is rejected as ‘carnal.’ Any critique arising out of a ‘carnal’ world-view is
from the outset bereft of significance.” 411 Substantively, then, Calvin holds a directly opposite
view to Spinoza to the point of not “being able to arrive at agreement or even mutual
toleration.” 412

Strauss claims that by presupposing a distinction between the natural and the miraculous
in their critique of orthodoxy, Spinoza and the Enlightenment in general failed to see the radical
nature of Calvin’s view of miracles and thus missed their target. Calvin’s orthodoxy did not
require miracles (as supra-natural events) to prove the veracity of its theology; it was not based
on empirical evidence but on faith. Thus by criticizing miracles the Enlightenment did not strike
at the heart of orthodoxy.

But what did this critical attitude really prove? First, according to Strauss, it revealed
less about the possibility of miracles in principle than it did about the rational scientific mind,
which, because it was devoid of faith, was immune to any notion of miracles. 413 This blind spot
forced Spinoza, in his attempt to refute orthodoxy, to resort to suspect logic. His “attempts to
demonstrate the unreality of the Biblical miracles and revelations depend[ed] on the express or
tacit premise that the impossibility of miracles and revelations in general [was] established or

411 Ibid., 197.
412 Ibid., 196.
413 Ibid., 136.
demonstrated.” In other words, Strauss observed that Enlightenment philosophy in general built into its arguments as premise what it should have proven – but could not – in its conclusion.

Furthermore, in order to refute orthodoxy in a constructive way Spinoza had to convince his audience that human life and the world around it were perfectly intelligible without an appeal to the supernatural and unfathomable God. To do so he had to show that mankind was sufficient unto itself; he had to develop a comprehensive system whereby man was shown to be the master of his own life and the world. “[T]he merely given world must be replaced by the world created by man theoretically and practically.” In this way “orthodoxy would be more than refuted – it would be ‘outlived’.” Thus rather than attempt what was not possible, that is, directly refuting orthodoxy, the Enlightenment engaged in what was properly its own enterprise, namely, civilization and through it redemption of mankind.

In this context, Spinoza’s intellectual position was born out of the belief that his ontology – developed in his *Ethics* – accounted for everything that traditional philosophy had attempted to do but, in the final analysis, failed. He took his account of God “as the clear and distinct and, therefore, the true account of the whole.” As long as the belief that the explanation of the whole was theoretically possible the only obstacle to Spinoza’s philosophical account of the whole was the Biblical account. Strauss suggested that Spinoza had to destroy the Biblical account of the whole in order to install his own ontology as the crowning achievement of philosophy and the only and true guide to human life.

The alternative that confronts man by nature, is…that of a superstitious account of the whole on the one hand, and of the philosophic account on the other. In spite of their

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radical antagonism, superstition and philosophy have this in common, that both attempt to give a final account of the whole, and both consider such an account indispensible for the guidance of human life.417

But did Spinoza succeed in providing a clear and distinct account of the whole and could this account be true? Spinoza’s clear and distinct ideas, according to Strauss, were concepts that were abstracted from the whole, which itself is not naturally clear and distinct; they were merely hypothetical.418 These hypothetical, abstract concepts – presented as the clear and distinct ideas – were in turn used as explanations of the whole. In other words, here too Spinoza was engaging in a circular argument. He presupposed the knowledge of the whole in his clear and distinct definitions, which he then used as clear and distinct guides to the knowledge of the whole.419 This fallacy was the essential rational foundation upon which he constructed his refutation of Biblical religion. Furthermore, given the hypothetical nature of the entire argument, “its cognitive status [was] not different from that of the orthodox account.”420 Strauss was able to show, then, that Enlightenment failed to refute orthodoxy not only because it was in principle impervious to refutation but on its own grounds, on grounds of reason. “Generally stated, I would say that all alleged refutations of revelation presuppose unbelief in revelation, and all alleged refutations of philosophy presuppose faith in revelation.”421

Based on his careful study of Spinoza’s critique of religion, Strauss came to realize that Enlightenment philosophy and modern science that emerged from it were in fact themselves grounded in faith. “All concrete objections to the doctrine of revealed religion are founded in the

417 Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing., 156.
419 Strauss, “Progress or Return,” Rebirth, 268-269.
421 Strauss, “Progress or Return,” Rebirth, 269.
last resort on man’s trust in his own reflections, on faith in man and in reason as man’s supreme power, the capacity and readiness to acquiesce in human capacities.”\textsuperscript{422} The ground from which the modern scientific mind springs is the same one that gives birth to religious orthodoxy. The object of faith may be different but the fundamental attitude is not.

Nor was the Enlightenment unaware of its weakness, according to Strauss. Its dependence on “trifles” to assault orthodoxy quickly turned to mockery. “The Enlightenment…had to laugh orthodoxy out of a position from which it could not be driven by any other means.”\textsuperscript{423} Indeed, for an age that perhaps worshipped wit as much as reason as a high mark of civilized society, its philosophy could offer nothing more than mockery of religion. This, for Strauss, was the conclusive evidence of the fatal flaw of its logic.

\textit{[I]t is in mockery that the liberation from ‘prejudices’ that had supposedly been already cast off is actually first accomplished; at the very least, the mockery is the admittedly supplementary but still decisive legitimation of a liberty acquired by whatsoever means. Thus the importance of mockery for the Enlightenment’s critique of religion is an indirect proof of the irrefutability of orthodoxy. As a result, orthodoxy was able to survive the attack of the Enlightenment, and all later attacks and retreats, unchanged in its essence.}\textsuperscript{424}

Strauss, then, questioned the means by which Spinoza’s critique of orthodoxy was achieved and the theoretical certainty with which it was presented. He concluded that on a theoretical or epistemological level Spinoza could not legitimately deny the possibility of revelation and thus the veracity of orthodoxy. And this failure proved to be fatal to the modern project because it meant that “the philosophic account and the philosophic way of life are not necessarily, not evidently, the true account and the right way of life.”\textsuperscript{425}

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\textsuperscript{422} Strauss, \textit{SCR}, 195.
\textsuperscript{423} Ibid., 143.
\end{flushright}
Spinoza’s Moral Motive

By establishing the fact that the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism could not be settled on epistemological grounds, Strauss displaced this entire argument to the level of morality. He realized that the significance of Spinoza’s critique was less theoretical than moral.

[T]he condemnation of the cognitive value of religion implies a verdict on the value of religion for human existence. It is impossible fully to grasp Spinoza’s critique of religion as Spinoza himself intended it, if one keeps only to the incontestable fact that Spinoza sees in the teachings of revealed religion theoretical errors, demonstrably false assertions.

In what sense, then, did Strauss understand the moral nature of the antagonism between Judaism (or, any orthodoxy) and philosophy? First of all, Jewish resistance to external critique has traditionally been sustained by the suspicion that this critique was driven by an Epicurean motive. From the Jewish perspective, Epicureanism represented a hedonistic rebellion against moral restraints – restraints instantiated by moral law, which was the heart of Judaism. The aim of this rebellion was to construct an alternative moral universe that would ultimately replace duty to the law with pursuit of pleasure as the moral imperative for the good life. It was thus thoroughly consequentialist or, as Strauss put it, “mercenary.”

[T]raditional Judaism always suspects that all theoretical and practical revolts against the Torah are inspired by the desire to throw off the yoke of the stern and exacting duties so that one can indulge in a life of pleasure. Epicureanism can lead only to a mercenary morality whereas traditional Jewish morality is not mercenary.

The consequentialist nature of the Epicurean critique – to which tradition, according to Strauss, Spinoza’s critique belongs as well – was evident in the fact that it understood its own

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427 Strauss, SCR, 216.
metaphysical doctrines, namely atomism, as “the means for liberating the mind from the terrors of religious fear, of the fear of death, and of natural necessity.”

In the second place, Strauss also observed in the development of the tradition of religious critique from its Epicurean inception to its post-Enlightenment atheist manifestations a growing moral imperative. There were moral reasons for rejecting religion. Critique which began with the Epicurean attempt to liberate men from the theologically inspired terror has over time been transformed to its post-Enlightenment attempt to liberate men from the theologically inspired delusion of comfort. This latest type of critique typically accused religion of providing an unrealistic vision of redemption, an escape from the struggles and the terrors of life. In other words, religious teachings themselves proved to be deceitful, dishonest and, therefore, immoral. Alternately, atheism became the new moral imperative.

A new kind of fortitude, which forbids itself every flight from the horror of life into comforting delusion, which accepts the eloquent descriptions of the misery of man without God as a proof of the goodness of its cause, reveals itself eventually as the ultimate and purest ground for the rebellion against the tradition of the revelation. This new fortitude, being the willingness to look man’s forsakenness in its face, being the courage to welcome the terrible truth, being toughness against the inclination of man to deceive himself about his situation, is probity.

Strauss described this modern attitude “atheism with a conscience.” Just as orthodox conviction denied atheist trust in man on moral grounds, so atheist conviction denied belief in God precisely for the same moral reasons. Thus he concluded that on the moral level the Enlightenment-

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429 Ibid., 29. For Strauss’s more lengthy discussion of Epicureanism see SCR, 37-47.
430 Ibid, 29; Philosophy and Law, 36-37. One of the more notable examples of this critique is found respectively in Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.
431 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 37.
orthodoxy dichotomy is revealed to be a stark and irreconcilable dichotomy between orthodoxy and atheism.\textsuperscript{432}

The morality of this antagonism was rooted in the clarity of the antagonist’s conviction. What troubled Strauss about Jewish modern theology, which tried to reconcile or synthesize Jewish traditional beliefs with modern, scientific and liberal logic, was its lack of honesty with respect to revelation.\textsuperscript{433} While Mendelssohn, Cohen, and Rosenzweig claimed loyalty to and love of the Jewish tradition, they were simultaneously undermining all of its fundamental principles. At least orthodoxy was honest about its convictions; and having shown that its convictions could not be disturbed by Spinoza’s rationalism, this was enough to earn the respect of the post-Zionist Strauss.

And yet this respect was not without serious reservations. Strauss discovered that not unlike the epistemological motive, the moral justification for Spinoza’s critique of religion was ultimately not a rational justification. Philosophy could not explain on its own rational terms why a life based on unbelief was the right life. Intellectual probity as the basis for atheism springs not from rational proofs that man is forsaken but from the will, from the conviction that man is sufficient onto himself. The moral analysis of the clash between orthodoxy and modern philosophy, just as the theoretical one, proved to be fatal to philosophy. It took Nietzsche to explicitly draw this conclusion out, but, as Strauss has shown in his study of Spinoza (and will go on to show in his study of Hobbes), the evidence for the weakness of modern rationalism was

\textsuperscript{432} Ibid, 38.
\textsuperscript{433} Ibid., 37: “It is this probity, ‘intellectual probity,’ that bids us reject all attempts to ‘mediate’ between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy – both those of the moderate Enlightenment [Mendelssohn] and especially those of the post-Enlightenment synthesis [Cohen and Rosenzweig] – not only inadequate, but also and especially as without probity; it forces the alternative ‘Enlightenment or orthodoxy’ and since it believes it finds the deepest unprobity in the principles of the tradition itself, it bids us to renounce the very word ‘God.’”
already to be found hidden in early modern thought. By overreaching in its claims and in the process destroying itself, modern philosophy provided a justification not only for Jewish orthodoxy but for orthodoxy as such. And in this, Strauss thought that he had proven too much.\footnote{Catherine Zuckert, \textit{Postmodern Platos}, 109: “By arguing that Spinoza and other representatives of the modern Enlightenment could not disprove revelation with reason, because revelation had never claimed to be based on reason, Strauss recognized that he had proved too much; such an argument effectively insulated any form of orthodoxy (or, we might even say, any explicitly irrational commitment) from rational criticism.” For Strauss’s critique of Hobbes see Chapter Four of this dissertation.} Citing Deuteronomy, he pointed out that from its earliest sources Jewish orthodoxy “based its claim to superiority to other religions…on its superior rationality.”\footnote{Strauss, “Preface,” \textit{SCR}, 30.} In other words, in his attempt to discover the legitimacy of Spinoza’s attack on traditional Judaism, Strauss gave credence for any and all forms of irrationalism to assert their superiority against philosophy. Subsequent to this discovery, Strauss would go on to reconsider the tension between philosophy and religion by searching for alternatives that would recover and restore both reason and revelation to their rightful place as the life giving sources for the wisdom and vitality of civilized life.

\textit{Spinoza’s Political Motive}

In 1932 Strauss revisited Spinoza’s legacy in an essay titled “The Testament of Spinoza.” In it he began to rethink Spinoza’s importance and place within Judaism as well as his significance within early modern philosophy. The timing for this reconsideration was rather propitious. The essay was occasioned by the changing political circumstances in Europe to which Strauss hinted ever so slightly. Spinoza, whose reputation within the Jewish community in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries meandered from condemnation to canonization and back to
condemnation, occupied a singular position as a mediator between traditional Judaism and modern European thought. As a thinker most responsible for giving birth to modern Jewish philosophy, his work was uniquely situated to justify modern Jewish philosophy before the court of traditional Judaism, on the one hand, and before the court of modern European thought, on the other. This was particularly true during the emancipatory period of the 1800s “[w]hen what mattered was the justification of the breakup of the Jewish tradition and the entry of the Jews into modern Europe[.]”\textsuperscript{436} In other words, Jews and gentiles could simultaneously appeal to Spinoza’s ideas as the intellectual justification for Jewish religious reformation and European political liberalization. But by the early 1930s the political circumstances were changing and the issue of Jewish assimilation as the compelling answer to the Jewish question had to be rethought. “It is clear that, at a time when modern Europe has been shaken to its foundations, one can no longer justify oneself before this Europe for the sake of Judaism, nor before Judaism for the sake of this Europe, supposing one still wants to do so.”\textsuperscript{437}

The origins of Strauss’s more positive assessment of Spinoza’s influence on European thought can be traced to his reconsideration of Spinoza’s radicalism. He began to doubt the originality of his philosophical position in light of the writings of the great early modern philosophers: Descartes, Hobbes and Leibniz. Compared with these towering figures of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, “Spinoza is only of secondary significance…in the history of natural sciences, on the one hand, and of natural right, on the other.”\textsuperscript{438} But if Spinoza was not the founder of modern philosophy, he certainly stood out among all the early moderns for being the most progressive.

\textsuperscript{437} Ibid., 218. Emphasis is in the original.  
\textsuperscript{438} Ibid., 217.
“He alone had drawn certain consequences from the foundations of modern philosophy, which became fully clarified only in the nineteenth century and which henceforth determined [its] general consciousness.”

Strauss discovered the evidence for Spinoza’s progressivism in his contribution to political thought. He was already well aware, of course, that the Enlightenment’s critique of religion had a political agenda. Spinoza, however, was the first to articulate the principles of liberal democracy, a society defined by its religious neutrality. Thus Strauss came to view Spinoza’s attack on orthodoxy as motivated by a more noble attempt to separate European political life from the domination of the Church and thus free the Jews from the oppression of medieval Christianity.

Furthermore, Spinoza’s critique of religion was the first intimation of the requirements for political Zionism. His rudimentary and rather sketchy observation offered a political rather than a theological vision of the redemption of the Jewish people. His critique of orthodoxy implied the meaningless character of their exilic suffering. As such it rested on his philosophical propositions. Just as man in general could become the master of his life, so could the Jews take their destiny into their own hands, if only they let go of the Biblical horizon that hitherto dominated their existence. Spinoza’s critique of traditional Judaism, then, was a rather...
Machiavellian effort of political liberation, a misunderstood attempt on the part of an estranged member to free a people he no longer considered as his own from millennial Christian persecution.445

Naturally Spinoza was an appealing figure to many modern Jews, including Leo Strauss. “Strauss and his students were philosophers who depended, for the highest work of their lives, on the freedom that was afforded by a liberal democracy, or a regime of law. Even more than Herman Cohen, Strauss had come to depend on that regime fashioned, to the most refined degree, from the thought of Spinoza.”446 Spinoza’s liberalism, his scientific outlook and his critique of religion appealed to subsequent Jewish hopes of liberating themselves from the power of a medieval Church, whose most characteristic action, according to Strauss, was that of the Crusades, which culminated “not accidentally” in the wholesale destruction of Jewish communities.447 But Strauss also concluded that for Spinoza such a society would require a radical transformation of Judaism in such a way that the Jewish people could no longer be nurtured on its traditional wisdom, which sustained it over two thousand years. Spinoza was advocating assimilation for the sake of the benefits in a liberal democratic society.448 In his thought and through his own action, Spinoza was opening the door for a radical estrangement of Jews from their religion. Thus his political project of bringing forth a liberal democratic regime (as well as political Zionism) and consequently in suggesting a Jewish reformation was

445 Strauss, The Early Writings, 221: “[J]ust as his teacher Machiavelli held Christianity responsible for the corruption of Roman virtue, so Spinoza held Judaism responsible for the impossibility of a restoration of the Jewish state.”


448 Green, introduction to Jewish Philosophy, 14. See also Steven Smith, Spinoza, 200: “Spinoza’s solution to the theologico-political problem can be summarized in a single word: assimilation… assimilation to a secular society that is, formally, neither Christian nor Jewish but liberal.”
foreshadowing the kind of problematic transformation in Judaism that took place subsequent to
the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{449}

In conclusion and as a way of pointing forward I would like to make the following
observations. Strauss interpreted the historical trajectory of modern enlightenment as leading
from an exaggerated belief in success of modern philosophy to deep doubts about the possibility
of philosophy. Spinoza’s thought belongs to that period in early modernity when contemporary
ideas were still considered to be decisively superior to the ideas of the past. His modernity has
not yet become historicist. A conviction that he and his philosophical companions “were
achieving a progress beyond
all earlier philosophy or science, a progress condemning to deserved oblivion all earlier efforts,
was rather common among the men who were responsible for the emergence of modern
philosophy and science.”\textsuperscript{450} This claim that man can expand the horizon of knowledge and
liberate himself from the necessities of nature by pushing its limits further and further away was
becoming increasingly unsustainable on intellectual, let alone on moral, grounds. Science itself,
“the proper vindication of the Enlightenment” was subverted by the “discovery of radical
historicity of man.”\textsuperscript{451} Modern science was shown, by Nietzsche and his followers, to be “as one
historically contingent form of ‘world-construction’ among others.”\textsuperscript{452} Modern reason, by
turning toward historical contingencies to justify itself, subverted its own claims against
orthodoxy. Its critique of orthodoxy was based on a belief in its own epistemic superiority,

\textsuperscript{449} Strauss, “Progress or Return,” \textit{Rebirth}, 231.
\textsuperscript{450} Strauss, \textit{Persecution and the Art of Writing}, 153.
\textsuperscript{452} Ibid., 33.

148
nothing more. Since Biblical claims could not be known on the basis of modern science,\(^{453}\) and modern science no longer possessed epistemic priority, this made “possible the rehabilitation of the ‘natural world-view’ on which the Bible depends.”\(^{454}\)

Strauss’s idiosyncratic distinction between modern and pre-modern rationalism (the natural world-view) can be traced to his analysis of the theoretical and moral motives behind Spinoza’s critique of religion.\(^{455}\) It was necessary for him to make this distinction in order to save rationalism from its modern self-destructive impulse but also, and consequently, to defend traditional Judaism and the possibility of revelation in general on rational grounds. Strauss’s argument about the strength of orthodoxy in the face of modern critique had as its end a claim against modern Judaism and not in fact a claim for orthodoxy. It was indeed an internal response to the self-destructive nature of modern scientific logic which was possible only if he took seriously science’s own self-understanding.\(^{456}\)

Finally, by targeting Spinoza’s philosophical and political project, Strauss exposed the radical nature of the Jewish problem. He discovered the extent to which modernity, despite its deep intellectual flaws, undermined any legitimate desire on the part of modern Jews “who cannot be orthodox” to remain Jewish. Political Zionism, which Strauss considered “the only ‘solution of the Jewish problem’ possible on the basis of atheism,” was indeed honorable but, as

\(^{453}\) “[T]here can be no question of a refutation of the ‘externally’ understood basic tenets of the tradition. For all these tenets rest on the irrefutable premise that God is omnipotent and His will unfathomable.” See Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 29.

\(^{454}\) Ibid., 33.


\(^{456}\) I owe this important observation to Gerald Mara.
we have seen in the previous chapter, ultimately inadequate. Strauss concluded that as long as modern Jews cling to modern premises, there can be no solution to the Jewish problem.\footnote{457 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 38.}

Strauss would attempt to perform an intellectually delicate balancing act by turning to Jewish medieval rationalism and to classical political philosophy. It is there that he will look for and find a rather different model for a theologico-political accommodation, one that is based on a profound rethinking of the core of Jewish and philosophical traditions. For Strauss, in other words, the answer to the modern Jewish question may lie beyond the promise of modernity.
CHAPTER 4
CRITIQUE OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY AND RETURN TO MEDIEVAL RATIONALISM

In the previous two chapters I argued that during the crucial early period of his writings, Strauss parted company – on philosophical if not on political and historical grounds – with political Zionism, with liberalism, and with Jewish theological responses to both. He took issue with the Zionists for failing to notice that their response to antisemitism was implicitly assimilationist; and he took issue with the explicitly assimilationist prescriptions of the liberals for failing to properly understand the persistent nature of antisemitism. Neither approach was sufficiently attuned to the spiritual dimension of the Jewish question.

Furthermore, Jewish theological responses, which aimed in various ways to rescue Judaism by riding on the wave of modern philosophy, were fundamentally flawed because they failed to question the veracity of a modern critique of religion. Inherent in the works of Mendelssohn, Cohen, and Rosenzweig was a belief that the principles of traditional Judaism were no longer tenable. Strauss concluded that despite their different philosophical commitments, they were, nevertheless, operating within the unified horizon of Enlightenment philosophy and its anti-Biblical ire. Consequently, their Judaism did not represent in any meaningful sense a return to but a reconstruction of Judaism based on modern prejudices. Strauss thus began to suspect that because of its inherent anti-Scripturalism modern philosophy could not provide sustenance for Jewish religion and its people.

