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*Disturbing Revelation: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin,  
and the Bible*

von

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## Innsbrucker Diskussionspapiere zu Weltordnung, Religion und Gewalt

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## *Disturbing Revelation: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Bible*

John Ranieri\*

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

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## Voegelin: Metastasis and Modernity

In the Preface to his *Israel and Revelation*, Voegelin writes: “Metastatic faith is one of the great sources of disorder, if not the principal one, in the contemporary world; and it is a matter of life and death for all of us to understand the phenomenon and to find remedies against it before it destroys us.” This dangerous metastatic faith is described by Voegelin as “A vision of the world that will change its nature without ceasing to be the world in which we live concretely.”<sup>1</sup> Voegelin further identifies this phenomenon as constituting the “most dubious element” within the Judaeo-Christian tradition.<sup>2</sup> He finds particularly acute forms of it in the writings of the prophets of Israel. The unyielding stance of the prophets when confronted with the seemingly reasonable accommodations of Israelite society to the demands of mundane existence is especially perplexing to Voegelin in that it seems to violate the common sense necessary for survival in a world of aggressive empires. While he may approve of the prophets’ effort “to disengage the order of the soul under God from a mundane order that was formed by the myth,” their rejections of the mundane order remain an oddity.” He believes the prophets were either unable or unwilling to find a way “from the formation of the soul to institutions and customs they could consider compatible with the knowledge and fear of God.”<sup>3</sup> To illustrate his point Voegelin cites the episode from Isaiah, chapter 7 in which the prophet tells King Ahaz to forego military alliances and military means at the time of the Syro-Ephraimic War. The king is told to trust in Yahweh and all will be well. Much has been written about this famous scene and its meaning; here I will focus on the conclusions Voegelin draws from the episode.<sup>4</sup> In the prophet’s advice to Ahaz, Voegelin finds that the inscrutable will of God becomes the knowable will of God identical to the will of Isaiah. The prophet attempts to tie God’s will to Judah’s pragmatic victories in the sphere of politics. Isaiah’s advocacy cap-

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 1, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), xiii, 452.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Voegelin, “World-Empire and the Unity of Mankind,” in *Published Essays 1953-1965*, vol.11 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 153.

<sup>3</sup> *Israel and Revelation*, 447, 446.

<sup>4</sup> I have treated this episode more extensively in my book, *Eric Voegelin and the Good Society*, (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 146-156.

tures the profound tension characteristic of prophetic existence, between the experience of revelation and the always imperfect concrete social situation. But in this case Isaiah “has tried the impossible: to make the leap in being a leap out of existence into a divinely transfigured world beyond the laws of mundane existence.” The resolution of the tension at the heart of Israel’s historical experience is accomplished through faith that God will transfigure the world. While remaining the world with which we are familiar, it will now be freed of the perennial problems afflicting the human race. The truth of order will be brought to earth by an act of trust in God. Despite their legitimate aims – to revive a sense of the divine presence in the lives of their people and to denounce social injustice – the prophets’ “ontological denial of the conditions of existence in the world’ is, for Voegelin, unacceptable. In decrying the prophets’ stubborn blindness he shows how philosophers are also capable of thundering in indignation:

The constitution of being is what it is, and cannot be affected by human fancies. Hence the metastatic denial of the order of mundane existence is neither a true proposition in philosophy, nor a program of action that could be executed. The will to transform reality into something which by essence it is not is the rebellion against the nature of things as ordained by God...The metastatic faith, now, though it became articulate in the prophets, did not originate with them but was inherent, from the very beginnings of the Mosaic foundation, in the conception of the theopolity as the Kingdom of God incarnate in a concrete people and its institutions.<sup>5</sup>

The metastatic problem continues in the New Testament. But from the start the gospel movement was forced to confront the discrepancy between eschatological anticipation and life in the world:

The tension was given with the historical origin of Christianity as a Jewish messianic movement. The life of the early Christian communities was experientially not fixed but oscillated between the eschatological expectation of the Parousia that would bring the Kingdom of God and the understanding of the church as the apocalypse of Christ in history. Since the Parousia did not occur, the church actually evolved from the eschatology of the realm in history toward the eschatology of trans-historical, supernatural perfection. In this evolution the specific essence of Christianity separated from its historical origin... [The] expectation of an imminent coming of the realm was stirred to white heat again and again by the suffering of the persecutions; and the most grandiose expression of eschatological pathos, the Revelation of Saint John, was included in the canon in spite of misgivings about its compatibility with