Enlightenment’s hostility to biblical religion was most clearly evident in the writings of Spinoza. In his penetrating study of this seventeenth century philosopher and Jewish apostate,
Strauss began to uncover the shaky foundations of modern rationalism. He showed that modern rationalism was impotent in its assault on orthodox positions – as evinced finally in its recourse to mockery. But even more lethal, Strauss exposed the foundations of modern rationalism to be nothing more than faith in its own project. Thus it possessed no epistemological superiority over orthodoxy; it could not rationally answer why philosophy was necessary – it merely assumed it to be.

Strauss was also able to show that modern Enlightenment harbored within itself atheistic proclivities that only became manifest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jewish orthodox opponents of modernity understood this from the very beginning and in fact viewed Enlightenment’s critique of religion to be merely the latest expression of Epicureanism. It wasn’t until modern thinkers themselves (such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud) openly accepted their project for what it was, namely, freedom from traditional (religious, moral, and political) constraints, that they could defend atheism on grounds of probity and intellectual honesty.

Spinoza, as Strauss acknowledged, offered his own prescription to the Jewish question based on atheism, namely, political Zionism, but Strauss had already revealed the inadequacy of this approach, despite its honorable political aims. Alternately, Spinoza’s liberalism explicitly anticipated Jewish assimilation.

Strauss rejected Spinoza’s ideas on epistemological and moral grounds: because he found his arguments to be weak and because he found Spinoza’s abandonment of Judaism dishonorable. Given the political circumstances of the 1930s, Strauss found this solution no
longer – if ever – decent. The rise of totalitarian regimes and the failure of liberal democracies to effectively respond to their menace convinced Strauss that the Jewish people were not served well by the modern world and its political and social projects. Given the radical rift between orthodoxy and atheism within modern thinking, Strauss concluded that the Jewish question, which is in many respects the product of this split could not be solved by modern thinking. “This situation not only appears insoluble but actually is so, as long as one clings to the modern premises.” Modernity, in other words, lacked redemptive power.

Within this context, Strauss wondered whether enlightenment had to be modern enlightenment. He began to probe the possibility of recovering pre-modern forms of rationalism – both Jewish and Greek – as paving the way for a meaningful answer for modern Jews who could not be orthodox and for whom accepting “modern premises” spelled assimilation. To be successful, he would have to show that pre-modern rationalism was radically different from modern rationalism, namely, that it was not in principle hostile to religion, that it took piety along with wisdom to be virtues. In other words, he had to make a convincing case that the pre-modern alternatives offered a philosophical justification for revelation or that they understood the limits of philosophy and thus the rational need for the Law. Strauss aimed to show modern Jews that intellectually they could embrace this view, which he called “enlightened Judaism,” and which amounted to a certain accommodation (not a synthesis) between Biblical religion and

458 Years later Strauss would explicitly state that as honorable men Jews had no choice but to remain Jews. See “Why We Remain Jews” in Jewish Philosophy, 329.
459 Ibid., 38.
philosophy. He found the pattern for this accommodation in the medieval enlightenment of Moses Maimonides.\textsuperscript{460}

In this chapter I will first explore the historical case for a return to Jewish medieval philosophy; then I will probe deeper into the way in which Strauss came to think of modern philosophical and scientific thought as a prejudice from which he attempted to free himself during the crucial period of the early 1930s.

**Historical Case for a Return to Jewish Medieval Rationalism**

The period between 1930 when he published *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* and the publication of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* in 1936 was a transformative period in Strauss’s intellectual development. This was the time when he began to recover ancient wisdom, discovered the primacy of political philosophy, and became aware of the esoteric dimension of ancient and medieval texts. During this time Strauss also published *Philosophy and Law*, his first significant study of Maimonides and medieval Muslim Aristotelians. This was the work that cemented for him the possibility of a return to and recovery of pre-modern philosophy. As Eugene Sheppard put it, “Strauss came to see the thought of Moses Maimonides as a promising alternative to the liberal configurations of Judaism precisely at the time that he was searching for an alternative paradigm to the modern sophistry of relativizing historicism and liberal politics.”\textsuperscript{461} Recovery of a pre-modern mode of thinking served for Strauss the purpose of establishing a ground outside the modern horizon from which he was able to shed light on the modern Jewish predicament of homelessness and redemption.

\textsuperscript{460} Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 38.
\textsuperscript{461} Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 69.
Let us recall that the theologico-political predicament in which Strauss found himself in the 1920s became all too evident with the failure of Weimar republic. But, as he recounted much later, the period of the liberal Weimar was just the coda of the classical era in German history, the time in which “Germany was the foremost country in thought and poetry” the period of Goethe, Kant, and Hegel. The beginning of this period marked the beginning of Jewish political emancipation. This was the time when “the Jews opened themselves to the influx of German thought, the thought of the particular nation in the midst of which they lived.” The defining feature of the German-Jewish predicament, the feature that made Jewish “political dependence…also spiritual dependence” was the necessary connection between German thought and German national identity. German thought, according to Strauss, “was understood to be German essentially. This was the core of the predicament of German Jewry.” In other words, before the failure of liberalism in Germany, before the rise of the Nazis and the threat of extinction that they posed, there had already existed the spiritual threat. Assimilation was an inherent demand of the circumstances in which modern philosophy with its scientific rigor was introduced into the Jewish community in the guise of German culture. Consequently, modern Judaism turned toward a process of intellectual self-criticism on a newly-discovered historical foundation. Indeed, critique of Jewish heritage on objective scientific grounds was the aim of the Science of Judaism.463

463 Ibid: “At a time when German Jews were politically in a more precarious situation than Jews in any other Western country, they originated the ‘science of Judaism,’ the historical-critical study by Jews of the Jewish heritage.” The Society for Culture and Science of the Jews was formally established in 1819 under the intellectual stewardship of Leopold Zunz. Its guiding principle was the belief that “scientific” study of Judaism would lead to the discovery of its essential characteristics and would reveal the significance of Jewish civilization to the spiritual makeup of humanity. Its members hoped that their scholarship could serve the political and cultural needs of contemporary Jews. They were guided by the belief that antipathy toward Jews would disappear once Judaism under
Yet it would be inaccurate to assume that prior to the modern age Judaism was somehow insular and unaffected by dominant intellectual currents in Europe. Jewish thought is layered with foreign cultural influences. The problem for the modern Jews, as Strauss understood it, was not that there were external intellectual pressures affecting the character of Judaism and its basic principles. The difference between pre-modern and modern Jewish experience is that in the past Judaism managed to absorb these influences without fundamentally altering its character. What is radically new about the modern experience is its devastating effect on the traditional meaning of Judaism and especially its notion of election; assimilation of new ideas into Judaism is no longer possible without the radical reformulation of Judaism. At worst, this process is no longer possible at all without complete abandonment and assimilation.464

The predicament that gripped German Jews was not altogether dissimilar from the predicament of medieval Spanish Jewry living under Muslim rule, where Jewish rabbis and scholars had to confront the challenge of Greek philosophy. It is generally accepted that the encounter between Judaism and Greek philosophy as represented in the thought of Maimonides led to the greatest Jewish intellectual achievement, to what one historian of Jewish thought called, “a golden age in history, the greatest accomplishment of the Jewish genius and the

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464 Strauss, “Progress or Return,” Rebirth, 233: “It is quite true that Jewish life in the past was almost always more than a continuation of a tradition. Very great changes within that tradition have taken place in the course of the centuries. But it is also true that the change which we are witnessing today, and which all of us are participating in, in one way or another, is qualitatively different from all previous changes within Judaism.”
To make sense of his own predicament, Strauss could not help but compare the two periods.

But he also understood the limited utility of drawing this type of historical analogy. The predicament of Spanish Jewry during the middle ages was quite distinct from the modern German Jewish experience because Greek thought was understood “to be Greek only accidentally.” Exposure to Greek philosophy, given its lack of national character within medieval culture, did not follow by demands to assimilate. The attachment of medieval philosophers, Jewish or Muslim, was to both religion and philosophy. Indeed, the entire intellectual posture of medieval thought was to find a way to accommodate religious claims with the claims of Greek philosophy be it Aristotelianism, Atomism, or neo-Platonism. The “conflict between religion and philosophy...was the central theme of both Islamic and Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages.”

This is not to say that there were no assimilationist tendencies in medieval Judaism at all. Indeed, Maimonides fought his own battles against assimilation, but it was not in any way

Charles C. Lehrmann, *Jewish Influences on European Thought* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976), 25-26. Lehrmann contrasts the experience of Spanish with North European Jewry in the Middle Ages: “In Spain, Judaism accomplished the most successful synthesis between its own spirit and the surrounding society, while in France, Germany, and Poland, the equilibrium was broken by an excessive withdrawal, with the resultant ghetto mentality, or by a disproportionate assimilation...” (26). Leo Strauss, “Preface,” *SCR*, 3: “The greatest achievements of Jews during the Spanish period were rendered possible partly by the fact that Jews became receptive to the influx of Greek thought.” It should be noted here that medieval Judaism developed two distinct cultures with rather different intellectual postures, one North European (Ashkenazi) the other rooted in Moorish Spain (Sephardic). The Ashkenazim in general were more interested in intensive study of the Talmud, whereas the Sephardim engaged more openly in philosophic activity. The fact that the Muslim Arabic culture was at the time the preserve of much of Greek thought facilitated in no small measure the exposure of Sephardic Jews to its wisdom. It is not surprising that the two great Jewish philosophers who inform so much of Strauss’s work, Spinoza and Maimonides, come from this milieu. In fact, Strauss assents to the description of Spinoza as “the last of the medievals.” See his “Preface” to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.

Strauss, “Preface,” *SCR*, 3. See also “How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy” in *Rebirth*, 211.

related to Greek thought. Still Greek philosophy and especially the undisputed authority of Aristotle were strongly challenging Jewish foundational claims thus posing a spiritual threat to those Jews who were exposed to its teachings. For Strauss, the fact that medieval Jewish experience was largely free from an assimilationist imperative, presented the possibility of glimpsing at the conflict between Judaism and philosophy in its unadulterated, natural light.

The Middle Ages witnessed the first, and certainly the first adequate, discussion between these two most important forces of the Western world: the religion of the Bible and the science or philosophy of the Greeks. It was a discussion...between religion as such and science or philosophy as such: between the way of life based on faith and obedience and a way of life based on free insight, on human wisdom, alone.\(^\text{470}\)

Maimonides afforded Strauss a different way of relating philosophy to Judaism. Proper relationship between Judaism and Greek philosophy, devoid of assimilationist temptation, is for Strauss the heart of what “enlightened” or “rational” Judaism should be. Thus he stated that “Maimonides is the ‘classic of rationalism’ in Judaism... [His] rationalism is the true natural model, the standard to be carefully protected from any distortion, and thus the stumbling-block on which modern rationalism falls.”\(^\text{471}\) What constitutes this rationalism will be the topic of the next chapter. Here it will suffice to say that Strauss gave us an interpretation of Maimonides as a Jewish thinker whose work was an attempt to come to terms with the challenge of Greek philosophy in a way that sustains and enriches, rather than diminishes Jewish life.


Overcoming Modern Prejudices:

By the early nineteen thirties Strauss became aware of the problematic nature of modern solutions to the Jewish question and began to search for alternatives. In 1923 he argued that “it is still self-evident that it is impossible to extricate oneself from modern life without employing modern means.”472 However, by 1946 he completely abandoned this view. In a letter to Karl Lowith he wrote:

One cannot overcome modernity with modern means, but only in so far as we also are still natural beings with natural understanding; but the way of thought of natural understanding has been lost to us, and simple people such as myself and those like me are not able to regain it through their own resources: we attempt to learn from the ancients.473

Similarly, whereas in 1925 he could still claim with approval that “the verification of revelation, once customary in traditional theology, was made impossible by the European critique,”474 by 1935, the year he published Philosophy and Law, he has moderated this categorical embrace of modern philosophy in “favor of” the rationalism of Maimonides, a rationalism that asserted the possibility and the necessity of revelation.475

In the years subsequent to the publication of Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, Strauss found a way to abandon his modern commitments and began to explore possibilities for recovering pre-modern modes of thought as a way of illuminating present-day controversies. Let us recall that during the 1920s Strauss developed a radically heterodox outlook that placed him outside the mainstream of German-Jewish thought. He declared himself the enemy of both

474 Strauss, The Early Writings, 125.
475 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 21.
modern orthodoxy and liberalism; simultaneously he distanced himself from the Zionist alternatives as well. He thus positioned himself outside the traditional Jewish and modern possibilities. Furthermore, coming on the heels of his work on Spinoza and Zionism, Strauss began to merge his Jewish concerns with his emerging interest in political philosophy. These developments coincided with two publications, both written prior to Strauss’s departure from Germany. The first was the short (and relatively unnoticed) review of Julius Ebbinghaus’s *On the Progress of Metaphysics* published at the end of 1931. The second was the more substantial and recognized “Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*” published in the spring of 1932.  

Ebbinghaus, whose lectures Strauss attended at the University of Freiburg (along with lectures of the more famous Edmund Husserl) in 1922, took issue in his book with the modern dogmatic belief in the superiority of modern over classical philosophy. Modern philosophy set out to liberate itself from all traditions, or, “to free the mind from all prejudice” in the name of freedom. With this expressed purpose modern philosophy unleashed compartmentalized (one could say with hindsight - departmentalized) and relativistic loci of knowledge and thus became enamored with “the conditions and vicissitudes of all questions” rather than with questioning itself. According to Ebbinghaus, the consequence of the break with classical tradition, the consequence of this affirmation of the “anarchy of systems” is not greater understanding and knowledge but a “philosophical chaos,” not freedom from prejudice but “freedom of ignorance.” Ebbinghaus’s prescription for extricating ourselves from modern ignorance was to turn to ancient

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476 Strauss’s own recollection places his change of orientation with the publication of the “Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*.” This change of orientation involved a growing and ultimately life-long interest in the relationship between politics (or society) and philosophy. See “Preface,” *SCR*, 31.
texts and to allow them to be our teachers. We had to learn how to read, which means we had to read “with the burning interest of one who wants to be taught.”

Evidently Ebbinghaus had given Strauss a blueprint, which in due time he would embrace as his own: Modern man cannot begin to philosophize without first turning to the history of philosophy. This is so because modern ignorance, according to Strauss, is deeper than the natural ignorance of Socrates. The original meaning of philosophy, as Strauss would write years later, was the “quest for the principles of all things”, or “the beginning of all things,” which, to separate it from mere myth, was synonymous with the discovery of nature. Thus the fundamental experience of the ancients, once they became aware of it, was a direct experience and the recognition of ignorance of nature, and the “whole history of philosophy is nothing but the record of the ever repeated attempts to grasp fully what was implied in that crucial discovery.”

We, the moderns, have no direct encounter with what is natural or, as Strauss put it, we do not possess “natural understanding.” To us nature is an abstraction. Our experience of the world is mediated by modern science and by our belief in the superiority of its methodology. Consequently, we have become estranged from “the simple and primary issues.” Only when we realize that modern science is not “the perfection of man’s natural understanding of the world, but rather...a radical modification of man’s natural understanding of the world,” can we begin to abandon our attachment to modern worldview. Modern science is inadequate as the final word on nature because, as

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478 Strauss, Natural Right, 82.
479 Ibid., 78-79.
480 Strauss, What is Political Philosophy, 28.
481 Strauss, “Progress or Return?” in The Rebirth, 241.
Nietzsche so pointedly reminded us, it is but one interpretation among many other possible interpretations. Given its method of starting from hypotheses, its answers must always in some respect remain hypothetical. Thus “modern science is in no way superior to Greek science, as little as modern poetry is superior to Greek poetry.”

So, first we must acquire a particular kind of knowledge, one that makes us aware of our prejudices; reading the old books achieves this goal provided we read to learn.

To illustrate Ebbinghaus’s point Strauss appeals to the image of the double cave. Plato used the cave allegory to demonstrate, among other things, the tension between society and philosophy, or an ascent from convention to nature. Strauss introduces us to a second, much deeper cave, to emphasize that modernity’s moral and intellectual crisis is more radical than anything Socrates encountered. Our first task is to work our way back to the original cave, i.e., back to Socrates. For this we need historical pedagogy as a propaedeutic, we need “learning through reading.” Strauss returned to this image a few years later in Philosophy and Law, where he argued that we must overcome the traditional interpretation of the fundamental principles of Greek and Biblical thought “so that an original understanding of these principles again becomes possible.”

To that end and only to that end is the ‘historicizing’ of philosophy justified and necessary: only the history of philosophy makes possible the ascent from the second, ‘unnatural’ cave...into that first, ‘natural’ cave which Plato’s image depicts, to emerge from which into the light is the original meaning of philosophizing.

482 Ibid.
483 Strauss, The Early Writings, 215.
484 Ibid.
486 Ibid. It is interesting to note that Strauss, at least at this point, takes for granted the ability of classic text, if we let them, to disabuse us of our modern “prejudices.” He doesn’t seem to entertain the possibility that even after opening up to the teachings of Plato or Aristotle we may come to a well-considered conclusion that modern philosophy, despite its serious shortcomings, may still possess virtues that render it more than mere “prejudice.”
Remember that thus far Strauss had shown the necessary conformity between Spinoza’s critique of religion and his liberalism (and, therefore, Jewish assimilation) and he also discovered the inherent weakness of that critique. He now discovered the mechanism by which modernity could be overcome, namely, the history of philosophy. Next, and following his engagement with Carl Schmitt, Strauss began in earnest his “change of orientation” by letting go of his modern commitments through his deepened understanding of liberalism and its underlying weakness.487

The Case Against Carl Schmitt

Schmitt in his work attempted to achieve something very similar to Strauss, namely, “to break out of the shackles of liberalism by critically revisiting its sources.”488 Schmitt’s polemic against liberalism was an attempt to return to the “political” as the existential or inescapable condition of man, as that which defines man and thus as the true foundation of the state. Schmitt characterized the political agonistically, in the sense that all “political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy,” whereby the notion of having enemies refers to “the ever present possibility of combat.”489 The essence of the political, then, is the general disposition and the willingness on the part of the enemy groups for “the most intense and extreme antagonism.”490 The political receives its existential meaning “precisely because [it] refer[s] to the real possibility of physical killing.”491

War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy. It is the most extreme consequence of enmity. It does not have to be common, normal, something

488 Eugene Sheppard, Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile, 36.
489 Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, 26, 32.
490 Ibid., 29.
491 Ibid., 33.
ideal, or desirable. But it must nevertheless remain a real possibility for as long as the concept of the enemy remains valid.\textsuperscript{492}

According to Schmitt, liberalism’s founding act was an attempt to negate the political.\textsuperscript{493} As Strauss put it: “Depoliticization not only is the accidental or even necessary result of the modern development but is its original and authentic goal; the movement in which the modern spirit has gained its greatest efficacy, liberalism, is characterized precisely by the negation of the political.”\textsuperscript{494} This negation amounted to an attempt to redefine the friend-enemy distinction with all its existential implications into economic and democratic categories where “competition” and “debate” rule the day.\textsuperscript{495}

The essential characteristic of liberalism is its individualism and as such it is mainly concerned with “the internal struggle against the power of the state.”\textsuperscript{496} Because of its real power to compel, the state is inherently a threat – the threat, indeed – to individual freedom. Liberal thought, therefore, has an ambivalent if not altogether a contradictory attitude toward the state. It is preoccupied with theoretically justifying its existence but only in terms of its role in defending the rights and freedoms of the individual, the selfsame freedoms that are mostly threatened by the existence of this same state. The following extensive quote from Schmitt conveys this inherent liberal tendency to depoliticize the foundations of the state:

No consistent individualism can entrust to someone other than to the individual himself the right to dispose of the physical life of the individual. An individualism in which anyone other than the free individual himself were to decide upon the substance and dimension of his freedom would be only an empty phrase. For the individual as such

\textsuperscript{492} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{493} Ibid., 69-70
\textsuperscript{495} Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, 28.
\textsuperscript{496} Ibid., 70.
there is no enemy with whom he must enter into a life-and-death struggle if he personally does not want to do so. To compel him to fight against his will is, from the viewpoint of the private individual, lack of freedom and repression. All liberal pathos turns against repression and lack of freedom. Every encroachment, every threat to individual freedom and private property and free competition is called repression and is *eo ipso* something evil. What this liberalism still admits of state, government, and politics is confined to securing the conditions for liberty and eliminating infringements on freedom.**497**

Freedom is guaranteed most pointedly when the state denies itself the power to compel individuals toward certain ends. The minimal, liberal state envisions itself as merely providing the necessary conditions for individual liberty; the citizen of a liberal state is free to pursue his own life-projects, his own ends. For liberal thought, under such conditions moral agency becomes a reality; that is, autonomy is possible only when the state takes upon itself the stance of amorality or moral neutrality. The moral ideal of the liberal state, then, is neutrality.**498** Thus Schmitt saw in the emergence of liberalism an attempt to evade the political by adopting an attitude of neutrality. Since the political – understood in terms of the opposition between friends and enemies – defines what it means to be a human being, the ascent of liberal thought amounted to a deliberate attempt to negate something essentially human.

But this cannot be. Politics “is destiny,” and in this sense it is inescapable.**499** Since it is a permanent feature of humanity the political cannot be abolished. Therefore, the pernicious nature of liberalism does not lie in its attempt to abolish the political. The failure of liberalism and in the final analysis the reason why, for Schmitt, it must be overcome lay not in its ultimate

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**497** Ibid., 71.

**498** Schmitt traces the stages through which the modern state adopts the ideal of neutrality in “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations” included in the Schwab edition of *The Concept of The Political*. Modern worship of technology is linked to the fact that it is in technology – not in theology, metaphysics, morality, or economy – that the ultimate ground of neutrality is found. “Progress” is measured by the success or failure to discover or establish this ground of neutrality. See *The Concept of the Political*, 80-96.

**499** Strauss, *Notes*, 110.
victory over the political but in its dishonest and contradictory appropriation of the political for its own aims. The point of departure for liberal thought is “anthropological optimism,” an unrealistic presupposition that only conceals and obfuscates but does not negate the political. Its contradictory nature is fully manifest in the fact that in order to overcome the political, liberalism must embrace and become political. But the intensity of its struggle against the political loses all moderation, which has traditionally been imposed by the honest recognition that groups always have enemies. Technology fails as the ultimate ground of liberal neutrality because it “is always only an instrument and weapon; precisely because it serves all, it is not neutral.” The aim of liberating man from violence and suffering only leads to greater brutality and inhumanity as the “war to end all wars” is necessarily fought on moral grounds whereby the enemy is a “monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed.”