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<sup>5</sup> *Israel and Revelation*, 453.

the idea of the church. The inclusion had fateful consequences, for with the Revelation was accepted the revolutionary annunciation of the millennium in which Christ would reign with his saints on this earth.<sup>6</sup>

This passage is tremendously important in understanding Voegelin's attitude toward the Bible and modernity. Here he makes a crucial distinction between ideas associated with the historical origin of the Christian movement and those that he describes as the "specific essence" of Christianity. In a letter to Alfred Schutz he clarifies his position further, insisting that "historically Christianity contains two main components which I have distinguished and identified as the gnosis of historical eschatology and as essential Christianity." The former component is part of the prophetic messianic legacy of Israel, while the latter identifies the core of Christian belief with the notion of supernatural fulfillment beyond this world. Using Voegelin's later terminology, we can say that the essence of Christianity is found in its differentiation of consciousness, rather than in Hebrew notions of the imminent, transfiguring reign of God.<sup>7</sup> For Voegelin, what is essential to Christianity is its orientation toward a supernatural destiny beyond history. Wherever this is recognized the Christian community is better able to relinquish its metastatic hopes and to adjust to the limitations of life in the world.

The churches become the bearers of "essential Christianity," but the eschatological messianic dimension never quite disappears. In Voegelin's view, mod-

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, in *Modernity Without Restraint*, vol.5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 169, 175-176. Also Eric Voegelin, "The Spiritual and Political Future of the Western World," in *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers 1939-1985*, vol.33 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 79-81 and Eric Voegelin, "Eric Voegelin to Alfred Schutz – On Christianity," in *The Philosophy of Order*, ed. Peter Opitz (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 452.

<sup>7</sup> On this same passage Theodore Weber writes "The 'specific essence of Christianity' is defined in Greek terms by the opening of consciousness to transcendent being, not in Hebrew terms by the descent of God to be with God's people in their history and to fulfill the promise of their liberation. Accordingly, Voegelin applauds the suppression of Jewish elements in Christianity and the decision by Augustine to move the eschaton from the end of history to a point of transcendence above history." Weber, "The Philosopher's 'Slant' on Christianity." Paper given at the annual meeting of the Eric Voegelin Society, 2002.

ernity does not begin with either the Renaissance or the Reformation; nor can its emergence be tied to a particular thinker such as Machiavelli or Hobbes. Modernity's roots are found in the eschatological consciousness that resurfaces in the work of Joachim and other medieval sectarians, but which are ultimately traceable to the messianic strain in the Bible. Voegelin does not hesitate to draw a direct line from the Bible, through the sectarianism of the Middle Ages with its culmination in the Protestant Reformation, to the revolutionary mass movements of the modern world:

Throughout the Middle Ages and up to our present, we meet with a sequence of movements that revive the eschatological spirit of the early Christian community. The members of the movements either withdraw from the world into smaller communities of "saints," thus, if the movements gather momentum, threatening the civilizational structure that is not based on eschatological expectation but on a compromise with the world; or the saints, expecting a early turning of the tables, become aggressive, particularly when their sentiments are nourished by the more primitive forms of the earlier Israelitic eschatology. The latter type of aggressive eschatological sentiment becomes increasingly important after the Reformation; it reaches its climax in the secularized derivatives of Christian eschatology; in the modern mass movements of Communism and National Socialism <sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere Voegelin makes it clear that he has more than "totalitarian" phenomena in mind. In his view, liberalism and every other form of "progressivism" are of the same lineage as their totalitarian opponents. All are variations on the theme of immanentization of the eschaton.<sup>9</sup> Liberalism contains "the

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. 1, *Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, vol. 19 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Athanasios Moulakis (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 160. See also Eric Voegelin, "Gnostic Politics," in *Published Essays 1940-1952*, vol.10 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 226, 229, 235, 240; *Israel and Revelation*, 454; *The New Science of Politics*, 185, 207-211; Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. 4, *Renaissance and Reformation*, vol.22 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. David L. Morse and William M. Thompson (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 144, 147-148, 150, 156, 160, 167-169, 172, 173-175, 194.

<sup>9</sup> *The New Science of Politics*, 189, 229-232; Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* in *Modernity Without Restraint*, vol.5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000, 299-300; Eric Voegelin, "Liberalism and Its History," in *Published Essays 1953-1965*, vol.11 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 89, 92.

irrational element of an eschatological final state, of a society that will produce through its rational methods, without violent disturbances, a condition of everlasting peace.”<sup>10</sup> Liberalism and communism are both manifestations of the modern myth of perfection through political action so characteristic of this “ideological and metastatic age”:

The two great protagonists of our present history are dominated by a common faith; they believe in a *telos* of humanity; they are conscious of a mission to fulfill. Such projects are unrealizable. The constitution of being cannot be changed. When the action of men and governments is dominated by eschatological dreams, it becomes impossible to define a rational policy; one can no longer do anything but adjust means to predetermined ends.<sup>11</sup>

However, Voegelin also believes the Biblical tradition provides resources that enable people to resist ideologies. Here “essential Christianity” (with its emphasis on the soul’s communion with divine transcendence) can play a formative role. The influence of Bible, then, operates primarily in an indirect fashion, through the spiritual formation of individuals and communities who are thereby inoculated against ideological illusions.<sup>12</sup> The biblical conviction that human beings are made in the image of God, is for Voegelin an invaluable insight from which may be derived a profound respect for the humanity of all persons.<sup>13</sup> In one sense it is hard to disagree with Voegelin’s understanding of the relationship between biblical faith and the social order. Ultimately the moral and spiritual condition of persons and communities is decisive in determining a society’s health and the ability of its institutions to endure. And in those societies falling within the Bible’s cultural orbit the formative role of the biblical message in this regard is critical in shaping these habits of the heart necessary for social stability. Voegelin rightly underscores the Bible’s emphasis on personal and communal conversion.

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<sup>10</sup> “Liberalism and Its History,” 89. Also “Gnostic Politics,” 235-236.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Voegelin, “Prospects of Western Civilization,” in *Published Essays 1953-1965*, vol.11 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 117.

<sup>12</sup> “Gnostic Politics,” 240; Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, vol.31, of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 28-40.

<sup>13</sup> *Hitler and the Germans*, 204-212; Eric Voegelin, “Democracy and Industrial Society,” in *Published Essays 1953-1965*, vol.11 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 213, 221-222.



But this conversion takes place in a phenomenal world which, on Voegelin's account seems to operate on the basis of a set of unalterable laws governing not only the non-human but the human realm as well – what he describes as the “laws of mundane existence.” He insists that “the constitution of being cannot be changed.” Here the dualism of Voegelin's thought – a dualism that tends to emphasize the distinction if not separation between the spiritual and the mundane - makes itself felt. Within a biblical framework this approach is problematic; because biblical notions of conversion, while certainly focused on the mystery of love and awe we call God, do not separate this encounter from the task of changing unjust social, economic, and political structures. For example, if the gospel is capable of transforming persons in ways that enable them not only to resist the lure of ideologies, but also to function as reasonable political agents, then the question naturally arises as to how we are to evaluate the actions, decisions, and policies of those so transformed. These individuals are called to act in the world, and when they do it will frequently be on the basis of their understanding of their transformative experiences. How are we to determine when actions spring from an interiorized “essential Christianity,” or from metastatic faith? Voegelin makes these judgments based on what he determines to be acceptable or possible in the political realm. He has a disturbing tendency to infer the presence or absence of deformed consciousness on the basis of the person's political decisions or stance. Profession of what he takes to be metastatic ideas is taken as proof that contact with reality has been lost. For example, Voegelin ridicules pacifist sentiments or movements committed to non-violent resistance, seeing in them evidence of unbalanced consciousness, as well as a “naively stupid” or even blasphemous misinterpretation of Christianity.<sup>14</sup> In such cases pacifist convictions constitute *proof* of metastatic, thinking. The thought that such convictions might actually proceed from a profound spiritual experience is not seriously considered. This is unfortunate, and some of Voegelin's most sympathetic critics note how self-defeating his polemical approach can be. Because his attacks sometimes come across as unfair and exaggerated, Voege-