Describing Schmitt’s position, Strauss remarks,

> liberalism has not thereby eliminated the political from the face of the earth but only has hidden it; liberalism has led to politics’ being engaged in by means of an antipolitical mode of discourse. Liberalism has thus killed not the political but only understanding of the political, sincerity regarding the political. In order to remove the smokescreen over reality that liberalism produces, the political must first be brought out of the concealment into which liberalism has cast it, so that the question of the state can be seriously put.

It is this fundamental dishonesty and absence of seriousness about the human condition that makes liberalism, according to Schmitt, a threat that must be overcome. For without understanding the political as basic to human life, we cannot begin to understand the purpose and the character of the state and, ultimately, the fundamentals of the human condition. This is true

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500 Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 64.
501 Ibid., 91.
502 Ibid., 36.
503 Strauss, *Notes*, 100.
for both Schmitt and Strauss. The pretense of liberalism to political neutrality and pacifism as the solution to the persistence of human conflict is the heart of its confusion and incoherence.

We can see more clearly now the influence Schmitt had on Strauss’s Zionist writings. As we have seen, during the 1920s Strauss increasingly railed against liberalism in its Weimar manifestation as weak and lacking any sense of realism in combating its numerous enemies from the right and the left. He saw depoliticization and neutralization functioning most clearly on the Jewish people, who in their exilic condition lost any conception of themselves as a political entity, i.e., as an entity whose existence could only be ensured through an honest and conscious acceptance of and struggle with its enemies. He also understood its ideals, as expressed by Spinoza, to be deleterious to Jewish identity. Given this, Strauss’s writings from this period were, as Eugene Sheppard put it, “increasingly aimed at extricating contemporary self-understanding from the confines of misguided relativism, historicism, and liberalism.” The virtues of Zionism for Strauss were precisely in politicizing the Jewish people by pointing out the paradoxical nature of exilic life. But political Zionists aimed to resolve the paradox by giving the Jews their own state, and this aspiration, Strauss insightfully pointed out, was as assimilationist as the earlier aspirations of emancipation. Implicitly and without intent, assimilation became a uniquely Jewish version of the broader liberal trend toward neutralization. The ideals of Zionism – namely, the normalization of the Jewish people – were the same as the ideals of liberalism. This insight that Zionism still operated within the orb of liberalism, Strauss now applied to his analysis of Schmitt.

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504 Sheppard, Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile, 20.
Strauss contests Schmitt’s belief that he succeeded in overcoming liberalism. To show this, he turns to the analysis of Hobbes as the founder of modern liberalism and indeed “as the founder of modern political thought.” In his notes on Schmitt, Strauss compared respectively his concepts “the political” and “culture” with Hobbes’ concepts “natural” and “civil society.” He is particularly interested in flushing out these Hobbesian categories as implied premises upon which Schmitt mounted his attack on liberalism. Specifically, Strauss focuses on the relationship between human nature and culture. Schmitt posited the political as a way of criticizing “the prevailing concept of culture,” which claimed to be a product of independent human spirit. But he never questioned, according to Strauss, this prevailing (or modern) notion of culture, this “liberal ideal of civilization” that was first and foremost authored by Hobbes. More accurately, according to Strauss, Schmitt purposefully accepted Hobbes’s version of culture, or civil society, because it rested on a version of nature that Schmitt clearly used as his idea of the political.

Culture, as Strauss points out, is “always the culture of nature.” Thus in order for us to understand the meaning of culture – the meaning of the ideal of civilization – we must first get at the meaning of nature and, specifically, human nature. Hobbes’s conception of civilization (politics, religion, exploration, commerce, art, etc.) intimately depends on his view of man as evil. But Hobbes conceived of evil as something “innocent,” as instinctual drives, as irrational power, and, ultimately, as natural fear of these drives whose end is violent death; and it is to

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507 Ibid., 107.
508 Ibid., 104.
escape from this natural evil\textsuperscript{509} – fear of violent death – that Hobbes constructed his powerful state, his “mortal God,” or his civil society.\textsuperscript{510}

In laying the foundations of his political philosophy, Hobbes puts vanity more and more into the background in favour of innocent competition, innocent striving after power, innocent animal appetite, because the definition of man’s natural appetite in terms of vanity is intended as moral judgment. But he is no better able than any other to make us forget that man does not happen to be an innocent animal.\textsuperscript{511}

Schmitt, who accepted this version of evil, did so by simultaneously ignoring a different, more traditional notion of human evil hinted at above by Strauss, one that held it to be \textit{willful} moral baseness, i.e., “corruption, weakness, cowardice, stupidity.”\textsuperscript{512} And he did so, according to Strauss, out of his “\textit{admiration} of animal power.” Thus “Schmitt speaks with an unmistakable \textit{sympathy} of the ‘evil’ that is not to be understood morally”\textsuperscript{513} precisely so that he could embrace it. But by affirming the political the way he did, Schmitt affirmed natural evil – as posited by Hobbes – as \textit{his} moral ideal. And if this is so, Schmitt failed on his own terms to establish an alternative conception of the state to one advanced by liberal thought (to the extent that Hobbes can be considered as the founder of liberal thought).

Thus Strauss shows that lurking beneath Schmitt’s conception of the political was the Hobbesian notion of human nature as innocent evil. His powerful definition of the political was a return to that “innocent” state of nature, which Hobbes embraced in order to justify the modern

\textsuperscript{509} In \textit{The Political Philosophy Of Hobbes} Strauss no longer uses the term “evil” to characterize Hobbes’s description of natural man; there man is merely an “innocent animal.” See Strauss, \textit{PPH}, 14.
\textsuperscript{510} Strauss argues that Hobbes conceived of human evil as innocent because he had to reject sin in order to affirm the primacy of human freedom. Only thus could he assert rights as primary claims and make all our obligations as subsequent restrictions on those rights. See Strauss, \textit{Notes}, 114.
\textsuperscript{511} Strauss, \textit{PPH}, 14. According to Strauss (at least in his earlier writings), Hobbes is the quintessentially modern philosopher because he gradually abandoned aristocratic virtues of honor and courage and replaced them by justice and charity, which grow out not of man’s celebration of contest and combat but out of man’s fear of violent death. See Strauss, \textit{PPH}, 114, 116. See also Plato, \textit{Republic} (358e-259b).
\textsuperscript{512} Strauss, \textit{Notes}, 114.
\textsuperscript{513} Ibid., 115.
secular yet powerful state. Schmitt’s critique of liberalism falls short because, like Zionism, it still operates within the “horizon of liberalism.”514 Thus Strauss concluded that a radical critique of liberalism required a complete break with Hobbes, or with modern conception of man as innocent.

The Case Against Thomas Hobbes

The case that Strauss constructs against Hobbes can be stated as follows: In his pursuit to establish a new science of politics and morality, Hobbes abandoned both Scriptural and Classical constructions (setting aside significant differences) of the eternal order as the grounding presuppositions for political and moral life. So when Spinoza ruthlessly attacked Biblical religion (and with it Judaism), he merely walked through the door opened for him by Hobbes.515 All other claims that Strauss holds to be characteristically modern – political control of religion, the primacy of rights over obligations, substitution of philosophy by history as the task of education; ultimately, the historicisation of thought – emerge out of this foundational assertion.

In his first major work on Hobbes, Strauss argues that at the heart of his anarchic conception of nature is the abandonment of the transcendent, eternal order, or, the “denial of creation and providence.”516 The evidence for Hobbes’s rejection of Biblical authority emerged only gradually in his published writings, according to Strauss. The shift is one from using the Scriptures to establish his political theory to then using that theory to abandon Scriptural

514 Ibid., 122.
515 See previous chapter.
516 Strauss, *PPH*, 123.
authority.517 Strauss holds that Hobbes’s personal attitude toward revealed religion remained unchanged: religion, he thought, must be subservient to the state.518 This characteristic view became fully evident only in his later work, namely, the *Leviathan*. There the progressive distancing from Scriptural authority clearly revealed itself in the answers Hobbes gave to the essential question: “On what authority does one believe that Scripture is the word of God?”519 Only in the *Leviathan*, unlike in the earlier *De cive* and, especially, in the *Elements*, is this authority not ecclesiastic but political. “[O]ne confesses verbally...that Scripture is the word of God, because secular authority commands this confession.”520 Furthermore,

    [a]ccording to *De Cive* it is a Christian dogma that Christ’s kingdom is not of the earth but of heaven; in the *Leviathan*, on the other hand, the kingdom of God under the Old and also under the New Covenant is to be understood as purely earthly kingdom.521

Thus in the development of his political philosophy “from the *Elements* via *De cive* to the *Leviathan*[,] Hobbes drew farther and farther away from the religious tradition” (74). But, as mentioned above, the evidence also suggested to Strauss that personally Hobbes already abandoned the Bible as the authoritative guide to the moral life even before the publication of the *Elements*.522 To make sense of this tension between Hobbes published early work, which evinces little opposition to Biblical authority, and his personal reflections (as expressed in letters), Strauss speculates that prudence must have necessitated him to hide his true view regarding religion early on.

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517 Ibid., 71. Spinoza, in his critique of religion, will employ the same strategy. See previous chapter.
518 Ibid., 74: “Hobbes’s personal attitude to positive religion was at all times the same: religion must serve the State and is to be esteemed or despised according to the services and disservices rendered to the State.”
519 Ibid., 72.
520 Ibid.
521 Ibid., 72-73.
522 See excerpt from Hobbes’s letter from 1636 quoted by Strauss in *PPH*, 75.
The fact that Hobbes accommodated not his unbelief but his utterances of that unbelief to what was permissible in a good, and, in addition, prudent subject justifies the assumption that in the decades before the Civil War, and particularly in his humanist period, Hobbes for political reasons hid his true opinions and was mindful of the maintenance of theological conventions, even more than in the *Elements*.\textsuperscript{523}

The entrapment of religion within the political logic of the State coincided with Hobbes’s fully developed anarchic conception of the state of nature and with his expansive notion of Sovereignty. Outside the authority of the State there is no providential knowledge, no moral law thus no moral guidance, and the natural life of man is “solitary, nasty, brutish, and short.” As Strauss sees it, Hobbes had to “shake the authority of the Scriptures” in order to assert absolute sovereignty of the State.\textsuperscript{524} The severing of morality from Biblical authority, of delinking the moral law from revelation, according to Strauss, in due time but inevitably leads to the assent of atheism.\textsuperscript{525} This claim is only reinforced by Hobbes’ own skeptical attitude toward the only non-atheistic alternative, namely, natural religion.\textsuperscript{526}

\textsuperscript{523} Ibid., 75. See also 74: “In the earliest presentation of his political philosophy Hobbes is thus relatively close to Anglican Episcopalianism. But he was as little a believing Christian then as later. Only political considerations can have induced him to defend the episcopal constitution of the Church and for this very reason to speak more circumspectly on dogma than during the Civil War and under the republic and the Protectorate.”

\textsuperscript{524} Ibid., 71.

\textsuperscript{525} See *Natural Right*, 169, 198.

\textsuperscript{526} *PPH*, 75, 77. Strauss’s interpretation of Hobbes as the initiator of a break with the Biblical tradition and, therefore, as the founding act of early modern political thought is strongly contested by Joshua Mitchell, who argues that Strauss, in his woefully inadequate interpretation of Hobbes, collapsed any distinction between Aristotelian and Biblical traditions. Thus while Strauss correctly identified Hobbes’s anti-Aristotelianism, he failed to recognize that this position was articulated within the Biblical horizon – specifically, within “the Reformation[‘s] preoccupation with the meaning of Christ’s fulfillment of the Old Testament” – to which early modern thought still belonged. See Joshua Mitchell, *Not By Reason Alone* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1-18, 46-72 and, especially, footnotes 17, 4, and 46 pgs. 156, 164, and 184. Whether Strauss or Mitchell is correct cannot be fully addressed here. The issue of significance to this dissertation, however, and one that requires a tentative or provisional comment is this: The project of the early modern thought, be it of Biblical orientation or hostile to it, nevertheless appears to deny the election of Israel either as unwarranted elitism and ethnocentric prejudice or as an idea that has been succeeded and superseded by Christianity. In either case, Strauss’s belief that Judaism finds friendlier grounds in premodern rather than modern philosophy and that Jewish identity is severely deformed and is a problem for modern Jewish life, is not a part of Mitchell’s critique. And yet the history of the notion of “election” as a theologico-political idea and its transformation from the Scriptural sources through the Reformation to its
The break with Biblical thought, initiated by Hobbes and others, however, was an instance of a larger, more comprehensive and self-conscious abandonment of classical frame of reference. At the heart of this early modern rebellion against classic and medieval philosophy, according to Strauss, was the shift of focus from the eternal order to man. The revolt against the past was directed under the premise that traditional wisdom was useless, that reason, as conceived by Plato and Aristotle, was impotent, and that the world, untouched by human hand, was indeed unintelligible. Human reason could not ascend through contemplation to eternity as the measure of all things. Strauss holds that this shift of focus amounts to the modern slow but steady abandonment of rationalism as such and is at the heart of the conflict between the moderns and the ancients.527

Not philosophy, the search for “what is,” but history, the study of human willful action became the standard of knowledge.528 Thus man was liberated from the judgment of the eternal order and became sovereign.529 The task of philosophy became the exploration and understanding of human deeds and thoughts with the emerging belief that human problems could

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527 Strauss, PPH, 160: “[The] break with rationalism is...the fundamental presupposition of modern political philosophy in general. The acutest expression of this break which can be found in Hobbes’s writings is that he conceived of sovereign power not as reason but as will... The holder of the sovereign power is not the ‘head’, that is, the capacity to deliberate and plan, but the ‘soul’, that is, the capacity to command, in the state. There is only a step from this to Rousseau’s theory that the origin and the seat of sovereignty is [the general will]. Rousseau made completely clear the break with rationalism which Hobbes has instituted.”

528 See Ch. 3 of this dissertation, pgs. 4-5. I should note here that Strauss would eventually reevaluate his assessment of the origins of modernity and would ultimately make Machiavelli and not Hobbes the founder of modern political philosophy. See for example Strauss, What is Political Philosophy, 40; also see his Preface to the American Edition of PPH, xv; but also see PPH, 88 (footnote #5) where Strauss is already anticipating this reevaluation: “The reference to Machiavelli’s programme (15th chapter of Il Principe) shows the direction and the lines which further investigation of the origins of the modern interest in history should take.”

529 Strauss, Natural Right, 175: “Man can be sovereign only because there is no cosmic support for his humanity. He can be sovereign only because he is absolutely a stranger in the universe. He can be sovereign only because he is forced to be sovereign.”
now be solved; man on his own terms becomes the redeemer and the redeemed.530 In other words, philosophy had to become practical or applied, and Hobbes’s political philosophy was the “logical conclusion” of this “shifting of interest from the eternal order to man.”531 His political philosophy becomes historical because for him order is not immutable, eternal, in existence from the beginning, but is produced only at the end of a process; because for him order is not independent of human volition, but is born up by human volition alone.532 Human redemption was at hand, and man himself held the reigns of his destiny.

Once the idea of eternity is abandoned, so is abandoned the source that illuminates and empowers reason and with it the quest for the rational ground of justice and morality. Modern rejection of revelation proved to be a threat not only to religion but to philosophy as well. The early modern turn to history ultimately led to historicizing reason itself; it led to modern nihilism.533 And since Strauss held Hobbes to be the founder of liberalism, he traced its current weakness – its intellectual inability to defend its own moral and political ideals from radical assault – to its philosophical origins, to its own inherent relativism and nihilism. The following extended quote sums up his critical position toward modern philosophy:

Since there is no superhuman order which binds man from the beginning, since man has no set place in the universe, but has to make one for himself, he can extend the limits of his power at will. That he can, indeed, extend those limits is shown by history as the

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530 According to Strauss, the neglect of history was one of the reasons that made scholasticism useless in the eyes of Francis Bacon. Bacon represents the clearest case where the interest in historical knowledge is informed by the “interest in the problem of application.” See, Strauss, PPH, 88-89.
531 Ibid., 100.
532 Ibid., 106. See also Strauss’s letter to Eric Voegelin dated October 12, 1950 in Leo Strauss, Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, trans. and ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 75: “’History’ in the strict sense belongs to the practical dimension that is subordinated to the theoretical. Historicizing means the forgetting of eternity. This forgetting must be understood in terms of the rejection of the classical concept of philosophy.”
533 In his letter to Karl Lowith some years later Strauss wrote that the “historical consciousness is a result of the discontent of modernity with itself.” See The Independent Journal of Philosophy (1978 or 1983) [need to get the exact citation].
history of progress; that present limits can be overstepped is proved by history as historical criticism. It is by the doubt of the transcendent eternal order by which man’s reason was assumed to be guided and hence by the conviction of the impotence of reason, that first of all the turning of philosophy to history is caused, and then the process of ‘historicising’ philosophy itself.\(^{534}\)

The crux of the issue is this: Based on his study of Spinoza’s critique of religion and his study of Hobbes’s political philosophy, Strauss developed a critical view of modernity that explicated the rise of modern liberalism and its ultimate moral and intellectual bankruptcy in terms of its critique of religion and of classical political philosophy. Hobbes, according to Strauss, founded liberalism (as well as a new political science) by abandoning any reference to a transcendent standard for goodness and justice, by giving up on the discovery or even on the search for such a standard.\(^{535}\) Instead the new politics (and the new science of politics) were “founded on first-hand experience of human life” and that experience Hobbes interpreted (and Schmitt adopted as a weapon against post-Hobbesian liberalism) in terms of natural innocence not intentional wickedness.\(^{536}\) The consequence of this turn was the emergence of a world that was increasingly becoming secular, relativistic, and ultimately irrational.

Strauss’ implicit point of departure both as a philosopher and as a Jew seems to pivot precisely on this question of human nature. At the time when civilization appeared to be collapsing in Europe from the weight of Nazi and Soviet tyranny, and antisemitism, he opined that Hobbes failed “to make us forget that man does not happen to be an innocent animal.”\(^{537}\) Hobbes could hold man to be innocent only by abandoning a standard for judgment beyond man. To say that man is innocent is to rob him of his capacity to discern right from wrong, good from

\(^{534}\) Strauss, \textit{PPH}, 107.  
\(^{535}\) Ibid., 153.  
\(^{536}\) Ibid., 29.  
\(^{537}\) Ibid., 14.
evil. Barbarism is seen as barbarism only in light of civilization, or as Strauss put it, “what prompts the savages in their savage doings is not savagery but the divination of right.”

To say that evil is not innocent but a sin, is to invoke the Biblical view that redemption may not come by way of independent human will but requires an order independent of it. The political corollary to this view is to say that the foundation of justice and the just state is of higher order than human interests and desires. Its source is the law, and this view is found both in the Bible and in Plato but with this significant difference: For the Biblical authors the knowledge of the law comes from revelation, whereas for Plato the knowledge of the law comes from independent human reason or speech. “Modern and classical political philosophy are fundamentally distinguished in that modern political philosophy takes ‘right’ as its starting point, whereas classical political philosophy has ‘law’.” In his lectures on Socrates, Strauss put it in slightly different terms:

“Political life derives its dignity from something which transcends political life... According to Socrates the transpolitical to which the political owes its dignity is philosophy, or theoría, which, however, is accessible only to what he calls good natures, to human beings who possess a certain natural equipment. According to the teaching of revelation the transpolitical is accessible through faith, which does not depend on specific natural presuppositions, but on divine grace or God’s free election. According to liberalism the transpolitical consists in something which every human being possesses as much as any other human being. The classic expression of liberal thought is the view

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538 Strauss, Natural Right, 130. For a more detailed discussion of human nature see ibid., 126-130.
539 See, for example, Genesis 6:5: “And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”
540 Strauss, PPH, 156. Quoting Earnest Barker, Strauss writes: “For what is the peculiarity of modern political philosophy in relation to classical political philosophy? ‘While modern thought starts from the rights of the individual, and conceives the State as existing to secure the conditions of his development, Greek thought starts from the right of the State.’ The ‘right of the State’ is, however, the law: ‘Freely as the spirit of Socrates ranged, he acknowledged himself the slave of the law.” See ibid., 155. (On this last point see Ch. 6 of this dissertation). See also PPH, 158: “In classical times the analogy to [the modern problem of sovereignty] is the question ‘Who or what shall rule?’ The answer of antiquity runs ‘The law.’ Philosophers who could not acquiesce in the divine origin of law justify this answer in the following way: the rational should rule over the irrational...and therefore law over men.”
that political society exists above all for the sake of protecting the rights of man, the rights which every human being possesses regardless of his natural gifts or his achievements, to say nothing of divine grace.\footnote{Strauss, “The Case of Socrates,” in \textit{The Rebirth}, 161-162.}

Modern philosophy and political thought formulated a particular solution to the conflict between reason and revelation (or philosophy and orthodoxy), namely, it demoted – if not outright rejected – revelation or the belief in revelation to the private sphere. Concurrently, the early moderns (if one can generalize for a moment) also abandoned the pre-modern purposive cosmology and its teleological conception of man, or to put in different terms, modernity rebelled against the Bible as well as Aristotelian natural science and Socratic political philosophy. In its place it erected modern science with its rigorous methodology as \textit{the} authoritative and superior mode of knowledge, thus demoting the rest of philosophy to the dust bin of mere speculation and prejudice. Consequently, modernity offered a particular solution to the Jewish question, namely, assimilation – be it liberal or nationalist. But given its relativistic and nihilistic proclivities, the modern solution was unsustainable.\footnote{In his latter writings Strauss spoke of the crisis of Western civilization as the inevitable result of abandoning the eternal order. \textit{See}, for example, \textit{The City and Man}, 3: “The crisis of the West consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose. The West was once certain of its purpose – of a purpose in which all men could be unified, and hence it had a clear vision of its future as the future of mankind. We no longer have that certainty and that clarity.” See also \textit{Natural Right}, Chapters I and II; “Progress or Return,” in \textit{The Rebirth}, 238-241; and “Preface,” \textit{SCR}, 30-31.} Therefore, the return to pre-modern thought (Biblical and Greek) is necessitated by the failure of modern liberalism to articulate its own superiority to emerging dangerous alternatives, and at the same time by its failure to offer a foundation for modern Judaism that preserves the historical identity of its people.

By recovering an older conception of man, Strauss was aiming to reopen the argument between the moderns and the ancients about the nature of man and the nature of the best political
order. He had to assert human vice and corruption as a theoretical counterpoint to human innocence in order to renew the more fundamental philosophical quest for human excellence and redemption. Against the looming Nazi barbarism and modern liberal impotence, Strauss evokes and captures the humanity of the ancients. Classical philosophy, he will write years later, “had been the humanizing quest for the eternal order, and hence it had been a pure source of humane inspiration and aspiration.”

He could have said this of Biblical thought as well.

Strauss, then, returned to the pre-moderns in order to strike at the heart of the most fundamental assumptions of modern thought. The virtues of the Biblical and Greek traditions is that they were free of modern presuppositions about man and his place within the eternal order, and despite their own disagreements, they offered a compelling alternative that allowed Strauss not only to establish a foothold outside the modern horizon, it also allowed him to reestablish pre-modern Jewish thought as the standard against which modern Jewish ideas could be measured and evaluated. The process of abandoning the modern project allowed Strauss to reopen the ancient dialogue between philosophy and religion regarding the source of redemption (reason or revelation), and consequently enabled him to rethink not only the modern solution to the Jewish question and to search for alternatives but also to rethink the nature of the question itself.

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543 Strauss, *Natural Right*, 34. See also *What is Political Philosophy*, 37. There Strauss makes essentially the same point but with the pointed focus on the role of technology and its dehumanization of the modern world: “The difference between the classics and us…consists exclusively in a different estimate of the virtues of technology. But we are not entitled to say that the classical view has been refuted. Their implicit prophecy that the emancipation of technology, of the arts, from moral and political control would lead to disaster or to the dehumanization of man has not yet been refuted.”
CHAPTER 5
MAIMONIDES ON REASON AND REVELATION: REDEMPTION AS ACCOMMODATION

“Maimonides is the ‘classic of rationalism’ in Judaism.”

In this chapter I turn to Strauss’s study of Maimonides’ encounter with the Greek philosophical tradition. I argue that Strauss came to understand him as the exemplar of a Jew who in his scholarly work and in his life successfully bridged the gap between Judaism and philosophy by making a strong case for the necessity of both, and he did so with a skill that appealed to a varied audiences with different levels of education and expectation. Strauss found in Maimonides a historical archetype who skillfully navigated the treacherous terrain between religion and philosophy, between revelation and reason, and used it, in part at least, to make his own philosophical case for the historical necessity of the Jewish people.

Specifically, Strauss was making a powerful case that the medieval Jewish sage was emphasizing the agreement between the teachings of the Torah and Greek philosophy. Early on Strauss held the view that Maimonides, rather than submit Judaism to the judgment of philosophy, used philosophy in order to defend Judaism, and he did so by showing that the radically diverse positions of religion and philosophy could be accommodated without sacrificing their fundamental claims. Specifically, Maimonides argued for this position, according to Strauss, by answering some basic questions, questions that were not asked by post-Enlightenment Jewish thinkers, questions about the fundamental relation between revelation and reason – more precisely between the Jewish conception of revelation as Law and the Greek conception of philosophy as the comprehensive search for what is. What role, if any, does or

544 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 21.
should philosophy play within Judaism? Is the life of philosophy justified on grounds of Jewish Law? Can Jewish Law be justified or explained on grounds of Greek philosophy? Is Jewish conception of revelation a necessary supplement and correction to philosophy, and if so, why?

Strauss’s sustained articulation of the view that reason and revelation, while distinct in their fundamental suppositions and claims are nevertheless compatible began to take shape within the context of Spinoza’s critique of Maimonides. By focusing on the philosophical differences between Spinoza and Maimonides Strauss brought to light the theologico-political issues that animated the conflict between the moderns and the ancients. These include, first, their divergent views regarding the efficacy of reason; second, their respective claims about the purpose and value of revealed law and with it their understanding of the meaning of prophecy; and third, the distinction between esoteric and exoteric writing. Through these issues we see Strauss working his way toward a view that Maimonides introduced philosophy into Judaism because he was convinced that neither the belief in revelation nor reason can exclusively redeem man.

**Limits of Reason and the necessity for Revelation (the Metaphysical Argument)**

Strauss’s earliest foray into the thought of Maimonides is rather conventional in that it fits within the main stream of modern scholarship. The conventional view of medieval philosophy holds that the kinds of questions that occupied medieval authors in general were theological in nature whose aim was to provide a rational account of God. According to this view, the most important issue that gave rise to this concern, and the problem that animated the

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545 Strauss, SCR, 147-192.
conflict between Greek philosophy and the Scriptures, was the metaphysical question of eternity or creation of the world. The conflict amounted to the following: The rational (Aristotelian) account of the universe, which claimed that matter and motion were eternal, and which conceived of God as self-contemplator, was radically questioned by the Biblical account of Creation. The aim of medieval authors, broadly speaking, was to rationally defend the possibility of Creation and, as a consequence, to be able to rationally account for sacred history, to show that God’s power and will could and did disrupt the so-called natural order.

Furthermore, the medieval theologians, unlike their modern counterparts, understood philosophy broadly as rational or human knowledge in general, distinct from revealed or divinely inspired knowledge. Consequently, they accepted more than one source of truth. The specific goal of Jewish theologians was “to examine those areas in which Torah and philosophic thought seemed to be in conflict, in order to show that either the conflict was apparent or, if the conflict was real, that a particular understanding of the Torah should be followed.”

Maimonides built his case for accommodation between philosophy and revelation, according to Strauss’s early view, on grounds of their identical aims. The task of philosophy is the perfection of the human soul, and given the fact that man is the rational animal, perfection of the soul amounts to the perfection of the theoretical intellect, or knowledge of first causes. The Torah, or the revealed law, has three aims: one, communal order and peace; two, individual moral training; and three, perfection of knowledge. Communal order and moral training address the perfection of the body, whereas pursuit of knowledge addresses the perfection of the soul or the true perfection of man as man. The third aim, then, is in harmony with philosophy. Since

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546 Samuelson, Back to the Sources, 261-262.
547 Ibid., 262.
the Torah holds man to be created, perfect knowledge consists of knowing and, consequently, loving his Creator.\footnote{Strauss, \textit{SCR}, 165-166.}

Spinoza also put forth proper human perfection as perfection of understanding, which he too held to be knowledge and love of God (setting aside here his radically different conception of God). The purpose of Divine law, which is nothing but the law of nature, is the means to this perfection. This law is universal, independent of historical narrative, and requires no ceremonies as expression of piety. All that is required is the “natural light of reason.”\footnote{Spinoza, \textit{A Theologico-political Treatise}, 61.} Furthermore, he eliminated the distinction between moral and intellectual perfection in “the wise,” a position which he found to be supported by the Scriptures.\footnote{Ibid., 66-67. One can add that this position is also supported by Plato.} Among the philosophers, knowledge and goodness are one. Only among the many, who can be compelled to moderation without understanding does this distinction hold. On this view, virtue for the many is nothing but “social perfection;” its aim is public order. But, according to Spinoza, this kind of moral virtue as well as social peace is achieved through man-made not Divine law. Spinoza, Strauss wrote, “completely severs divine law and human law.”\footnote{Strauss, \textit{SCR}, 167.} Hence, the singular aim of Divine law, as perfection of the intellect, is perfection of individual as individual, “it has no [direct] bearing on society.”\footnote{Ibid.}

From the traditional Jewish perspective, the consequence of this view is dramatic. Since Spinoza held that Divine law is addressed universally to every man as man, as a rational creature, he inevitably delinked it from its particular, political context which is central in the Biblical
narrative. It is no longer addressed to certain men or to a particular group of men. Since the Mosaic Law first and foremost informs and guides the moral conduct of a specific group, the Jews, within a particular social and political context and not individuals as individuals, Spinoza concluded that this law could not possess Divine authority; it was man-made. By denying the divine nature of the Torah, Spinoza by implication rejected the central Biblical claim that God, at least at one time, spoke to men through the Jewish people. He thus denied not only the philosophical importance of revelation but also the historical claim that Jews are the chosen people – the priestly people, whose mighty task is to be the righteous nation among the nations.

Unlike Spinoza whose rejection of the Torah Strauss traced to his “fundamental alienation from Judaism,” Maimonides began his philosophical task with the acceptance of the Torah, or to put it differently, for him as a Jew the law, as revealed Law, was authoritative. Maimonides’ interpretation of Scripture is “guided by concern with Scripture. This concern springs from concern with conduct required of man, required of the Jew, by Scripture.” But it is not sufficient to say that Maimonides accepted the Law because he was a Jew; more accurately, he understood that without the Law there can be no Judaism in any meaningful sense – a position that will be proven to be correct foremost by the personal example of Spinoza. Given Strauss’s analysis of the modern Jewish predicament, this insight was decisive for him in his reorientation from the world created by Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza to the one defended by Maimonides.

553 Ibid., 169, 171, 174.
554 Ibid., 174.
555 For Strauss’s analysis of the relationship between Spinoza’s and Descartes, see SCR, 183-185.
Within the context of the dichotomy between the affirmation and the denial of revelation and with it between the defense of and alienation from Judaism, Strauss formulated the issue as a whole between Maimonides and Spinoza and by extension between the ancients and the moderns in terms of “[h]uman inadequacy versus human adequacy.”

The difference between Maimonides and “philosophy,” and therewith between Maimonides and Spinoza, comes to light first in the assertion that human reason is inadequate for solving the central problem. In the conviction that human reason is inadequate lies the reason for concern for revelation.

Strauss’s return to and recovery of medieval philosophy could be stated thusly: Given the highly skeptical and yet inconclusive position taken by modern philosophy with respect to revelation, the interest in medieval philosophy by contrast emerges from the possibility of revelation.

The “central problem” referred to by Strauss is the argument between religion and philosophy about the origins and nature of the universe. According to Maimonides, the basis for revelation and thus for Judaism is the claim that the world is not eternal but created. Thus for a Jew to accept the Aristotelian notion of the eternity of the world “would amount to destroying the Torah root and stock, to accounting all miracles as fictions, and to declaring baseless everything for which the Torah makes one hope and of which it makes one fear.” But as long as philosophy has not been able to prove without any doubt the eternity of the world and thus to solve the argument – and, according to Maimonides, it hasn’t because it cannot (this is at least the view held by Strauss early on) – its own scientific reason points to its own limitation and thus

556 Ibid., 159.
557 Ibid., 158.
558 Ibid., 160. See also Philosophy and Law, 91: “Indeed for Maimonides it is known that Scripture teaches the creation of the world and – what is even more important for him – that Judaism forfeits its foundation if the assertion of creation is abandoned.”
559 Strauss, SCR, 161.
to the possibility of creation. The need of revelation and with it the interest in revelation emerges upon the failure of philosophy to resolve conclusive the disagreement about creation or eternity of the world. Thus Strauss writes in Philosophy and Law

The conviction of the inadequacy of the human intellect to knowledge of the truth, that is, of the decisively important truth, is the condition of the possibility that a philosopher as philosopher may have an interest in the revelation. Maimonides, the classic author of medieval Jewish rationalism, is filled with this conviction. The decisively important doctrine, the doctrine on whose truth the possibility of being a Jew depends absolutely, that is, the doctrine of createdness of the world, is, according to his explicit and emphatic statement, not demonstrable.

According to Strauss, to understand Maimonides’s defense of revelation it is important to keep in mind the purpose for writing the Guide. The theoretical aspect of whether the world is created or eternal crucially bears on the identity of Judaism. If the world is freely created by God then miracles are possible; if miracles are possible then revelation is possible; if revelation is possible then the sufficiency of human intellect is questioned and the unique status of the people of Israel in the scheme of redemption can be affirmed. Judaism ostensibly stands or falls on this cosmological speculation. Maimonides wrote the book, then, exclusively for “believing Jews who have, by reason of their training in philosophy, fallen into doubt and perplexity, into a conflict between the views that they have taken over on the basis of the

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560 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 66: “Maimonides demonstrates that reason has a limit and must therefore accept the suprarational doctrines of revelation without being able to understand or demonstrate them. Maimonides’ rational critique of reason shows that philosophy knows, strictly speaking, only the ‘lower world’…”

561 Ibid., 64.

562 Moses Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover Publication, 1956), 199: “If we were to accept the Eternity of the Universe as taught by Aristotle, that everything in the Universe is the result of fixed laws, that Nature does not change, and that there is nothing supernatural, we should necessarily be in opposition to the foundation of our religion, we should disbelieve all miracles and signs, and certainly reject all hopes and fears derived from Scripture…” This observation applies to Aristotle alone. According to Maimonides, Plato’s cosmology can admit of creation and miracles.
tradition and their philosophic insight.”\textsuperscript{563} The natural or immediate experience that is characteristically Jewish is “obedience in act to the Torah.”\textsuperscript{564} Belief in revelation, then, is historically, existentially, and logically prior to philosophic or scientific inquiry. But acceptance of the priority of revelation need not be hostile to the rational pursuit of knowledge. Indeed the Jewish law “summons to the understanding and to the demonstration of the truths that it imparts.” True piety, then, accords with understanding because “belief is perfect only if a man has seen that the opposite of what is believed is in no way possible.” What this means is that every Jew is commanded “implicitly” to know the world because “God can be known only from His works.” Since the aim of Divine law is perfection of man, man reaches this perfection through the knowledge of God. Thus Maimonides was teaching those perplexed Jews that “the end of the law is identical with the end of philosophy.”\textsuperscript{565} The following extensive quote illustrates Strauss’s view of Maimonides just as he himself was beginning to work through his own theologico-political perplexities as a young German Jew torn out of his Jewish tradition by his philosophical education:

Maimonides is not setting up a pedagogical program by virtue of sovereign philosophy. He himself had in his own life followed this advice given to the young. He also was brought up as a Jew, before he turned to philosophy. As a Jew, born, living and dying with Jews, he pursued philosophy as a Jewish teacher of Jews. His argumentation takes its course, his disputes take place, within the context of Jewish life, and for that context. He defends the context of Jewish life which is threatened by the philosophers in so far as it is threatened by them. He enlightens Judaism by means of philosophy, to the extent that Judaism can be enlightened. He elevates Judaism by means of philosophy once again to the height it originally attained, so far as Judaism had descended from that height.

\textsuperscript{563} Strauss, \textit{SCR.}, 164.
\textsuperscript{564} Ibid: “the stage of intellectual formation that necessarily precedes the stage of philosophic knowledge is obedience in act to the Torah; knowledge of the truths embodied in faith on the basis of tradition is necessarily prior to proof of those truths, that is, to philosophy.”
\textsuperscript{565} Strauss, \textit{Philosophy and Law}, 89-90.
as a result of the disfavor of the times; Maimonides’ philosophy is based in principle and throughout on Judaism.\textsuperscript{566}

Strauss’s argument establishes that contrary to Spinoza and the moderns who judged revelation in the court of its own, newly established “scientific” reason and found it to be a mere “prejudice,”\textsuperscript{567} for Maimonides it is philosophy that first of all has to justify its claims in the court of the Jewish Law in order for itself not to become a mere prejudice. Thus Maimonides, according to Strauss, established a legal justification for philosophy.\textsuperscript{568} By doing so, Maimonides not only preserved the divine nature of the Torah, but he also and simultaneously defended philosophy against orthodox disfavor. He accomplished this task on the playing field of revelation or Judaism. But Maimonides defended the necessity of both reason and revelation also on philosophic grounds, on grounds of their common aim: perfection of the intellect through knowledge of this world (the only knowledge available to philosophy). By doing so he simultaneously established the universal function of the Torah, which is “to educate mankind in true worship of God through Israel,”\textsuperscript{569} and with it the rational grounds for defending the historical claim of the election of Israel. Maimonides defended Judaism, according to Strauss, by showing the intellectual indeterminacy of Aristotelian science.

In sum, Strauss embraced the moderate rationalism of Maimonides, one that simultaneously defended revelation against reason on philosophical grounds and defended reason against orthodox religion on legal grounds. What made Maimonides a rationalist in this

\textsuperscript{566} Strauss, SCR, 164.

\textsuperscript{567} Ibid., 164-165. For a discussion on how Strauss understood the concept of prejudice see Green, Jew and Philosopher, 13-15; Eugene Sheppard, Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile, 49-51.

\textsuperscript{568} Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 60: “The first and fundamental task of medieval philosophy is the legal foundation of philosophy, that is, first of all, the demonstration that the men suited to philosophizing are obligated and thus authorized to philosophize by the revealed law.”

\textsuperscript{569} Strauss, SCR, 167. See Maimonides, The Guide, trans. Friedlander, 350: “[O]ur object is to lead mankind to the service of God, and to good social order.”
(original) sense is his insistence on beginning with the recognition of the limitation of reason. From this position he moved to conclude the possibility and the necessity of revelation. In other words, he “demonstrates the rational character of Mosaic law.” By establishing that Aristotelian cosmology could not be demonstrated, he was reinforcing as rational the Jewish belief in revelation and consequently in its unique status as the chosen people.

**Prophecy as Philosophic Legislation (the Epistemic-Political Argument)**

Spinoza (and modern philosophy in general) articulated an alternative to the Biblical world-view. His account of the whole presupposed human ability to account for the whole, and consequently, he asserted the ability on the part of man as man to construct a rational, moral, liberal society. Biblical thought, on the other hand, presupposed human limitations and thus constructed a polity based on revelation. In light of this stark dichotomy, Strauss’s assertion that Maimonides accommodated reason and revelation has to be clarified.

Strauss’s analysis of Maimonides’ simultaneous defense of philosophy and religion has a certain dialectical structure in that it is made both on philosophic and religious grounds. In the first place Strauss argues that the position staked out by Maimonides is based on Aristotelian physics, on his analysis of the natural world. Pursuit of this kind of knowledge, the scientific knowledge of the world as it is, leads inevitably to the question of the origins of the world: is the world eternal or created? Strauss’s early account (one found in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*) attributes to Maimonides the view that human reason overreaches when it attempts to provide a definitive answer to this question. The purview of human reason is this world, the “sublunary

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570 Strauss, SCR, 159: “Reason needs revelation, reason desires the solution offered by revelation.”
571 Ibid.
world.” Aristotle himself, according to Strauss, succeeded only in contributing to our knowledge of this world, the only world that is accessible to human understanding. Defense of the possibility of creation rests on philosophically inconclusive results regarding the question of origin and, consequently, on the philosophical recognition of its own limits. Failure on the part of philosophy to conclusively prove eternity of the world opens up the possibility that the world is created. Thus from this perspective, accommodation could be reached through the understanding that rational knowledge of God (the God of the Bible) or the knowledge of the other world (the source of creation) is available to man through his knowledge of this world; philosophy can get us there through, and only through, its analysis of the here. Philosophic knowledge is mediated, inferential knowledge. But this can only be true under the assumption of creation. If matter and motion are eternal then philosophic investigation of this world says nothing about the other world. Indeed, with the exception of Platonic and neo-Platonic affirmation of otherworldliness, the philosophic tendency has been to deny implicitly (or explicitly) its existence altogether. Thus the philosophically unproven assumption of the possibility of creation precedes the philosophic claim of compatibility of philosophy and religion.

But Maimonides, according to Strauss, puts forth a second defense of the proposition that the world is created which emerges precisely out of the recognition of the limits of philosophy. It advances a proposition that holds the superiority of the prophet over the philosopher. As Strauss put it, “[i]n the face of this limitation upon all human understanding, Maimonides demands caution and mistrust in regard to the inclination of human thinking, and points to the

572 Ibid., 157.
Jewish tradition founded by Moses’ prophecy.”

On this view the knowledge of this world is the task of the philosopher, but the proclamation of the other world is the task of the prophet.

Let us recall that Spinoza criticized Maimonides’s position that philosophy and theology are compatible on grounds of revelation. Spinoza’s critique “of truth and piety, in one body of doctrine of revelation,” as Strauss put it, rested on his “critique of God as law-giver.”

Specifically, he rejected that there is any law outside man-made law whose transgression constitutes a violation of God’s will. He did so, according to Strauss, because he had to erase any notion of sin, since it did not comport with his conception of the world built on strictly rational or natural foundations.

What disturbed the purely rational mind of Spinoza was Maimonides’s theory of prophecy, a theory that elevated the prophet – the one who, because of his supra-rational discernment, stands as the mediator between God and men – to a status superior to the philosopher by the nature of his insight, an insight that transcends natural or ordinary human capacities. This conception of prophecy was instrumental to Maimonides’s project of interpreting the Scriptures to clarify certain perplexities. The way in which he accomplished this task, broadly speaking, was by distinguishing between “the literal and the real meaning” of the Bible. This distinction amounted to the following series of claims: first, human speech is not able to provide positive attributes of God because of God’s unity in its deepest sense – this is the central teaching of the Bible; second, the literal meaning of Scriptures – the one imbedded in the written word – cannot, therefore, be the right meaning because it contradicts the truth of God’s

573 Ibid., 157-158.
574 Ibid., 172.
575 Ibid., 171-172.
576 Ibid., 172.
unity and thus belies its own revealed nature; finally, Divine law conveys both the literal or the “outer” meaning and the real or “inner” meaning thus instructing man in communal-moral life through the former and imparting upon some fundamental truths through the latter.\textsuperscript{577}

The prophetic texts testify to the unique gifts of the prophet who both possesses direct knowledge of revelation and the capacity to impart this knowledge on multiple levels of meaning. To do so certain conditions must hold. They consist of the “perfection of the intellect, of the morals, and of the imaginative faculty.”\textsuperscript{578} Perfection of the intellect is the task of philosophical training. Thus the prophet “must at least be also a philosopher, an actual knower; the perfection of the intellect, acquired through practice and instruction, is a condition of prophecy.”\textsuperscript{579} Philosophy then is the necessary condition for prophecy; the prophet is not everyman. But it is not a sufficient condition. Given God’s “unfathomable freedom” a philosopher may be denied the power of prophetic illumination. “It is an essential character of revelation that it should be a free gift bestowed by God, and that it cannot be acquired by human talent or training.”\textsuperscript{580} Thus Maimonides held that “a man endowed to receive prophecy, and properly trained for it according to the philosophers’ correct specifications, may nevertheless be restrained from prophesying by the miraculous intervention of God’s will.”\textsuperscript{581}

\textsuperscript{577} Ibid., 295, footnote 224. See also Maimonides, \textit{Guide of the Perplexed}, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 12. Speaking of prophetic parables Maimonides writes: “Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meaning of the \textit{Proverbs} and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is.”