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<sup>14</sup> Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. 8, *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*, vol.26 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. David Walsh (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1999) 280-283; Eric Voegelin, “Foreword to the Second Edition of *The Political Religions*,” in *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers 1939-1985*, vol.33 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 21.

lin increases the risk that open-minded readers will dismiss him as a strident political partisan<sup>15</sup>. This has the effect of casting doubt on the validity of his analyses of experiences of transcendence, since they now are under the suspicion of being nothing more than reflections of Voegelin's political convictions. To the extent he allows these convictions to influence his evaluation of the spiritual condition of other thinkers, he has only himself to blame for creating this impression.

Caught between a deep wariness with regard to the Bible's deforming tendencies and a deep respect for wisdom it embodies, Voegelin resolves this tension by dividing the biblical legacy. On one side there is the Bible's eschatological vision – dynamic, prone to imbalance, and tainted with an ineradicable impulse to bring heaven to earth. In this vision Voegelin locates fundamental roots of modernity and its travails. On the other side there is the biblical revelation of the God beyond the gods – the transcendent reality in relation to which humans become aware of both their greatness and their limitations. By recovering this orientation to the transcendent, Voegelin believes modernity might someday find its balance. The question remains though, whether there anything distinctively biblical remains in the notion of transcendent experience, pruned of its eschatological impulse to cooperate with God in undoing the world's evil.

### **Strauss and the “Triumph of the Biblical Orientation”**

Responding to the criticisms made by Voegelin and Alexandre Kojève of his book *On Tyranny*, Strauss wonders whether the attempt to restore classical social science is not, perhaps, utopian, “since it implies that the classical orientation has not been made obsolete by the triumph of the biblical orientation.”<sup>16</sup> In a 1946 letter to Karl Lowith, he further remarks how “there can be no doubt that our usual way of feeling is conditioned by the biblical tradition;” even as he refuses to rule out the possibility of correcting that feeling. In

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<sup>15</sup> Eugene Webb, “Voegelin's ‘Gnosticism’ Reconsidered,” *The Political Science Reviewer*, vol. XXXIV, 2005, 48-71.

<sup>16</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth, revised and expanded edition (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 177-178.

order to begin the process of correction, though, we must first identify the source of this pervasive feeling. Strauss finds it in the biblical teaching on Providence, which he describes as “the belief in creation by the loving God.”<sup>17</sup> Eleven years earlier, in another letter to Lowith focusing largely on Nietzsche, Strauss praises the latter’s doctrine of the eternal return as an attempt “to wean us and himself from millennia-old pampering (softening) due to belief in creation and providence.” As part of the same exchange, Strauss reiterates his point:

If one considers what decisive importance the dogma of creation and providence has for all of post-ancient philosophy, then one comprehends that liberation from this dogma was only to be brought about through the ‘superhuman’ effort of the teaching of the eternal return. Once this liberation – liberation from an unbelievable *pampering* of the human race – is achieved, then the eternal return can be taught calmly – assuming that it is true, and that is the central question for cosmology.<sup>18</sup>

Strauss’s attention to the Bible is not merely a political philosopher’s reflections on the biblical text, but a conscious effort on his part to liberate society from the domination of biblical teaching. There is a sense in which everything Strauss writes on the Bible can be understood in light of these remarks. In his view, the “triumph of the biblical orientation” points to a disruptive imbalance within western civilization. The predominance of either Athens or Jerusalem jeopardizes the vitality of the West, which depends upon the tension between the two cities for its dynamism and life.<sup>19</sup> In modernity, the teaching of Jerusalem has won out over the way of Athens; modernity reflects the unfortunate consequences of this “unbelievable *pampering*” of the human race. In a situation in which the Bible has clearly triumphed, adherents of philosophy must work to restore the proper balance.

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Lowith and Leo Strauss, “Correspondence Concerning Modernity,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. IV, (1983), 111

<sup>18</sup> Karl Lowith and Leo Strauss, “Correspondence,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 5/6, (1988), 183, 190.