\textsuperscript{578} Strauss, \textit{Philosophy and Law}, 104.

\textsuperscript{579} Ibid., 105.

\textsuperscript{580} Strauss, SCR, 155.

\textsuperscript{581} Ibid. See also \textit{Philosophy and Law}, 104. Alfarabi, according to Strauss, denied prophecy to be super-philosophical knowledge. For him the prophet is the philosopher. See ibid., 116.
Strauss is very clear about the nature of this miracle: its function is to deny, not enable prophesy to the one with the gift and talent to do so. Maimonides had to interpret prophesy in this manner explicitly in the name of Judaism, in the name of the Biblical case for the transcendent order, and at the same time for the sake of philosophy, for the sake of natural human understanding. This is so because “[i]f the revelation were merely the miraculous deed of God, it would be simply beyond all human understanding.”

He had to recognize the incomprehensible power of God who is able at will to break through the natural order of his own construction and at the same time he had to insist on philosophy as absolutely necessary for prophetic insight, that is, in order to make revelation comprehensible in human terms.

The revelation is intelligible only insofar as God’s deed of revelation is carried out through second causes, is worked out in creation, in created nature. If it is to be wholly intelligible, it must be simply a natural fact. The means through which God carries out the deed of revelation is the prophet, that is, an extraordinary man, preeminent above all, but in any case a man. Therefore the philosophic understanding of the revelation, the philosophic foundation of the law, means the explanation of prophecy from the nature of man.

Still prophetic illumination is not the same as philosophic knowledge. Knowledge based on revelation is supra-rational. Strauss explains at some length Maimonides’ hierarchical conception of knowledge which corresponds to the hierarchy of man. Only the prophets are endowed with the capacity for direct knowledge of transcendence (of what truly is) and among them Moses is the only one for whom illumination, but for brief interruptions, is continuous. Lesser prophets experience greater interruptions and among these some prophets were

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582 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 104.
583 Ibid. The emphasis is in the original.
584 Ibid., 108-109, 126
585 It should be noted that Maimonides considered Jesus and Mohammed equal to Moses as law-giving prophets, that is, as founders of religious communities. See Green, Jew and Philosopher, 216.
The philosopher, on the other hand, is enlightened indirectly; his merely rational capacity to know what is real is opaque compared with the prophet. “[H]is knowledge of the upper world necessarily remains fragmentary and doubtful” because ultimately it is based on “syllogisms and proofs.” The rest of mankind lives in semi-darkness.

But the prophet has other capacities that make him a more complete human being, superior to the philosopher. Since revelation is addressed to everyone through the one (or the select few) with the “capacity for theoretical life,” the prophet must also possess the skill of communicating revealed truths in a way that is accessible to the non-philosophical many, namely, imagination. “The prophet must…be a man who, while having philosophical knowledge at his disposal, is at the same time capable of presenting it figuratively; besides perfection of the intellect, perfection of the imaginative faculty is also a condition of prophecy.”

According to Strauss, Maimonides understood these prophetic faculties as working in harmony with one another because without holding prophetic imagination to be a certain kind of perfection, his interpretation of the Scriptures as having an inner and outer truths could not hold, and, consequently, the central claims of the Biblical narrative (specifically those dealing with the positive attributes of God) would stand in contradiction to truths of reason and, therefore, could

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586 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 108, 116. See also SCR, 155-156: “If God’s essence is hidden and unfathomable, if all human knowledge of God is fragmentary and intermittent, then there cannot but be a genuine interest in revelation; if God is hidden from us by the world and by our preoccupation with that world, if our knowledge of God is comparable to the occasional flash of lightning in a night of profound darkness, if then there may be gradations in the clarity of this vision, from almost unceasing illumination to complete benightedness, and if the zenith of clarity was attained by Moses the prophet, and if all other human knowledge of God remains in varying degree far below that zenith: then acceptance of the unsurpassable teaching of Moses, far transcending the knowledge of all other men, is due and binding.”

587 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 105.
no longer be considered revealed but purely fictitious. Indeed, Spinoza rejected the Law of Moses as Divine law not only because he found neither empirical nor rational evidence for its revealed nature, but also and precisely because he saw no evidence for the cooperative arrangement between the intellect and the imaginative faculty. Spinoza, under the influence of Cartesian science, took it for granted that “the stronger the power of understanding; the less the power of the imagination, and vice versa.”

Let us recall that Spinoza’s interpretation of the Scriptures hinged entirely on its literal meaning, that is, exclusively on the imaginative faculty uninformed by reason. In imaginative capacity – and by extension in the Biblical narrative – he saw only danger to reason. However, in condemning imagination (and the Bible) he failed to see the benefit to it from rational instruction. Spinoza, according to Strauss, failed to notice what Maimonides saw clearly – the dual function of the prophet: his capacity for theoretical knowledge (to grasp by his intellect that which is revealed by God) and his capacity for practical knowledge (to render his insight understandable to the masses through his deployment of easily accessible images). By claiming imagination and not the intellect as the source of prophetic inspiration Spinoza failed to see its mere communicative function. Maimonides, on the other hand, envisioned the prophet as standing between God and man; the prophet directly grasps God’s existence, His unity and His incorporeality, and he communicates these truths in images that can awe his nascent community and establish God’s authority over it. Thus the prophet is not only the philosopher and more, he

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588 Strauss, SCR, 172.
589 Ibid.
590 See Chapter Three of this dissertation.
591 Strauss, SCR, 172-173: “Spinoza’s critique thus presupposes the proof that understanding does not influence imagination as imagination influences understanding.”
is also the law giver and as such he serves a political function. In other words, the point of the imaginative faculty “is only to communicate to the multitude certain doctrines without which the existence of the community is not possible.” In this respect, “[p]rophecy is both theoretical and practical; the prophet is teacher and governor in one.”

[T]he prophet is a man of perfect intellect and perfect imaginative faculty, who is completely ruled by desire for knowledge of the upper world. Only such a man can be in direct union with the upper world, can directly know “God and the angels.” This knowledge, superior to all other human knowledge, qualifies him to be a teacher of men, a teacher even of the philosophers; in particular, the fact that even his imaginative faculty is wholly seized by knowledge of the upper world qualifies him for the figurative presentation of his knowledge and hence for the instruction of the multitude.

Reason and revelation are accommodated on this view through this dual capacity of the prophet. But this accommodation is accomplished by the ascription of a political meaning to revelation. Revelation here is understood as legislation, the prophet in his political, not philosophical, function is the law-giver, the supreme legislator. As such his function is to help the members of his community to reach moral and intellectual perfection, perfection of the body and the soul. The aim of divine law, then, is the ideal community, a community of virtue and justice, or, in Jewish terms, a community of righteousness. But there is a caveat: The law serves the same function among the many as reason serves among the few. The law is the rational extension into the public sphere of what is privately available only to the prophet. The moral and intellectual perfection of the people is of lesser degree than the perfection of the prophet precisely because it is mediated by the law. Put another way, piety is a necessary and rational political virtue. By asserting this superiority of the prophet over men (including the

593 Ibid., 120. Emphasis is in the original.
594 Ibid., 111. Emphasis is in the original.
595 Ibid., 121.
Maimonides successfully vindicated not only the rationality of belief in revelation but also the rationality of the Jewish tradition. He successfully defended the Law in the court of reason by exposing the limitations of reason; that is, he presented a rational case for the necessity of revelation.

Maimonides’s political rendering of revelation, according to Strauss, is based on the assumption that men need revelation. Maimonides links this need for revelation-as-divine-legislation to the claim that man requires political association for his physical and spiritual perfection. In other words, Strauss locates the source of this position in the classical argument that by nature man is a political animal (a claim that was strongly contested by Hobbes). But given also human natural individuality and diversity, well-functioning political associations are not easy to come by; harmony of interests is not natural. Therefore, men need legislation and a legislator, that is, they need “a governor to regulate” their affairs “in such a way that a concord based on statute replaces the natural opposition.” Human existence “depends on the existence of human individuals who have the capacity of governing” and God, who created men as they are, also provided them with such individuals.

This political rendition of Maimonides, with its theory of prophecy occupying central place, stands outside traditional scholarship. It departs radically from conventional interpretations of Maimonides as a scholastic philosopher whose primary aim was to reconcile

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596 Ibid: “If the founder of the perfect community must be a prophet, but the prophet is more than a philosopher, this means that the founding of the perfect community is not possible for a man who is only a philosopher. Hence the philosopher too is dependent on a law given by a prophet; the philosopher too must obey the prophet; he would have to obey him even if his theoretical insights were no less than the prophet’s; for this theoretical insight would not make him capable of legislation; and man, as a political being, can live only under a law.”

597 Even the most radical arguments for self-government, such as Rousseau’s and Marx’s, have not been able to come to terms with this fact in any compelling way.

598 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 120-121.
Biblical religion with Aristotelian philosophy. The founding principle of Aristotelian philosophy and its primary theme is a theoretical account of nature. It begins with physics, that which is observable, and proceeds to metaphysics or theology, that which can only be contemplated. God for Aristotle becomes a metaphysical necessity, provable by the workings of the natural world. What is lacking from Aristotle’s philosophy is the recognition of the political context within which all philosophizing takes place, indeed, according to Strauss, must take place. The Aristotelian philosopher, in other words, is unfettered by the law. “Aristotle sets [philosophy] completely free; or rather, he leaves it in its natural freedom.”

Strauss argues, in opposition to this view, that the basis for understanding Maimonides’s Guide is not scholasticism but Plato’s political philosophy. He is able to adopt this unconventional position because of his reliance on alternative (i.e., non-Christian but Muslim) medieval sources, specifically al-Farabi, that held considerable influence on Maimonides. Muslim and Jewish philosophers during the Middle Ages, according to Strauss, were guided “by the primary, ancient idea of law as a unified, total regimen of human life...because they [were] pupils of Plato and not of Christians.” The other significant source for this view for him was Hermann Cohen, who advanced the position that on Jewish (if not on philosophical) grounds Maimonides could not have been an Aristotelian.

Cohen most forcibly established his paradoxical doubt of Maimonides’s Aristotelianism with the lapidary sentence, “All honor to the God of Aristotle; but truly he is not the God of Israel”… for this reason a Jew as Jew cannot be an Aristotelian; for him it can never at any time be left at a matter of the primacy of theory; he cannot assert this primacy unconditionally and unreservedly.

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599 Ibid., 132.
600 Ibid., 73.
601 Ibid., 130-131.
Strauss does not deny that Maimonides asserted the primacy of theory as the highest achievement of philosophy, but he grounded its purely contemplative pursuits within a political setting. The philosopher too was subject to the law given by the prophet, who in all respects is superior to the philosopher. The end of philosophy is the knowledge of truth, but truth is unavailable to the unaided human reason. The end of prophecy is the founding of the ideal state which is only possible because of direct prophetic illumination. This claim, according to Strauss, reveals that Maimonides’ theory of prophecy was the fulfillment of Plato’s notion of the philosopher-king. “The prophet is the founder of the ideal state. The classic model of the ideal state is the Platonic state.” Thus “the prophet is the founder of the Platonic state.” In other words, the foundation of Maimonides’ theory of prophecy is Platonic political thought. Plato merely furnished a theoretical “outline” that was “filled-in” with a sacred content by Maimonides and his Muslim predecessors for whom revelation was a historical fact. For them the fact of the revelation is certain; for them therefore it is also certain that a simply binding law, a divine law, a law proclaimed by a prophet with the force of law, is actual. This law authorizes them to philosophize. In philosophizing, they inquire into the possibility of the actual law; they answer this inquiry within the horizon of Platonic politics; they understand the revelation in the light of Platonic politics. They derive Platonic politics from un-Platonic premise – the premise of revelation.

By asserting a Platonic rather than an Aristotelian foundation for Maimonides’ theory, Strauss was not denying that Plato too conceived philosophy ultimately as contemplation. In other words, for him, too, the highest human good is knowledge. The fundamental difference between Plato and Aristotle, however, according to Strauss, revolves around the social role and responsibility that philosophers have. Aristotle sets them “completely free” whereas Plato

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602 Ibid., 74, 127. Emphasis in the original.
603 Ibid.
604 Ibid., 128.
“compels’ them to care for the others and to guard them, in order that the state may really be a state, a true state (Rep. 519-520c).” For Plato, then, the philosopher “stands under the state, is answerable for himself before the state; he is not simply sovereign.” It is this moderate conception of philosophy-under-the-law that consequently comes to life and is fulfilled during medieval enlightenment, or, as Strauss puts it, “is fulfilled in the age of belief in revelation.”

The consequences of this discovery for Strauss were far reaching. He “discerned that this so called ‘Platonic’ political philosophy provided Maimonides with a unique and penetrating philosophical access to biblical religion, Jewish theology, and divine law, and laid the basis for Maimonides’ entire approach to conciliating reason and revelation.” But Strauss also recognized at this stage that in the process of adopting the philosophic politics of Plato as the foundation for his theory of prophecy, Maimonides also took liberties with this ancient source which, according to him, amounted to a departure from Plato. Since Maimonides (and the Falasifa) took revelation as a historical fact, his appeal to Plato whose philosophizing stood outside the Biblical horizon proved to be a “modification” and indeed a “critique” of Plato.

If the founder of the perfect community can only be a prophet, this implies that the founding of the perfect community is not possible for the man who is only a philosopher… In sketching the true state, Plato predicted the revelation; but just as, in general, it is only the fulfillment that teaches a full understanding of the prediction, so the Platonic sketch must be modified on the basis of the actual revelation, the actual state.

Strauss’s analysis shows that for the Islamic Falasifa and their student, Maimonides, “the founder of the ideal state is not a possible philosopher-king to be awaited in the future, but an

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605 Ibid., 132. See also Plato, Republic, 519-520c; The Laws of Plato, trans. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), Book X.
606 Green, Jew and Philosopher, 96.
607 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 74.
608 Ibid., 128-129, 74.
actual prophet who existed in the past. That is, they modified Plato’s answer in the light of the revelation that has now actually occurred.” In other words, Strauss took Maimonides (and his Islamic predecessors) to be a pious member of his religious community for whom revelation was not “truly open to question” and therefore was the only perfect basis for political and moral life. For Maimonides revelation presented itself as the Law whose divine origin was vouched for by the prophet, an individual whose qualities he established to be superior to the philosopher.

Greek philosophy, with all the respect given to it, was nevertheless measured and assessed against, and adopted to account for revelation, the revelation given to the Jewish people, as a fact established beyond all doubt.

The Esoteric Dimension of Medieval Jewish Thought (the Rhetorical-Political Argument)

By 1941 Strauss radically rethought this conclusion. That year he published two essays, “Persecution and the Art of Writing” and “Literary Character of the Guide of the Perplexed,” that marked a culmination of a number of years during which Strauss began more thoroughly to unpack the esoteric dimension of the Guide. He began to question his prior assumption that the Law was simply authoritative for Maimonides because he became more attuned to the numerous contradictions within the Guide. The full implication of Maimonides’ rationalism – and once grasped, the rationalism of the entire classical and medieval philosophical tradition from Plato to Lessing – became clear to Strauss once he understood the significance of its esoteric character.

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609 Ibid., 75.
610 Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (hence PAW), 44, 45, 31.
611 Regarding Lessing’s esotericism see “Exoteric Teaching,” in Rebirth, 64: “Lessing was the last writer who revealed, while hiding, the reasons compelling wise men to hide the truth: he wrote between the lines about the art of writing between the lines.”
In light of this discovery the previous metaphysical and epistemic-political notions of reconciliation between philosophy and Judaism had to be reconsidered as merely public or rhetorical. Strauss’s final and most intriguing exploration of Maimonides’ defense of revelation, and with it the defense of the Jewish tradition comes to full maturity, then, as a result of Strauss’s careful recovering of its esoteric character. Accordingly, Maimonides’ philosophical (or non-traditional) defense of revelation is possible, and in fact only makes sense, once the true nature of philosophy, of the teachings of the Law, and subsequently the circumspect method of Maimonides’ writing are fully understood and accounted for.

Strauss’s rather controversial argument about the esoteric nature of medieval philosophy is based on a fundamental premise that became evident to him through persistent prodding of the Guide’s hidden message, namely, that there exists of necessity a profound tension, if not an outright antagonism, between the philosopher on the one hand, and his religious-political community on the other. He maintained that Muslim and Jewish medieval authors (as distinct from their Scholastic counterparts) took the claims of revelation to be incompatible with the claims of philosophy in a radical and essential way. The common assumption of these pre-modern authors held that “the wise” and “the vulgar” were separated by an unbridgeable gap. This gap was “a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of ‘the few.’”

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612 Strauss, PAW, 42-43.
613 Strauss rejected Scholasticism precisely because he came to see in it an illegitimate attempt to openly synthesize religion with philosophy by claiming that both explicitly articulated a single fundamental truth, albeit in radically different ways. See PAW, 18-19.
614 Strauss, PAW, 34. Modern Enlightenment rejected this view and argued that the distance between the few and the many could be bridged by enlightening through popularized education those who were not philosophically inclined. The reason for this, however, according to Strauss, was less a philanthropic attitude on the part of Enlightenment thinkers than their desire to avail themselves from the threat of persecution by means other than esotericism. Unlike
Strauss came to see a compelling reason for this attitude given what he deemed to be radically incompatible aims of philosophy and society. In its original light, philosophy understood itself to be as science, as a rigorous and comprehensive attempt to understand reality, and with it to aim at the highest reaches of human potential. From its origins, philosophy equated wisdom with knowledge, and philosophers were individuals who were passionately committed to that end. Philosophy, as Strauss put it, “is the attempt to replace opinion about ‘all things’ by knowledge of ‘all things’. “

Opinion, however, is the domain of the city; it is “the element in which society breathes.” To recognize, to consider, and to give expression to diverse opinions about the things that belong to the city (what Michael Sandel called the “tumult of the city”) – public safety, just legal structure, fair distribution of wealth and goods, determination of who should rule – is the activity of politics, not philosophy. To the extent that philosophers enter into this conversation with their fellow citizens and attempt to formulate rational principles of public virtue, of justice and of authority – principles of the best regime, in short – they act as political or public philosophers. Political philosophy, then, is the outer expression of philosophy; political and moral teachings of philosophers are their public utterances. But their ultimate or private aims are not identical with the aims of the city. In their pursuit of replacing opinion with knowledge, they are not bound by their loyalties to the city. “Philosophy is as such transpolitical, transreligious, and transmoral, but the city is and

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615 Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 221. See also *Natural Right*, 11-12.
616 Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 221.
617 To the extent that philosophers are aware of the communal setting within which all philosophizing takes place, they are by definition political philosophers. This is the deeper meaning of the political that Strauss subtly introduces at this stage into the history of ideas. Philosophic self-awareness is necessarily political.
ought to be moral and religious.”

Philosophers’ inevitable skepticism regarding the fundamental values, principles and beliefs which ground society lends them to the accusation of impiety and corrupting the young. Their highest aims, in other words, are viewed – not without some merit – with suspicion and on occasion with ridicule. Philosophers, therefore, must tread water carefully in a way that allows them to pursue their ends without necessarily disturbing social order. It is precisely because philosophers in pursuit of their goals as philosophers (as opposed to their goals as citizens) do not share in the aims of their society and do not feel bound by its opinions that they pose, in principle, a threat to its norms. To avail themselves and the city from this threat, they must show respect for the opinions of the city without necessarily accepting their veracity.

Philosophers or scientists who hold this view about the relation of philosophy or science and society are driven to employ a peculiar manner of writing which would enable them to reveal what they regard as the truth to the few, without endangering the unqualified commitment of the many to the opinions on which society rests. They will distinguish between the true teaching as the esoteric teaching and the socially useful teaching as the exoteric teaching.

Philosophers who understand their philosophic task in its original meaning develop this unique method of expressing themselves as the rational manifestation of their spiritual and intellectual independence. They sense that they do not entirely belonging to and are not a part of society; they know that they are homeless in the city of man. The following passage, which Strauss wrote under a different context, illustrates best this sentiment:

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620 Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, 227: “Esotericism necessarily follows from the original meaning of philosophy, provided that it is assumed that opinion is the element of society.”
621 Ibid., 222.
The recognition of universal principles...tends to prevent men from wholeheartedly identify themselves with, or accepting, the social order that fate has allotted them. It tends to alienate them from their place on the earth. It tends to make them strangers, and even strangers on the earth.622

Hence philosophy must remain the preserve of a small “homeless” minority, and for this elite group of individuals “public communication of the philosophic and scientific truth was impossible or undesirable.” In other words, philosophers had to “conceal their opinions from all but philosophers, either by limiting themselves to oral instruction of a carefully selected group of pupils, or by writing about the most important subjects by means of ‘brief indications.’”623 Only thus could they ensure their own freedom of thought without the disturbing social and political effect on and without coming under scrutiny from the social and political order. Indeed, clever concealment of thought was and, according to Strauss, remains the preserve and the only guarantor of freedom of thought.624

It is this insight about the radical dichotomy between the philosopher and his city which became clear to Strauss during his study of Muslim and Jewish medieval authors that led him to reconsider the significance of the Guide within the larger context of the Jewish community.625 To be sure, the fact that Maimonides and his Muslim predecessors hid from the eyes of the careless reader their true teaching was quite evident to Strauss early on.626 He knew that Maimonides, steeped as he was in the Jewish Biblical and rabbinic sources, was particularly attuned to those elements of the tradition that advanced the view that the most profound

622 Strauss, Natural Right, 13-14.
624 Ibid., 56.
625 Ibid., 8.
626 See for example Strauss’s “The Philosophic Foundation of the Law”, written in 1931, although not published until 1935 as Chapter 3 of Philosophy and Law. In it Strauss was working through Maimonides’s theory of prophetology, however, he clearly noted there (pgs. 102-103) that at the heart of the distinction between medieval and modern Enlightenment is the esoteric and the exoteric character of each respectively.
teachings of the Scripture were intentionally hidden from public scrutiny. To ensure their
secrecy, the most noble and sacred truths of Judaism, which were conveyed through the Account
of the Beginning and the Account of Chariot, were communicated orally under the shadow of the

\[O\]ur Sages blame those who reveal these mysteries, and praise the merits of those who
keep them secret, although they are perfectly clear to the philosopher… They have
clearly stated that the Divine Chariot includes matters too deep and too profound for the
found in Pesachim or Pesahim 119a, which says: “What does ‘and for stately clothing’ [limkasseh ‘athik] mean? That refers to him who ‘conceals’ [mekasseh] the things which the Ancients [‘athik] of days concealed. And what is that? The secrets of the Torah.”}

Thus Strauss was aware for some time that, as he wrote later, “[a]s far as Maimonides is
concerned, the Bible is an esoteric book, and even the most perfect esoteric book ever
written.”\footnote{Strauss, PAW, 60.} What is remarkable about this stage of his encounter with Maimonides, then, is not
the fact of the esoteric dimension, but his gradual recognition of the content of the Biblical
secrets that Maimonides imparted upon his readers, and the reason why this content had to be
disclosed esoterically.

The moment Strauss grasped what Maimonides was doing was a moment of sheer
revelation for him. The kinds of questions that he began to ask pulled him deeper and deeper
into the text which became a source of intellectual sustenance to last a lifetime. The Guide, he
wrote, “is not merely a key to a forest but itself a forest, an enchanted forest, and hence also an
enchanting forest: it is a delight to the eye. For the tree of life is a delight to the eye.”\footnote{Leo Strauss, “How to Begin to Study The Guide of the Perplexed,” in The Guide of the Perplexed by Moses Maimonides, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), xiii-xiv.} In other
words, given the sacred nature of the subject matter and given the legal prohibition against such
revelation, Maimonides’s method of disclosure had to be esoteric as well. But if this is so, why was it necessary to write and publish a text to begin with if its core insights are hidden from the public eye? “How can we unseal it?” Strauss asks.

This last question, so remarkably simple, oozes with irony and double meaning, and represents the crux of Strauss’s own hermeneutics (and, by extension, of any student of Strauss for whom the content of the Guide is more than an intellectual curiosity). Upon reflection, the issue for Strauss became not simply one of exegetical excavation but one of moral responsibility and, consequently, of rhetorical or literary skill similar to one practiced by Maimonides. Strauss understood that given the secrecy of the subject matter, the scholar of the Guide has the unique responsibility of presenting his findings in a way that does not violate the spirit and the intent of its author. “How can we unseal it?” takes on the additional meaning: “by what authority do we have the right to reveal that which was meant by the author to remain concealed?” Esoteric books demand esoteric analysis. Thus he was morally compelled, despite different historical and political circumstances, to employ the same rhetorical device (which included contradictions, repetitions of popular opinions and, in light of those repetitions, unexpected omissions).

The position of Maimonides’ interpreter is, then, to some extent, identical with that of Maimonides himself. Both are confronted with a prohibition against explaining a secret teaching and with the necessity of explaining it. Consequently, one might think it advisable for the interpreter to imitate Maimonides also with regard to the solution of the dilemma, i.e., to steer a middle course between impossible obedience and flagrant transgression by attempting an esoteric interpretation of the esoteric teaching of the Guide. Since the Guide contains an esoteric interpretation of an esoteric teaching, an

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631 Strauss, PAW, 46.
632 Strauss, “How to Begin to Study the Guide,” xiii. See also PAW, 55: “The Guide is devoted to the explanation of an esoteric doctrine. But this explanation is itself of an esoteric character. The Guide is, then, devoted to the esoteric explanation of an esoteric doctrine. Consequently it is a book with seven seals.”
633 Strauss, PAW, 55: “No historian who has a sense of decency and therefore a sense of respect for a superior man such as Maimonides will disregard light-heartedly the latter’s emphatic entreaty not to explain the secret teaching of the Guide.” For a detailed discussion of esoteric methodology see ibid., 60-78.
adequate interpretation of the *Guide* would thus have to take the form of an esoteric interpretation of an esoteric interpretation of an esoteric teaching.⁶³⁴

Despite the fact that this practice may leave the reader of Strauss (certainly the casual reader) puzzled and perhaps frustrated, the moral foundation of esoteric expression imposes moral responsibility upon any scholar of esoteric work to practice cautious and moderate expression themselves. This methodological meta-position that Strauss established regarding writing about writing, while exalting moderation, leads (intentionally or not) to the extreme conclusion that esotericism, if taken seriously, tends to spawn esotericism ad infinitum; it is self-perpetuating.⁶³⁵

Despite these reservations about Strauss’s methodology, it is quite clear that substantively and as a consequence of years of meticulous and careful analysis he finally began to discover truths in the *Guide* that so far had eluded him. But consistent with his moral obligation to Maimonides and through him to the Jewish people, he did not explicitly state what those truths were, certainly not in published print.⁶³⁶ As Maimonides before him was compelled to write down truths that lay hidden in the Scripture and the rabbinic oral tradition Strauss, too, was compelled to recover the secret wisdom of the *Guide*. What compelled him?

Let us recall that Strauss turned to Maimonides among other things as an alternative to Spinoza’s solution to the Jewish problem. Spinoza found redemption for the Jewish people in assimilation, in the forgetfulness of their homelessness or, alternately, in the political reconstruction of their homeland. These were the only solutions compatible with his rationalistic

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⁶³⁴ Ibid., 56, 57.
assault on Biblical authority, which assigned a unique role and a specific dwelling place to the Jewish people. For reasons already stated, Strauss found Spinoza’s answers objectionable. In the rationalism of Maimonides the highest achievement of which now became esotericism, Strauss discovered an alternative. He came to see that not unlike Spinoza Maimonides sided with philosophy against Biblical authority, but unlike Spinoza Maimonides did not explicitly turned against Judaism; heresy need not be public. So the difference between these two rationalists who rejected the Biblical narrative of creation amounted to the fact that as a consequence of their philosophical insights Spinoza rejected Judaism whereas Maimonides remained loyal to Judaism. In fact, through esotericism Maimonides found a way of accommodating philosopher’s boundless love for the truth on the one hand, and the Jewish abiding love of righteousness and a “longing for justice,” on the other.637

Given the incompatible aims of philosophy and Judaism, a person cannot simply be both, and according to Strauss’s final and most controversial insight, Maimonides was not a Jew but a philosopher. Specifically, Strauss became convinced that Maimonides was persuaded by Aristotle’s philosophical argument for the eternity of the world as opposed to the Biblical claim for the creation of the world. This represented a radical reevaluation of his earlier view whereby Maimonides explicitly and successfully defended Judaism from Aristotelian assault.638 Now Strauss understood that this was a clever rhetorical devise Maimonides employed as not to disturb the traditionalist habits of the Jewish people.

According to Strauss, one comes to terms with the secrets of the Guide by paying close attention, in the first place, to the person (or persons) for whom it was written. The Guide,

637 See the opening paragraph to Strauss, What is Political Philosophy?, 9.
638 See supra, 184-188.
unlike the more popular Mishneh Torah, was not written for the masses despite their inevitable, intrusive presence on its pages. It was addressed to his Jewish student, Rabbi Joseph, who found himself on the fence in the conflict between reason and revelation. He became perplexed about certain Biblical passages because his own occasional and unsystematic exposure to philosophy led him to question them. Consequently, he could no longer simply accept the Jewish tradition as authoritative. Put another way, the typical addressee of the Guide stands at a crossroad between following authority on the one hand, which is his habit, and following his independent rational desire for demonstration, which may ultimately lead him to question Biblical authority, on the other. Maimonides’ genius, according to Strauss, was to anchor his student’s natural habit for authoritative learning to his own authority and interpret the Scriptures in such a way that would lead the perplexed Jew ultimately and on his own rational terms to “discover” philosophical truths at the heart of Judaism. His hints gently shepherded the appropriate reader toward his own conclusion that the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot were synonymous respectively with Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. For Strauss, then, the identity of philosophy with the esoteric message of the Bible is at the heart of the esoteric teachings of the Guide for those who are perplexed.

What he means by identifying the core of philosophy (natural science and divine science) with the highest secrets of the Law (the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot) and therewith by somehow identifying the subject matter of speculation [philosophy] with the subject matter of exegesis [secrets of the Law] may be said to be the secret par excellence of the Guide.\footnote{Strauss, PAW, 93-94; “How to Begin to Study the Guide of the Perplexed,” xvii-xix. See also Maimonides, “Epistle Dedicatory,” in The Guide for the Perplexed, trans. Pines, 3-4.}

\footnote{Strauss, “How to Begin to Study the Guide,” xvi-xvii. See also PAW, 60.}
For this type of a student, Biblical perplexities are cautiously explained when philosophic teachings are presented in the guise of Jewish secret oral tradition. This way the perplexed student need not choose philosophy over Judaism, and conversely should not think that a choice for Judaism is a choice against philosophic wisdom. Maimonides in essence domesticates philosophy by imbedding its principles within the secrets of the Jewish tradition. God’s existence, unity and incorporeality are made sense of rationally on the foundation of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. This way esotericism solves the problem into which scholasticism inevitably leads philosophy, namely, publicly making it the handmaiden to theology. Esotericism protects simultaneously the freedom of philosophy and the authority of tradition.

One also comes to terms with the secrets of the Guide by paying close attention to the political circumstances of the Jewish people at the time of its writing. According to Strauss, Maimonides introduced philosophy into Judaism at the moment when Jewish oral tradition, after centuries of exile, was threatened with extinction. Maimonides, in other words, was motivated as much by a political imperative – the imperative of prolonged exilic existence – as he was by the intellectual needs of his student.641 In this regard, his motive was not unlike that of Mendelssohn, Cohen and Rosenzweig. He wrote the Guide as a response to a crisis on a national scale. “Not a private need but only an urgent necessity of nation-wide bearing can have driven Maimonides to transgressing an explicit prohibition. Only the necessity of saving the law can have caused him to break the law.”642 And saving the law meant saving its secret teachings,

641 Strauss, PAW, 50.
642 Ibid., 49.
teachings that traditionally had been transmitted orally. Prolonged existence in the Diaspora with its lack of political certainty had the effect of endangering the hidden truth of Judaism.\(^{643}\)

As time went on, the external conditions for oral communication of the secrets of the Torah became increasingly precarious. The moment seemed eminent when it would become altogether impossible. Confronted with that prospect, Maimonides decided to write down the secret teaching.\(^{644}\)

But Strauss went further. He took the claim that in his Biblical interpretation Maimonides had adopted philosophical principles to mean that Maimonides wasn’t simply “writing down” the oral tradition. He was in fact reinterpreting it; and he was doing so precisely in line with his own intellectual background, which was infused in large measure with philosophical training, or as Strauss put it, with “speculative premises.” Maimonides, he wrote, rediscovered the secret teaching by following the indications which are met with in the Bible and in the words of the sages but also by making use of speculative premises. Since the Bible and the Talmud had been studied no less thoroughly by his predecessors than by him, his rediscovery must have been due to a particularly deep understanding of the ‘speculative premises,’ i.e., of philosophy. He did not feel conscious of thereby introducing a foreign element into Judaism, for long before his time the ‘Andalusian’ Jews had accepted the teachings of the philosophers as far as these were consonant with the basis of the Torah. Philosophic teachings thus belonged, in a sense, to the tradition of Maimonides’ family. Perhaps he even believed that the resurgence of philosophic studies in the Middle Ages more or less coincided with the disappearance of the secret teaching of Judaism and that thus the chain of tradition never was interrupted. After all, the

\(^{643}\) Ibid., 50: “[C]ontinuity of the oral tradition presupposes a certain normality of political conditions. That is why the secrets of the Torah were perfectly understood only as long as Israel lived in its own country in freedom, not subjugated by the ignorant nations of the world.”

\(^{644}\) Ibid., 50-51. See, Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed, trans. Friedlander, 251-252: “But if...I were to abstain from writing on this subject...when I die...that knowledge would die with me, and I would thus inflict great injury on you and all those who are perplexed. I would then be guilty of withholding the truth from those to whom it ought to be communicated, and of jealously depriving the heir of his inheritance. I should in either case be guilty of gross misconduct. To give a full explanation of the mystic passages of the Bible is contrary to the Law and to reason; besides, my knowledge of them is based on reasoning, not on divine inspiration. I have not received my beliefs in this respect from any teacher, but it has been formed by what I learnt from Scripture and the utterances of our Sages, and by the philosophical principles which I have adopted. It is therefore possible that my view is wrong, and that I misunderstood the passage referred to.”
defensible part of the philosophic teaching appeared to him as but a last residue of Israel’s own lost inheritance.\textsuperscript{645}

To Strauss, the identity of Aristotelian philosophy with the secret teachings of the Bible was an innovation, albeit a noble one. He upheld this controversial position consistently for the rest of his life as evidenced by examples from his latter writings. On one occasion he wrote that Maimonides “when introducing Aristotelian philosophy into Judaism, \textit{had to assume} that he was merely recovering Israel’s lost inheritance.”\textsuperscript{646} On another occasion he made a similar point:

The first four chapters of the \textit{Yesode Ha-Torah}…\textit{introduce philosophy into the Holy of Holies by as it were rediscovering it there}. Since philosophy requires the greatest possible awareness of what one is doing, Maimonides cannot effect that fundamental change without being aware that it is a fundamental change, i.e. without a conscious, although not necessarily explicit, criticism the way in which the Torah was commonly understood.\textsuperscript{647}

Strauss, then, did not accept as sincere Maimonides’ effort to in effect reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with Judaism on Biblical grounds. It was merely a jest for the sake of the perplexed. A reader possessing philosophical discernment, one who is neither pious, nor perplexed (certainly not in the way that Rabbi Joseph was), would clearly see through this kind of subtle rhetorical trickery; he will indeed “derive great pleasure” from it.\textsuperscript{648} Ultimately, however, the philosopher too encounters Biblical passages through a glass darkly. Reason, according to Strauss, cannot prove nor disprove revelation, a position that coheres with his persistent claim that the Biblical and the philosophical worldviews regarding redemption are not compatible with one another because one ultimately requires obedience and the other free thought. Therefore,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[645] Strauss, \textit{PAW}, 52. Emphasis added.
\item[646] Strauss, “\textit{Progress or Return},” \textit{The Rebirth}, 234. Emphasis added.
\end{footnotes}
“the Guide, far from offering a final interpretation of the secret teaching of the Bible, may actually have been an attempt to revive the oral discussion thereof by raising difficulties which intentionally were left unresolved.”

To be clear, the Greco-Hebraic conflict within the context of Jewish medieval philosophy does not amount to a conflict between rationalism and irrationalism. Strauss understood that for Maimonides both the philosophical and the Jewish positions were rational articulations of the meaning of redemption, one grounded in the theoretical principles of knowledge, the other in the practical principles of piety. Moreover, precisely because Strauss adopted the premise that most people are devoid of philosophical inclinations and, therefore, could not be persuaded to accept moral principles based on the strict naturalism of Aristotelian kind that he came to see the Jewish articulation of revelation (based as it was on the claim of creation) as representing a rational world view. The strongest case for revelation, according to him, was made manifest through the “election” of the Jewish people on Mt. Sinai and through the “miracle” of their continuous existence. Only Jewish history stands as the authoritative voice or witness to revelation.

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 sun and moon and stars do not deserve worship, that heaven must be depreciated in favor of human life on earth, and ultimately, that the origin of the world is divine creation. There is no argument in favor of creation except God speaking to Israel.

649 Strauss, PAW, 48. See also “How to Begin to Study The Guide of the Perplexed,” lv: “According to Maimonides the Aristotelian and the biblical alternative have not been demonstrated.”

650 Strauss’s central thesis against modern philosophy (and especially against Kant) is its elevation of practical reason to its dominant status. Kant’s fatal mistake, according to Strauss, was to assume that man can autonomously reason his way into morality or to discover his better angels. When Divine authority was toppled by reason, reason itself self-destructed and only Nietzschean relativism and irrationalism remained standing. For Strauss’s view that the Biblical account of creation is a rational account see “On the Interpretation of Genesis” and “Jerusalem and Athens” in Jewish Philosophy, 362-368 and 377-404 respectively.

Maimonides was ultimately able to defend Judaism, despite the fact that personally he was convinced of the rightness of Aristotle’s arguments, because he was allowed to do so by the rationalism of the Jewish esoteric tradition. Esotericism as a rhetorical or literary device is the accommodation of both the religious/orthodox demand for piety or “impossible obedience” and the philosophic demand for intellectual freedom or “flagrant transgression.” It is the final and most complete accommodation of religion to philosophy and philosophy to religion consistent with the nature of both the Jewish law and philosophic anarchism.

It remains to be seen, however, whether such accommodation is possible on philosophic rather than Jewish grounds. To answer this question Strauss turned to his study of Socrates, the paragon of the philosophic life. As he wrote in an outline to an unpublished manuscript,

In spite of the ultimate and fundamental conflict between these two spiritual powers [i.e., philosophy and religion or Athens and Jerusalem], a reconciliation between them became possible because classical Greek philosophy permitted, nay, demanded an exoteric teaching (as a supplement to its esoteric teaching) which, while not claiming to be strictly speaking true, was considered indispensable for the right ordering of human society… According to a medieval view, ‘Socrates’ represented precisely the synthesis of the two forms in which philosophy appears, the esoteric and the exoteric form.”

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653 See supra, 206.
CHAPTER 6
SOCRATIC PIETY, PHILOSOPHIC HOMELESSNESS, AND REDEMPTION AS HOMECOMING

“Socrates expressed it [well], when he said, he was not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world.”

Plutarch

In the previous chapter I argued that the pursuit of alternative answers to the Jewish problem led Strauss back to Jewish medieval rationalism. Medieval Jewish philosophy, which found its greatest expression in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, was both religiously pious and philosophically moderate. According to Strauss, Maimonides was careful in laying down a legal (*halachic*) justification for philosophizing as well as showing the limitations of philosophy to answer the most important questions. Ultimately, he came to see Maimonides as a defender of Judaism from the threat of Aristotelian philosophy, despite the fact that his reason may have convinced him of its truth.

Whereas the previous chapter focused primarily on the problem of the rational character of revelation within the Greek-Biblical dialectic, this chapter focuses on the problem of the pious character of Greek philosophy within this dialectic. More precisely, this chapter explores Strauss’s intellectual encounter with Socrates. As such it represents the final stage in his lifelong study of the Jewish question. Strauss described this encounter as “tentative,” “experimental” but “necessary.” What is the purpose of Strauss’ return to and engagement with Socrates? What occasioned this need for wisdom from the ancients, wisdom that Strauss readily admitted is not simply available to us? The critical issue for us is to determine what is it that Strauss discovered *there* that sheds light on the Jewish problem *here*. What significance, if

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215
any, is evinced from Strauss’s interpretation of Greek thought not merely in his role as a political philosopher but in his role as a Jewish political philosopher, whose work is haunted by the spiritual perplexity of modern Jews?

Specifically, Strauss’ intellectual odyssey of a return ends with his investigation of the esoteric tradition of Greek philosophy and more specifically, what he called, “the case of Socrates.” Did Socrates find redemption in the exclusively rational life? The purpose of this chapter is to argue the contrary. Reconciliation between Greek and Biblical thought is possible only if Greek philosophy was understood as having both an esoteric and an exoteric level of meaning. The demand for an exoteric dimension suggests that Strauss found in Socrates recognition of the insufficiency of purely rational life and with it skepticism of an exclusively rationalistic conception of redemption. The philosopher needs to show care for the way of life to which his community is committed – a way of life which is not perfect or rational – because he recognizes that his redemption, as he understands it, is tied to the redemption of his community. Political philosophy, as an exoteric expression, is the attempt of the philosopher to redeem his community by making it just on the basis of natural right. For Strauss, the case of Socrates is proof that philosophic homelessness provides no redemption to the philosopher. To be redeemed the prodigal son of the city needs to come home, to return if you will. Redemption is a homecoming. Homeless life is a life without redemption.

This chapter explores the way in which Strauss understood the essential issues raised by Socrates and his students, and the effect it might have had on the Jewish themes in his work. It concludes by bringing to light the way in which Strauss links the universal character of redemption as homecoming with the Jewish character of redemption as return or repentance.
The question of Socrates’ piety constitutes for Strauss the background for the emergence of the central theme of Platonic political philosophy. The accusation of impiety, which forms one half of the case brought against Socrates, was based on the prevailing suspicion among Athenians that Socrates who was a “student of all things in the sky and below the earth” did not “even believe in gods” (Apology 18c). The accusation against Socrates is an accusation against philosophy as such: the assumption is that to engage in a philosophical inquiry is at worst to participate in a radical, impious and therefore, dangerous, activity. (At best, it is an irrelevant frivolity.)

To be sure, Strauss took seriously the charge of impiety. His reading of modern philosophy’s hostility toward Biblical religion as exemplified by Spinoza, for example, certainly bears witness to this suspicion. One can say that for him, rightly or wrongly, modern philosophy lives up to the charge of impiety that was leveled against a life devoted to rational inquiry. The danger of exclusive rationality, its lack of moderation, bears fruit most clearly only in the late modern period when historical consciousness turned against itself, or, to put it in slightly different terms, when the attempt “to make men absolutely at home in ‘this world’” ended up in nihilism, in “man’s becoming absolutely homeless.”

The difficulty in resolving the question of the guilt or innocence of Socrates, indeed, its impossibility lies precisely in the conflict between philosophy and the city. This conflict extends

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658 This is the title of a chapter for a book Strauss intended to publish but never did. The brief synopsis of the chapter states that its topic was going to be the treatment of Jewish medieval philosophy. My intention here is to use it to discuss piety as one of the faces of Socrates. See Strauss, “Plan of a Book Tentatively Entitled Philosophy and the Law: Historical Essays,” Jewish Philosophy, 468.

659 Strauss, Natural Right, 15-18.
to the question of what constitutes piety, justice and, ultimately, to what is the character and the origin of law.