<sup>19</sup> “Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History,” in Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 72; “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, edited with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 116, 121.

Yet for someone who considers the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem to be the central issue confronting western civilization, Strauss devotes a relatively meager amount of space to analysis of the Bible. What are we to make of an author who writes three books on Xenophon's Socrates, while limiting his only detailed biblical commentary to the first two chapters of Genesis? This discrepancy would pose no problem, but for the fact that Strauss insists we cannot understand the modern world without a serious consideration of the claims of Athens and Jerusalem. His reticence, then, in treating biblical texts with the same degree of thoroughness as he employs when considering classical Greek texts, is puzzling. In the case of the New Testament, the absence of any serious consideration amounts to a deafening (and quite intentional) silence on Strauss's part. Nonetheless, there are in fact sufficient statements and hints in his work to enable us to recognize ways in which he construes the relationship between the Bible and the modern world.

Perhaps most important is the connection between modern philosophy and biblical morality:

Modern rationalism rejected biblical theology and replaced it by such things as deism, pantheism, and atheism. But in this process, biblical morality was in a way preserved. Goodness was still believed to consist in something like justice, benevolence, love, or charity...<sup>20</sup>

However well-intentioned, Strauss believes these modern developments lead to a subordination of philosophy to extra-philosophical goals, in the interest of serving human needs and relieving suffering. From the perspective of classical philosophy, this is a deflection of philosophy from its true path. In his reflections on Genesis, Strauss repeatedly calls attention to the Bible's depreciation of the heavens and its overriding concern for human beings.<sup>21</sup> This

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<sup>20</sup> "Progress or Return? 99. See also Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, translated by E. M. Sinclair, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 81; Leo Strauss, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research* Vol. 13, no. 3, (September: 1947), 329.

<sup>21</sup> Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens," in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, edited with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 383; Leo Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, edited with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 369, 372-73.

turning toward the human is an implicit criticism of the “superhuman” contemplative ideal of the philosophers. For Strauss this represents a significant lowering of the horizon, as the highest type of human life is relegated to a position of lesser rank in comparison with the biblical call for moral virtue.<sup>22</sup> For Strauss, this shift of interest “from the eternal order to man” is, in fact, a move toward a focus on “application.” He believes this preoccupation with application (in other words, practicality) easily deteriorates into the manipulation and domination of human life. He suggests as much when he notes how:

According to the modern project, philosophy or science was no longer to be understood as essentially contemplative and proud but as active and charitable; it was to be of service of man’s estate; it was to enable man to become the master and owner of nature through the intellectual conquest of nature.<sup>23</sup>

When Strauss criticizes Hobbes for allowing “justice and charity” to supplant the aristocratic virtues, it is because in so doing, Hobbes weakens the necessary forces of prudence and moderation that would prevent practicality (in the interest of charity), from degenerating into manipulative, albeit well-intentioned, oppression.

With this in mind, we can better appreciate Strauss’s description of some of the consequences of allowing charity to acquire dominance in society:

By Machiavelli’s time the classical tradition had undergone profound changes. The contemplative life had found its home in monasteries. Moral virtue had been transfigured into Christian charity. Through this, man’s responsibility to his fellow men and for his fellow men, his fellow creatures, had been infinitely increased. Concern with the salvation of men’s immortal souls seemed to permit, nay, to require courses of action which would have appeared to the classics, and which did appear to Machiavelli, to be inhuman and cruel...He seems to have diagnosed the great evils of religious persecution as a necessary consequence of the Christian principle, and ultimately of the Biblical principle. He tended to believe that a considerable increase in man’s inhumanity was the unintended but not surprising consequence of man’s aiming too high.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 92.

<sup>23</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> Leo Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?” in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 43-44.