Xenophon’s Socrates: Piety as Justice as Lawfulness

Socrates is guilty of rejecting the gods acknowledged by the state and of bringing in strange deities: he is also guilty of corrupting the youth.\(^{660}\)

Thus began Xenophon’s account of the charges against Socrates. According to Strauss, the charge of impiety against Socrates as recounted by Xenophon was equivalent to the charge of injustice and Xenophon understood justice in terms of lawfulness.\(^{661}\) To be accused of impiety is to be accused of breaking the laws of Athens. If Socrates is shown to be just, i.e., lawful, then the charge of impiety is false. Thus the “bulk of Memorabilia is…meant to set forth or to praise Socrates’ justice… [I]t is meant to refute the indictment, i.e., the assertion that Socrates had committed certain unjust acts; by refuting the indictment, Xenophon shows therefore that Socrates was just in the narrow sense of the term, i.e., that he did not commit crimes or act against the law. Thus the Memorabilia as a whole is devoted to proving Socrates’ justice.”\(^{662}\)

Strauss reviews three arguments that Xenophon puts forth in defense of Socrates. The first argument addresses Socrates’ participation in the ritual of sacrifice and on his use of divinations (Memorabilia, I, i, 2-9). Most of this argument focuses on divinations because whereas his sacrificing was conventional and thus fit the conventional notions of piety, his claim regarding divinations was rather unusual. Socrates described the daimonion “as a voice of a

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\(^{660}\) Xenophon, Memorabilia (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 3.

\(^{661}\) Leo Strauss, Xenophon’s Socrates (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 3.

god” and “he was notorious for saying that the daimonion gave him signs.” Furthermore, according to Xenophon, Socrates considered his daimonion reliable because he was foretelling the future to his companions and he would not have done so had he not trusted that gods foretold the truth (I, i, 4-5). Since he trusted the gods “how can he have disbelieved in the existence of the gods?” (I, i, 5)\(^{663}\) Strauss believed that this defense was clearly insufficient because the impiety charge was not an accusation of atheism but of heresy and this defense does little to exculpate him of that charge.\(^{664}\) Further consideration reveals that whether Socrates consulted his daimonion or whether, more conventionally, he consulted oracles, neither was sufficient to prove his piety because they focused on what Socrates did and said and not about what he may have thought or believed in private.\(^{665}\) Intellectually, Socrates may have been living a double life, a fact that was expressed in the exoteric nature of his teachings. Accordingly, Strauss notes that Xenophon returns to the question of Socrates’ sacrificing later in the text. Apparently with respect to prayers, sacrifices and ancestor worship, Socrates complied with Athenian law, which leads Strauss to conclude that there can be no doubt that “Socrates worshipped the gods of the city, although it still remains uncertain whether he believed in their existence.”\(^{666}\) Socrates may not have believed in the gods of the city but in his deeds and speeches he never subverted the social order of Athens by openly questioning the practices of its citizens. So despite the fact that his piety may not have been genuine and therefore may have been ironic, it certainly exhibited the character of prudence and moderation.

\(^{663}\) Strauss, Xenophon’s Socrates, 130, 4-5.
\(^{664}\) Ibid., 5, 131.
\(^{665}\) Ibid., 5-6.
\(^{666}\) Ibid., 18.
Nevertheless, in the second argument, Xenophon tries to dispose of the suspicion that, in private, Socrates held beliefs about gods different from those he exhibited in public (I, i, 10-15). He does so by emphasizing that Socrates always taught in public in the midst of large crowds and that he did most of the talking. In the process, “none ever knew him to offend against piety and religion in deed or word” (I, i, 10-11). In this argument Xenophon focuses on the substance of Socratic teaching. According to him, Socrates discussed the nature of all things but his discussion was grounded in human concerns. Socrates questioned the wisdom and the usefulness of worrying about the universe or the heavenly things with no regard for the human things. In the first place, he thought that human things should not be disregarded for the sake of divine things. In the second place and more radically, he doubted that man could ever know divine things. Finally, Socrates questioned the utility of mere theoretical knowledge, knowledge of the origins of all things, even if such knowledge was possible (I, i, 15). Xenophon summarizes these points at the end of Memorabilia arguing that Socrates was familiar with the higher themes of philosophy, such as astronomy and geometry but found this knowledge of limited utility. (IV, vii, 2-5). “In general, with regard to the phenomena of the heavens, he deprecated curiosity to learn how the deity contrives them: he held that their secrets could not be discovered by man, and believed that any attempt to search out what the gods had not chosen to reveal must be displeasing to them” (IV, vii, 6).

Instead, Socrates conversed of human things. “The problems he discussed were, What is godly, what is ungodly; what is beautiful, what is ugly; what is just what is unjust; what is prudence, what is madness; what is courage, what is cowardice; what is a state, what is a

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667 The reference here is clearly to the pre-Socratic philosophers including Heraclitus and Parmenides.
statesman…” (I, i, 16). In short, according to Xenophon, Socrates did not engage in speculative philosophy, an activity that could have been a compelling ground for the suspicion of impiety and could have legitimately landed him in trouble with the authorities.

Strauss raises doubts about this conclusion. He challenges Xenophon not on the substantive issue of Socrates’ teaching but on the venue and the method of his teaching, and on his irony. The fact that Socrates spent his days in the open, talking, does not negate the fact that “what he thought was not manifest to his judges or to all.”

668 Furthermore, Strauss points out that Socrates was not always in the open, that “he sometimes conversed in private and even with a single man.” Most importantly, “even when he talked in public, he frequently raised questions instead of answering them, so much so that he was notorious for this practice.”

Thus Xenophon’s second argument is not a compelling defense against the charge of impiety and the suspicion that was raised in the first argument persists.

The third argument deals with the most public of Socrates’ acts, the one that would have been known to the Athenian citizens and the one that would have established in their minds without a doubt the fact of his piety. Socrates presided over the Assembly during the trial of six Athenian generals relating to events subsequent to the naval battle at Arginusai in 406 B.C. The people wanted to condemn the generals by a single vote, an illegal procedure. But because Socrates took an oath to uphold the law, “he refused the motion in spite of popular rancor and the threats of many powerful persons” (I, i, 18).

Strauss, however, again is not convinced. He points out that “Socrates’ exemplary conduct on that occasion could as well be regarded as proving his justice rather than his

668 Strauss, Xenophon’s Socrates, 9.
669 Ibid.
By asserting a distinction between piety and justice, Strauss’s objection draws our attention to Xenophon’s defense on a narrow understanding of justice as lawfulness. Xenophon could only prove Socrates’ piety under the assumption that piety as justice was a derivative of Athenian law. “By refuting the indictment, Xenophon shows that Socrates did not commit these unjust acts [impiety and corrupting the youth] of which he was accused, nor any other unjust act. He proves that Socrates acted justly in the sense of legal justice.”

The argument for Socratic piety is further undermined when Xenophon shifts focus from Socrates’ own piety to his teachings regarding piety, i.e., to the charge of corrupting the youth. He argued that Socrates served as an example to his students to pursue excellence both in body and in mind. To instill virtue is no corruption. (I, ii, 1-8). Socrates’ association with Critias and Alcibiades was used by the accusers as an example of his corrupting influence; Xenophon explains that their corruption preceded their association with Socrates. Their motive for associating with Socrates was not to learn virtue but to acquire political skills (I, ii, 12-16). Xenophon offers instead the example of Aristodemus the dwarf, a close friend who “was not known to sacrifice or pray or use divinations, and actually made a mock of those who did so” (I, iv, 2). From Aristodemus’ replies, as Strauss put it, “it appears that he, who was one of those who lived constantly with Socrates, did not believe in Socrates’ daimonion… [H]e must have interpreted Socrates’ prophetic utterances as non-demonic, as due to human wisdom only; he may have interpreted Socrates’ references to his daimonion as ironic… One may say that Aristodemus’ unbelief in Socrates’ daimonion was the root of his impiety.”

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670 Ibid.
671 Strauss, The Rebirth, 137.
672 Strauss, Xenophon’s Socrates, 24-25.
Aristodemos saw in Socrates’ actions merely human knowledge or his philosophic, rather than his prophetic wisdom.673

Xenophon conveys that Socrates also encouraged Aristodemos to worship the gods and to seek their council about things not evident to human beings. “[O]nly then [would Aristodemos] come to realize that the divine is so great and of such a character as to see everything, to hear everything, to be present everywhere, and in one act to take care of all things.”674 Strauss emphasizes how remarkable it is that Xenophon is silent about Socrates’ effectiveness in this instance. Nevertheless and apparently without much justification, Xenophon concludes that exposure to Socratic teaching about piety had a salutary effect. “Socrates brought it about that his companions abstained from unholy as well as unjust and from base things not only when they were seen by men but also when they were alone.”675 Socrates clearly taught virtue that was based on “the belief in the gods’ being able to do good and evil, which, modified by the belief in divine omniscience and justice, becomes the belief in divine reward and punishment.” But, as Strauss points out, Socrates “had not proved that the gods are just or concerned with men’s justice.”676

The notion of divine omniscience and justice are not of Greek but of Biblical origins, and Socrates, as far as we know, would have no knowledge of this source. Was Socrates reasoning his way toward a conception of a deity that went beyond anything presented by the Greek poets? But Strauss is aware that this too would have been an act of heresy. This suspicion is reinforced

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673 For a distinction between philosophic and prophetic wisdom see Chapter Five of this dissertation.
674 Strauss, Xenophon’s Socrates, 25.
675 Ibid., 26.
676 Ibid.
by the fact that Xenophon recognizes that Socrates held beliefs about gods that were at variance with the rest of the Athenians. Quoting directly from Xenophon, Strauss writes that

Socrates’ belief “in the gods’ concern for man differed from the belief of the many, for the many believe that the gods know some things and do not know others. Socrates however held that the gods know everything, what is said, what is done, and what is silently deliberated, that they are everywhere present, and give signs to the human beings regarding human things.”

Furthermore, Socrates’ “belief that the gods know what is going on in the minds or hearts of men is meant to explain why he kept his oath.” Strauss describes this Socratic view of the gods as “extreme,” compared to the beliefs of “the many.” The oath here refers to Socrates’ sworn duty to uphold Athenian law during the trial of the generals. But the statement could just as well apply to his refusal to flee Athens subsequent to his trial which was not an uncommon practice (Crito 50a-54d) and to his famous last request: “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget” (Phaedo 118). Paying his debt and keeping his promise to a god and to the laws of the city were perhaps the ultimate acts of piety and justice, and could have served as the final refutation of the charge. But Socrates was condemned because the Athenians were convinced that despite his public acts and proclamations, in private he did not believe in the gods of Athens. “[T]he impiety charge ultimately concerned what Socrates thought as distinguished from what he said.” Thus Strauss concludes that it is not surprising “to see Xenophon finally stating that ‘the Athenians’ were persuaded that Socrates was not sound (sophron) regarding the gods…”

677 Ibid., 9.
678 Ibid., 9-10.
679 Ibid., 10.
680 Ibid.
To sum up Strauss’s assessment of Xenophon’s defense of Socrates: The main purpose of *Memorabilia* is to prove that Socrates was pious and just both in the conventional/legal sense but also in the “translegal” sense. Whether Strauss held Xenophon’s defense to be sincere or ironic, he concluded that it failed with respect to the former but conventional injustice and impiety may point to and may be compatible with a higher law.

At the end of Xenophon’s refutation of the indictment of Socrates, we have come to realize that Socrates’ legal justice and his legal piety could not be proven, or that Socrates was not unqualifiedly just. This, however, is perfectly compatible with the fact that he possessed translegal justice, which consists in benefiting one’s fellow men. Socrates benefited his fellow men to the highest degree by leading them to excellence or to virtue, that is to say, to that kind or degree of virtue of which the individual in question was capable.

Xenophon’s defense of Socratic piety and justice depends to a great extent on a conventional understanding of piety and law. Xenophon fails to prove his legal or conventional justice and piety. But this failure serves to emphasize not Socrates’ impiety and injustice but the qualified nature of his piety and justice. His piety and justice transcend the bounds of mere conventions. From the conventional perspective of law, his justice points to the translegal conception of justice or a conception of justice that meets a higher notion of law. As Strauss reminds us, given his well-known and outspoken critique of Athenian democracy, Socrates could not be just in an unqualified sense.

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682 Ibid., 138.
683 Ibid., 137. Based on a series of letters Strauss wrote to Jacob Kline between 1938 and 1939, letters that show Strauss in the process of discovering esotericism, Laurence Lampert argues that for Strauss *Memorabilia* presented the public or the manifest Socrates. The true, or the hidden Socrates Xenophon presents in his *The Education of Cyrus*. Quoting from one of the letters, Lampert concludes: “Distinguishing this way among Xenophon’s writings leads Strauss to one of his greatest insights into the Socratic circle: ‘His Socrates-image is therefore not fundamentally different from that of Plato.’” Laurence Lampert, “Strauss’s Recovery of Esotericism,” *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, 68.
To question whether piety and justice are mere legal conventions, religious or political, is the task of philosophy. The aim of philosophy is human wisdom or human excellence – a pursuit of knowledge that is not limited by the contrivance of conventional opinion, held together by some form of authoritative compulsion (be it political or religious). This is precisely the claim that Socrates made in his defense against his accusers and in his critique of the poets. But his critique should not be construed as an attempt to liberate philosophy from the shackles of convention. It may also be an attempt to infuse customary religious belief, or piety, with the light of reason, to liberate religion from the shackles of custom. For Strauss, this attempt constitutes the necessarily exoteric, or public, face of Socrates. In this light, his apologia, then, amounts to nothing less than the defense of philosophy against the charge of impiety. Philosophy cannot be guilty of impiety if piety is a virtue, if it requires knowledge, the highest knowledge – knowledge of the gods.

But whether piety is a virtue or not is itself a philosophical question one in which neither the accusers nor most of the citizens sitting in judgment were interested. Their sense of piety was conventional. They knew what piety was, they knew that they were pious because they believed in the traditional accounts of the gods and their deeds. As Strauss asks rather ironically, “does not everyone know what piety is?” Is not piety simply the worship of “ancestral gods according to ancestral customs[?]”684 However, the philosophical question, the one that aims at virtue is whether “worshipping gods according to ancestral custom [is a] good?”685 The task of philosophy seems to be to enlighten piety. To be pious one must possess some kind of

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684 Strauss, The Rebirth, 188.
685 Ibid.
knowledge; to be pious one must engage in philosophy. There appears to be, therefore, a conflict between conventional understanding of piety and the attitude of the philosopher who questions this understanding.  

Strauss pays particular attention to this issue in his study of the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Euthyphro* – the three Platonic dialogues that address directly Socratic piety and his justice. Chronologically, the setting of the *Euthyphro* immediately precedes the trial and conviction of Socrates. It serves, then, as the opening act of Plato’s account of the last days of Socrates’ life. Strauss also points out that the *Theaetetus*, a dialogue that raises the question of knowledge, belongs to this period as well. Both take place at the end of Socrates’ life. Both provide the context for the *Apology*, the most biographical of all the Platonic dialogues and one that shows Socrates in the most public light. Clearly this tidbit is meaningful to Strauss. Is the piety of the philosopher inextricably bound with his knowledge? Does proximity of death impose upon the philosopher a need for reconciliation (reconciliation with one’s city, religion, or with God)?

Strauss says that the *Theaetetus* culminates in a description of the philosophic life (173d-177b), which amounts to becoming like the divine. To be a philosopher one must try to flee from here thither as quickly as possible; but that flight is assimilation to God as far as it is possible. And that assimilation consists in becoming just and pious, together with becoming prudent. Here in the most solemn and central passage (almost

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686 Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 204: “But one can love God only to the extent to which one knows Him. Therefore one must dedicate oneself to the study of the sciences and insights that enable him to know God to the extent to which this is possible for man.”

687 As far as I know, to this date scholars who take Strauss’s work seriously have paid little attention to his interpretation of these dialogues.


689 Strauss, *Studies*, 38: “[I]t is *the* dialogue of Socrates with the city of Athens.”

literally central), the question of whether piety is a virtue is answered in the affirmative.691

Despite all this, there is certainly merit to the charge of impiety. From the perspective of the city, as Strauss’s account of Xenophon already suggests, Socrates was guilty of impiety because he did not take the Greek tradition, as told by the poets, at face value. He did not consider the traditional stories about the gods as true.692 If, however, piety is a virtue and philosophy is essentially the pursuit of virtue then this pursuit as the task of individual human life should indeed be justified by the gods. This of course is true only if gods care whether man is virtuous and just; for this to happen gods themselves must be in agreement with respect to virtue and justice.693 But the notion that there is a just cosmic order was not a part of the Olympic reality. Is not the purpose behind the *Euthyphro* to point precisely in that direction? Is it not to challenge the entire edifice of the Greek religious conventions (10a-d)? In defending himself against the charge of impiety, then, Socrates was implicitly relying on or pointing in a direction of a theology that was rather foreign to the Greeks.694 In the *Euthyphro* Socrates was explicit in his skepticism with respect to tradition and recognized this skepticism to be the source of the charge against him (6a-c).

He seems to believe he knows that the gods are both good and just and therefore both the givers of all good things, and only good things, to man and incapable of fighting with each other. But precisely this knowledge would make him impious.695

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691 Strauss, *The Rebirth*, 193. Strauss does recognize, however, some ambiguity in this claim “as would appear from a consideration of the context.”
693 Plato, *Euthyphro*, 9c-d.
694 How foreign and ridiculous Socratic ideas were to the Athenians can be glimpsed from Aristophanes’ *The Clouds*.
The question of piety ultimately hinges on the relationship between gods and men. The essence of this relationship is to determine whether humans are to do what gods tell them (the orthodox position) or do what gods do (the philosophical position). Euthyphro’s own attempt to break with orthodoxy is untenable because he is not a philosopher; he has no knowledge of the gods beyond the traditional accounts. Piety in its philosophic sense requires certain knowledge, knowledge of the gods, and the pursuit of this knowledge is the purview of the philosopher.\textsuperscript{696}

It appears, then, that by reconceiving the notion of piety and the cosmic order, Socrates was guilty of impiety in the eyes of tradition. The Athenian jurymen were accustomed from childhood to the stories that described Socrates as “a wise man, a thinker of the things aloft, one who has investigated all things beneath the earth, and one who renders the weaker speech the stronger.”\textsuperscript{697} In other words, the legal accusation of impiety was based on the prejudice held by the many that Socrates was a sophist who also transgressed the bounds of the social order and of common decency established by Greek religion. Thus the accusation that Socrates does not believe in gods was merely “inferred by the listeners…who believed that those who do the things mentioned by the accusers also do not believe in gods.”\textsuperscript{698} But, as Strauss points out, the suspicion of impiety based on the presumption of philosophical indecency was not sufficient to bring legal charges against Socrates. To make the charge of impiety stick, it had to be supplemented by the charge of corrupting the youth. Nothing could be worse in the eyes of adults than harm inflicted upon its young. Thus the accusers “say that he corrupts the young by doing and teaching the things for which all who philosophize are commonly blamed, namely,

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{696} Ibid., 198-199
\item \textsuperscript{697} Strauss, \textit{Studies}, 39.
\item \textsuperscript{698} Ibid., 39.
\end{footnotes}
‘the things aloft and beneath the earth,’ ‘not believing in gods’ and ‘rendering the weaker speech the stronger.’”

Ultimately, however, “the corruption charge is...reducible to the impiety charge [namely:] Socrates does not believe in the existence of those gods in whose existence the city believes.”

Socrates’ defense against the charge of impiety is ambiguous. The source of the ambiguous relationship between Socratic philosophic quest and Socratic piety is the Delphic proclamation regarding his wisdom. Plato tells us in the Apology that Socrates reluctantly set out first to disprove the claim of the oracle that he was the wisest man. His explicit intention was to refute the god, to prove that he was not the wisest man. He did so despite his certainty that the god does not lie. This, at least, was the argument he made in his defense to the jury (21b-c). It is certainly legitimate to ask whether this initial act of disobedience constitutes impious intent. This is not a question that Strauss, nor we, can answer with confidence. Plato seems to have deliberately kept the answer ambiguous. As Strauss points out, however, regardless of the intent, Socrates subsequently came to see the truth of the oracle. Philosophic wisdom starts with the awareness of our individual ignorance. “Socrates is wise only in the sense that he knows that he knows nothing. And this is the meaning of the enigmatic oracle regarding Socrates: human wisdom is of little or no account, but a human being who possesses it, as Socrates does, is most wise. The god shows that he, the god, is truly wise by hinting at the truth about the worth or

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699 Ibid., 42. See also his “On the Euthyphron” in The Rebirth, 190: “We get the impression that what the Athenians really resented was not so much his cleverness, or the deviationist character of his thought, as his alleged missionary zeal. His real crime, the crime that killed him, was then not so much his impiety as his apparent philanthropy, or what is called in the charge his ‘corrupting the young’.”

700 Strauss, Studies, 43.
rather worthlessness of human wisdom and its purely negative content.” 701 Socrates came to see
the truth of the oracle and “his attempt to refute the god turned into assistance to the god and a
whole hearted service to him.” 702 Socrates took the god’s oracles as a command “to spend his
life philosophizing and examining himself and others.” 703

To philosophize, then, became Socrates’ pious duty. In the process of attempting to
prove the god wrong, or, to put it more strongly, in the process of independent inquiry – an act of
disobedience – the ancient philosopher proved the god right. By discovering the truth of the
oracle, by discovering the limits of human knowledge, Socrates discovered that pursuit of
knowledge or the love of knowledge is indeed a pious endeavor. Based on this account, piety
requires wisdom not in the limited human sense but in the all-embracing or all-knowing divine
sense. To engage in philosophy is a process by which we come to resemble – imperfectly as it
may be – the divine. To be pious is to imitate the god; to be wise is to be like the god, to be in
the image of god, an idea which, according to Strauss, Plato entertained in the Euthyphro and in
the Theaetetus. The life of philosophy, the life of Socrates is not a life of indecency but
ennobling life, perhaps, the best possible life.

Strauss claims that similar to the Hebrew prophets Socrates had a god-inspired mission,
although, unlike the prophets, no god spoke to him directly. 704 Neither did Socrates have an
eschatological vision, a vision of the messianic age such as held by Isaiah (2:2-4); he was not as
sanguine as the prophets were about the possibility of a perfectly just society. Their vision was

701 Ibid., 42. See Plato, Apology 21d - 23b
702 Ibid., 42.
703 Ibid., 44.
704 Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” Jewish Philosophy, 400, 402. Unlike the Delphic Oracle, which is said to have
originated Socrates’ mission, the voice of the daimonion, which Socrates did hear directly, sent him on no missions.
The daimonion is the voice of moderation counseling against political ambition and moral zealotry.
ultimately rooted in their faith in redemption through divine dispensation, whereas Socratic notion of redemption depended on the perfectibility of human nature: a coincidence of philosophic knowledge with political power.\(^{705}\) Still, they had a shared interest regarding the most important things.

The fact that both Socrates and the prophets have a divine mission means, or at any rate implies, that both Socrates and the prophets are concerned with justice and righteousness, with the perfectly just society which as such would be free of evils.\(^{706}\)

Nevertheless, Socrates’ commitment to the life of philosophy is the reason why he eschewed the life of politics and business (Apology 23b). It also explains why Socrates would not abide by the jury’s condition for acquittal, the condition that he would stop philosophizing. As Strauss put it, Socrates “would not consider an offer of the jury to release him on the condition that he no longer philosophize, because he will obey the god rather than the jury: he will disobey a ruling or a law forbidding him to philosophize because he will obey the god rather than the laws.”\(^{707}\) Strauss presses this argument in the following way: There are two conceivable reasons why Socrates cannot remain silent with respect to philosophy. In the first place, “by remaining silent he would disobey the god” and thus would indeed – at least in his own eyes – be guilty of impiety. In the second place, by not engaging in philosophy Socrates would betray his own belief that the life of philosophy, the life of virtue is the best possible life.\(^{708}\) Neither of these reasons, however, satisfied the majority of the jury who were convinced

\(^{705}\) Ibid., 403.
\(^{706}\) Ibid., 403.
\(^{707}\) Strauss, Studies, 45.
\(^{708}\) Ibid., 50: “[I]t is the greatest good for a human being to engage every day in speeches about virtue and the other things…”

232
of his guilt. But those who voted to acquit did so either based on their conviction of Socrates’ piety or on their belief that philosophic life is indeed the best “or perhaps both.”

In the final analysis, Socrates was willing to follow the laws of the city with one sole exception – the law forbidding philosophy. He submitted his body to the city but not his soul, or as Strauss put it, “he identifies himself completely, as far as his body is concerned, with the city, with ‘his people.’” This might explain the strong case Socrates made for the laws of Athens against the arguments presented by Crito, who besieged his friend to save his life, to flee the city and abandon his people. To make this point incontrovertible to Crito – a man who, as Strauss points out, “never speaks of gods,” who is “sober… pedestrian… narrow and somnolent regarding the things which transcend his sphere, his experience”; a conventionally pious man, in other words – Socrates implied that even “the voice of the Laws seems to be the voice of the gods.”

In all respects, then, Socrates exhibited his piety and his law-abidingness which, from the perspective of the city, is one and the same. He obeyed the god with respect to his inner life by pursuing a life of philosophy and he obeyed the god by obeying the laws of the city by submitting his body to its verdict. We can say that for Strauss Socrates’ death was the ultimate expression of his piety and his justice.

Still, the account of Socratic piety as it emerges from Strauss’ analysis of the Apology is less convincing than the one found in the Euthyphro. It is based primarily on Plato’s representation of Socrates’ speech to the Athenian Assembly. In other words, it relies on his

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709 Ibid., 50.
710 Ibid., 51. It is worth noting here that Strauss is silent with respect to Socrates’ soul.
711 Ibid., 57.
712 Ibid., 66.
public speech; it represents the public face of Socrates whose ironic nature Strauss would be the first to recognize. In light of his subtle critique of the Olympian religion in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates’ defense based on the Delphic oracle, which was one of the principle institutions of this religion, should raise some eyebrows. The suspicion that Socratic display of piety was strictly for public consumption or merely an expression of his moderation and responsibility, however, does not deny the fact that, for Strauss at any rate, the accusers did not prove their case beyond a reasonable doubt. “[N]o man”, he writes, “could know whether Socrates was pious or not. In that case one could say no more than that he ought not to have been punished for impiety. *I personally believe that this would have been a wise decision*… But from Plato’s point of view that message could not express more than a pious wish, a wish that cannot be fulfilled.”

Indeed even Strauss’s account of the *Euthyphro* leaves us baffled regarding the question of Socratic piety. Strauss tells us that it offers “irritating half-truths.” The philosophical question “*quid sit dues?*”, once asked, prevents a return to orthodoxy because it challenges claims about gods based on “mere tales.” According to Strauss the only alternative to knowledge of gods based on popular tales is through approximation and analogy. “[W]e divine that the gods are superhuman beings, and therefore that the highest human type gives us an inkling of what the gods might be. But the highest human type is the wise man. The analogy of the wise man will therefore be the best clue at our disposal in regard to the gods.” Strauss concludes that we have no choice but to follow Socrates. It is quite remarkable that Strauss does not remind his reader at this point that philosophy in its classic, Socratic sense is not the possession but the

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714 Ibid., 187.
715 Ibid., 198.
pursuit of wisdom and that Socrates himself claimed that he possessed no great knowledge, and that his wisdom consisted in the awareness of his ignorance. If this is so, then Socrates would possess no knowledge of the gods and would, therefore, prove himself to be impious not only on traditional but also on philosophic grounds. Strauss does not pursue this line of inquiry. Instead he ends his analysis of the *Euthyphro* with reminding his readers about the relationship between philosophy and laughter. *Euthyphro* is a humorous dialogue despite what for many is a serious subject. But the laughter it induces also stands boldly within the context of Socrates’ approaching fate. Philosophy, then, “fulfills singlehandedly the highest function of both comedy and tragedy.” Strauss emphasizes this point against traditional Christian and modern interpretations of Plato emanating from Germany “the country without comedy” which see only the tragic aspect of Platonic ideas.

A slight bias in favor of laughing and against weeping seems to be essential to philosophy. For the beginning of philosophy as the philosophers understood it is not the fear of the Lord but wonder. Its spirit is not hope and fear and trembling, but serenity on the basis of resignation. To that serenity, laughing is a little bit more akin than weeping.

To follow in the steps of Socrates one must do so with the tragicomic attitude, with the recognition of the ironic nature of the human condition. Here one is reminded of Nietzsche’s laughing Zarathustra, the bearer of some tragic news. But perhaps even more so, one is reminded of Jewish history and the ways in which both tragedy and the laughter-inducing irony shaped its destiny, culture, and ideas as a homeless people for whom redemption is a homecoming but for whom there is no home to come to. The historian Eugene Sheppard, in his resent study of Strauss made the following fascinating observation:

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716 Ibid., 206.
717 Ibid., 206.
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. Even upon his entrance into a liberal democratic state that offered him refuge, Strauss still sought to instill the sense of unease or not-being-at-home within a new vision of a conservative political philosophy. This remarkable and compelling dissonance between his appreciation of the dangers and philosophic virtues of exile stands at the center of Leo Strauss’s intellectual personality.\textsuperscript{718}

I am inclined to agree with Sheppard to some extent, although I believe that for Strauss the issue of assimilation replaced persecution as the main problem facing Jews in a liberal democracy. Still the suggestion that Strauss read Plato as an exilic Jew, i.e., with an eye to the Jewish problem is quite correct. I would only add that he eventually came to see both the Jewish problem \textit{and} the problem of Socrates as the “normative model” for modern man as such.

The problem revealed by the entire case against Socrates is not exclusively the question of his piety or impiety; this question remains obscured. Rather, the problem of Socrates reveals the difficulty and danger in addressing the moral and the theoretical questions within the political context of the city. It underscores the important questions he raised with respect to the nature or the justness of Athenian law (or any conventional law) and, therefore, of justice itself, and on the other hand with respect to the nature or the truth of Olympic theogony and its theology and, consequently, of the nature of reality itself. Publicly, Socrates was willing to identify himself with the conventions of Athenian law and its religion; privately, his love of wisdom and virtue were beyond the reach of conventions.\textsuperscript{719} In \textit{Natural Right and History}, Strauss observes that this distinction is fundamental for the Greeks and is implicit in their idea of philosophy:

\textit{Philosophizing means to ascend from the cave to the light of the sun, that is, to the truth. The cave is the world of opinion as opposed to knowledge... Philosophizing means, then,}

\textsuperscript{718} Eugene R. Sheppard, \textit{Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile}, 7.
to ascend from public dogma to essentially private knowledge. The public dogma is originally an inadequate attempt to answer the question of the all-comprehensive truth or of the eternal order… The fundamental premise of conventionalism is, then, nothing other than the idea of philosophy as the attempt to grasp the eternal.720

The fact that Socrates was flirting with some loftier notion of divinity, justice and law does not escape Strauss’ notice. But given that Socrates’ aim was to question political and religious conventions and point beyond them, the nature of “the beyond” or “the eternal” remained unresolved. Whether the gods were the highest beings or not could not be resolved by Socrates. His philosophic inquiry (indeed all philosophic questioning) is characterized by an essential openness and indeterminacy with respect to its ultimate concerns. Consequently, Strauss’s Socrates found no redemption in philosophy; his life of intellectual wanderings ultimately left him without a home. Plato presents us with an account of knowledge but this account replaces gods with ideas – a substitution that Strauss found unconvincing – and thus introduces one of the more intractable dilemmas in the history of Western philosophy: the relationship between ideas and the gods. This is the heart of the tension between the philosophical and the Biblical account of redemption, or as Strauss put it in his conclusion to “On the Euthyphron,” “[w]hether the Bible or philosophy is right is of course the only question which ultimately matters.”721

The task of political philosophy is to investigate and pursue the nature of all political things, and for Strauss, Socrates was the archetype of this endeavor. As one of Strauss’s students put it, he turned to his study of Greek philosophy in “an attempt to recover the true Socrates and,

720 Strauss, Natural Right, 11. See also What is Political Philosophy?, 32.
721 Strauss, The Rebirth, 206.
with that, the character of political philosophy itself.”  To understand the nature of the political things, Strauss closely scrutinized the question of Socratic piety in the works of Plato and Xenophon (and Aristophanes). Socratic political philosophy revealed to him that the tension between religious and legal compulsion on the one hand and rational inquiry on the other was not dissimilar to the one experienced by Maimonides. This selfsame tension also sustains Jewish life in the modern world, a world of liberal democracy – a world of physical exile and spiritual homelessness.

**Redemption as Homecoming**

This study of Leo Strauss and the Jewish question began with his evaluation and rejection of the historicist character of modernity. Historicism for him represented the extreme of this-worldliness that ultimately collapses into complete homelessness. As a consequence he began to work back to the non-historicist philosophical and Biblical origins of western civilization (back to the first cave, if you will). Philosophy, which posits knowledge as the way of redemption, from the start conceived of it in terms of a rational discovery of the natural standard, of natural right, or of nature in general, rather than in terms of revelation (or convention – as the more appropriate adversary for the Greeks). “One inquires into the origins or the genesis of civil society, or right and wrong, in order to find out whether civil society and right or wrong are based on nature or merely convention.”

Philosophic pursuit for the right life according to nature is an attempt to recover the truest, thus the oldest, standard for proper human life.

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723 See Chapter Four of this dissertation.
For, when speaking of nature, the first philosophers meant the first things, i.e., the oldest things; philosophy appeals from the ancestral to something older than the ancestral. Nature is the ancestor of all ancestors or the mother of all mothers. Nature is older than any tradition; hence it is more venerable than any tradition.725

The metaphor of nature as the mother, as the womb, links the biological with the metaphysical and the moral aspects of the human condition, a condition of a sense of loss and yearning to return and rediscover one’s origins. The origins of western thought (just as the origins of every man) are its home. Strauss understood the recovery of what is lost, of what is missing from one’s life as redemption; redemption is a homecoming.

But the language of return, the language of redemption, which is the language *par excellence* of Strauss’s political philosophy, is deeply informed by and is inseparable from Jewish faith and history. Return, he points out, is a translation of the Hebrew word *t’shuva*. In Hebrew, though, this word is somewhat ambiguous. In its ordinary sense it simply means “an answer,” as in an answer to a question. But in its Biblical, original, sense it means an answer to the call of God; it means repentance and repentance is a return.

Repentance is return, meaning the return from the wrong way to the right one. This implies that we were once on the right way before we turned to the wrong way. Originally we were on the right way; deviation or sin or imperfection is not original. Man is originally at home in his Father’s house. He becomes a stranger through estrangement, through sinful estrangement. Repentance, return, is homecoming.726

There is a strand within Biblical understanding of the human condition that is antithetical to the modern in its insistence that the original condition is the perfect condition. The natural condition is one of obedience as powerfully illustrated by the story of Abraham. If this is so then the notion of progress (understood morally and politically) is at odds, one could say, with the

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725 Ibid., 91-92.
Biblical horizon, and Strauss seems to suggest that it is therefore foreign to the original Jewish world-view. Any expression of hope that gazes at the future is indeed a hope for a return and a restoration. The view of the Ecclesiast that there is “nothing new under the sun” is a radical denial of history’s significance and it is a perfect reflection of the repeated prophetic calls upon the people of Israel for repentance, for t’shuvah.

When the prophets call their people to account, they…accuse [them] of rebellion. Originally, in the past, they were faithful or loyal; now they are in a state of rebellion. In the future they will return, and God will restore them to their original place. The primary, the original or initial, is loyalty; unfaithfulness, infidelity, is secondary. The very notion of unfaithfulness or infidelity presupposes that fidelity or loyalty is primary. The perfect character of the origin is a condition of sin – of the thought of sin. Man who understands himself in this way longs for the perfection of the origin, or of the classic past. He suffers from the present; he hopes for the future.727

The notion of sin, repentance and redemption, of abandonment and return, is woven into the fabric of Jewish Biblical stories, Jewish folklore, and its experience. Traditionally even in sin the people of Israel did not shed their relation to God. Rebellion against God, just as loyalty to Him, was built into Jewish experience and self-awareness.728 When Strauss, then, addresses his Jewish audience on the subject of return, he speaks as a Jew, as a Jewish philosopher; he enacts within the modern context the language of the Jewish prophets. But at the same time modern Jewish rebellion and, consequently, modern return are radically different from the Biblical experience. Today, Strauss writes, “t’shuvah sometimes means, not a return which takes

727 Ibid., 229. See also Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, 179-180: “When the prophets call their people to account…they recognize as the root and the meaning of all particular transgressions the fact that the people had deserted their God. It is on account of this falling away that the prophets reproach the people. At one time, in the past, the people was faithful; now it is fallen away; in the future, God will restore it to its original state.”

728 Let us recall that the name Israel was given to Jacob after he struggled with God (Genesis 32:29), and while “striving” does not amount to rebellion and disloyalty (Jacob was never disloyal or abandoned God) it does mark a unique quality of the Israelites whose relation with God cannot be reduced to blind obedience. It remains a fascinating question why would God elect a people whose inherent quality is to struggle with God. (I thank Joshua Avni for bringing this question to my attention.)
place within Judaism, but a return to Judaism on the part of many Jews who, or whose fathers, had broken with Judaism as a whole.\textsuperscript{729} The difference, according to Strauss is that contemporary rebellion understands itself as freedom from prejudice or as a “progress beyond Judaism.”\textsuperscript{730} Contemporary rebellion, in other words has its roots in foreign soil. It is based on principles that are fundamentally hostile to Judaism which modern Jews accepted with little or no reflection.

That abandonment of Judaism…understood itself as progress. It granted to the Jewish tradition…that Judaism is old, very old, whereas it itself had no past of which it could boast. But it regarded this very fact, the antiquity of Judaism, as a proof of its own superiority and of Judaism’s inadequacy… It assumed that the beginning is most imperfect and that perfection can be found only in the end – so much so that the movement from the beginning toward the end is in principle a progress from radical imperfection toward perfection. From this point of view, age did not have any claim whatsoever to veneration. Antiquity rather deserves contempt, or possibly contempt mitigated by pity.\textsuperscript{731}

Regardless of the noble intents and efforts of modern Jewish religious reformers, Jewish belief in progress as such, the source of which is the Enlightenment, cannot be internalized by Judaism without in some important sense abandoning the core of Judaism. Assimilation then is a socio-cultural manifestation of what is fundamentally a theologico-political problem. Ancient “prejudices” are superseded by the superiority of modern knowledge and modern ways of life. Only when this superiority is put into question can modern Jews contemplate a return home.

\textsuperscript{729} Strauss, “Progress or Return,” The Rebirth, 229.
\textsuperscript{730} Ibid., 230.
\textsuperscript{731} Ibid., 229. See also Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, 180-181: “The positive mind, which rebels against revealed religion, is characterized precisely by this: that it looks toward the future, not merely hoping for it [as the Christian mind does], but rather using its own powers to build the future, and that it does not suffer from the past. The positive mind is incapable of suffering from the past, since it has not lost an original perfection by a Fall, but has by its own effort worked itself out of the original imperfection, barbarism and rudeness. What is felt from within as fidelity, as obedience, appears to the positive mind as stupidity, imprisonment in prejudices. To that mind, ‘rebellion’ is ‘liberation,’ ‘to become an apostate’ is ‘liberty.’ The contraries prejudice-freedom correspond to the contraries obedience-rebellion, and strictly contradict them.”
Strauss’s entire intellectual posture, one could say, is oriented toward the past; it possesses the quality of a return, of honoring his philosophical predecessors the way a good Jew would honor his ancestors. It is a philosophical instantiation of the historical experience of homelessness and a search for redemption.\footnote{“There is a Jewish problem that is humanly soluble, the problem of the Western Jewish individual… The solution to his problem is return to the Jewish community, the community established by the Jewish faith and the Jewish way of life – teshubah (ordinarily rendered by “repentance”) in the most comprehensive sense.” Strauss, “Preface,” SCR, 7.}

A return is necessary, then, as a Jewish imperative, on grounds of his concern for the Jewish people. But, as we have seen, the message of return as the way to redemption is not meant just for the Jews. Strauss deploys it as a symbol for the revitalization of Western civilization as such. The aim here is to regain and rebuild its vibrancy and probity, to restore its sense of purpose and its humanity. He forcefully argues that the western civilization must recover its intellectual and moral foundations; it must return to the place where the principles of Western civilization were laid down and articulated – and to begin anew.\footnote{Strauss, “Progress or Return,” The Rebirth, 245.} This spells out some form of a recovery of the principles of Biblical revelation on the one hand and the principles of Greek philosophy on the other. The path of redemption for modern man lies in recovering ancient wisdom, and for Strauss that recovery begins by understanding the wisdom that one finds at the heart of the genuine conflict between reason and revelation.

Many of Strauss’s followers and critics argue that ultimately he sided with the life of reason or philosophy against Biblical authority or revelation. I believe that this conclusion is at best questionable. Strauss’s ideas are much more complicated, subtle, perhaps even contradictory than this view allows. As I tried to show, in Strauss’s political philosophy – which
is a search for the right way to live, or the human quest and desire for redemption – neither reason nor revelation are conclusive. That there is a real and irreducible tension between religion and philosophy, there is no doubt. In the context of Western experience Jerusalem and Athens symbolize real choices. But for Strauss these were not simply choices between two radically different visions of human life; they represented two dimensions that are equally hidden within and inform each tradition – the Socratic and the Jewish.\(^{734}\) It is because of this parallel internal tension that the Jewish question or problem was understood by Strauss as the symbol of the human problem.

But what exactly is this problem? It is a problem of human nature, a problem of man himself, his inability to ultimately grasp the whole of creation and his own place within this creation. It is a problem of homelessness and the absence of redemption. Strauss called it the “infinite” and “absolute” problem, or the idea that, given contrarian (or sinful) human nature, “human beings can never create a society which is free of contradictions.”\(^{735}\) Using slightly different language but addressing precisely the same problem, Strauss wrote in *Natural Right and History* that the argument against natural right presupposes that all knowledge which men need in order to live well is natural in the sense in which the perception of sensible qualities and other kinds of effortless perception are natural. It loses its force, therefore, once one assumes that knowledge of natural right must be acquired by human effort or that knowledge of natural right has the character of science. This would explain why knowledge of natural right is not always available. It would lead to the consequence that there is no possibility of a good or a just life or no possibility of “the cessation of evil” before such knowledge has become available.\(^{736}\)

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\(^{734}\) Thus the conjunction “and” rather than “or” in Strauss’ famous antinomy.

\(^{735}\) Strauss, “Preface,” SCR, 6.

The implication of course is that Strauss foresaw no time in which such knowledge would ever become universally available or accepted; nor has it ever been so. In this context, we can understand his sober observation that “the Jewish people were the chosen people in the sense, at least, that the Jewish problem is the most manifest symbol of the human problem as a social or political problem.”

Man cannot solve his own problem; man cannot redeem himself, which means that philosophy, the life of reason and pursuit of knowledge, taken exclusively, is not the best life. The alternative is the life of faith and loving devotion. But such a life, given the evidence of Jewish history, was not altogether rational. A life committed to righteousness and charity as the one thing needful for redemption, as advocated persistently and throughout the ages by Judaism was, according to Strauss, a life of “heroic delusion.” This commitment is heroic in principle because it nobly stands in the face of the ugliness, stupidity and evil of the human heart. But this commitment is delusional precisely because it is based on and justifies itself through faith in a loving God.

[The] notion of the one thing needful is not defensible if the world is not the creation of the just and loving God, the holy God. The root of injustice and uncharitableness, which abounds, is not in God, but in the free acts of His creatures – in sin. The Jewish people and their fate are the living witness for the absence of redemption. This, one could say, is the meaning of the chosen people; the Jews are chosen to prove the absence of redemption.

Reason or revelation, Athens or Jerusalem are untenable antinomies for human redemption. Therefore, in his political philosophy, Strauss attempted to engage the two in a way

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738 The most compelling case for philosophic redemption is of course Plato’s Republic, a dialogue devoted to the founding of the just city modeled after the philosophic soul. The Republic is Plato’s vision of a city founded by the philosopher as his own, as his own home but a home that is not real – that cannot be real. For the difference between Plato’s vision and Socrates’ reality, see Strauss, Natural Right and History, 119.
that grants each their due whereby each recognizes the validity of the other’s position, and by extension each recognizes its own limitations. All human attempts at redemption, guided exclusively by reason and science, just as all attempts at redemption guided exclusively by blind faith are self-destructive; ergo, modern nihilism.

In the end, Strauss’s pursuit of accommodation between religion and philosophy was driven by the recognition that neither politics, nor reason (or science), nor revelation speaks exclusively to man’s search for redemption. Neither one offers the conclusive answer to man’s search for a home. Do I find my home in a liberal multicultural state or with my ancestral people and its tradition? Is the world my home? Or does my destiny lie in eternal salvation through God’s redeeming grace? What does homecoming and thus redemption ultimately mean? These are the questions that have animate the Jewish problem as Strauss understood it, and these are the questions that pulse through the human experience and its thought.
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250


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