Strauss makes an explicit contrast between the classical tradition, which would have recoiled at the thought of committing atrocities in the interest of saving souls, and the biblical tradition, whose sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others leads to persecution. Strauss never says Machiavelli is mistaken in his judgment about the effects of charity; rather he faults Machiavelli's *reaction* to these effects. Confronted with the social disruption wrought by charitable intentions gone awry, Machiavelli opts for the way of "calculation" to bring peace through a more judicious and effective use of violence. But calculation is but another word for the preoccupation with practicality Strauss associates with the influence of charity on the modern society. To block the dangerous effects of aiming too high, Machiavelli lowers the horizon. Strauss believes this to be a mistake, and he looks to the classics for models of society that aim high, while remaining free of the harshness that all too frequently accompanies the reign of charity.<sup>25</sup>

According to Strauss, Machiavelli's teaching contains nothing unfamiliar to the classical authors. The primary difference is Machiavelli states boldly and in his own name what the classical writers would only suggest indirectly through the mouths of their characters.<sup>26</sup> This is his fundamental error. Machiavelli's resort to "propaganda" is, in Strauss's opinion yet another consequence of the biblical legacy. Machiavelli follows in the footsteps of Jesus, the greatest of the "unarmed prophets" who used propaganda to achieve victory for Christianity. Machiavelli "attempted to destroy Christianity by the same means by which Christianity was originally established."<sup>27</sup> The public nature of the Christian proclamation stands in stark contrast to the subtlety of "Socratic rhetoric." An author such as Xenophon understands this well; a classical sense of moderation and social responsibility informs his political teaching:

[He does so] not by protesting that he does not fear hell nor the devil, nor by expressing immoral principles, but by simply failing to take notice of the moral principles. He has to reveal his alleged or real freedom from morality, not by speech but

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<sup>25</sup> See Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988), 118. Unfortunately, Drury is sometimes so polemical she undermines her case.

<sup>26</sup> Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 10; Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey ed., *History of Political Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 297.

<sup>27</sup> "What Is Political Philosophy", 45.

by silence. For by doing so - by disregarding morality “by deed” rather than by attacking it “by speech” – he reveals at the same time his understanding of political things. Xenophon, or his Simonides, is more “politic” than Machiavelli; he refuses to separate “moderation” (prudence) from “wisdom” (insight).<sup>28</sup>

To avoid the misconception that Strauss’s analysis here is directed solely against the influence of Christianity, I would call attention to the fact that he also invokes Xenophon in at least two other places in order to compare the Greek thinker’s advice with that of Nathan the prophet (2 Samuel 12:1-7). In one instance he mentions how “the prophet Nathan seriously and ruthlessly rebukes King David for having committed one murder and one act of adultery.” Strauss then contrasts the prophet’s behavior with “the way in which a Greek poet-philosopher playfully and elegantly tries to convince a Greek tyrant who has committed an untold number of murders and other crimes that he would derive greater pleasure if he would have been more reasonable.” This comparison also appears in the essay “Jerusalem and Athens,” where Strauss quotes Xenophon directly; in order to illustrate how the bluntness of the prophet stands in sharp relief to Socratic subtlety and indirectness.<sup>29</sup> The prophets would seem then, in Strauss’s view, to be practitioners of the same dangerous moral zealotry that culminates in the imposition of the realm of charity. As spiritual descendants of prophets and saints, modern political philosophers further the belief that all means are justified in the pursuit of this charitable end.

It remains for us to consider why Strauss defends the option for Jerusalem in the modern world. On one level he does so out of a sense of respect for and loyalty to his Jewish heritage. Another significant reason has to do with his association of the Jewish problem with the fundamental political problem. As Eugene Sheppard writes:

Strauss was a German-Jewish refugee vitally concerned with the possibility of Jewish existence in exile. During his own period of exile from his native country, he came to question the wisdom and prudence of any project that called for an overcoming of political imperfection or for any messianic aspiration to overcome exile.

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<sup>28</sup> “What Is Political Philosophy”, 56.

<sup>29</sup> “Progress or Return?”, 109-110; “Jerusalem and Athens,” 404. The episode with Nathan and David is also cited as one of two biblical epigraphs to Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* (both involving prophetic chastisement of kings), lending credence to the view that the book is written with the opposition between Jerusalem and Athens ever in mind.

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.<sup>30</sup>

A third important reason derives from Strauss's opinion that because the majority of society will never be capable of philosophy and since the unity of the city requires at least some salutary and fundamental opinions, the choice for Jerusalem is worth defending. Strauss thinks those aspects of biblical morality that focus on law and prohibitions are to be preserved and fostered as a guide for those who are not capable of the philosophical life. In the dangerous present, any belief that helps men and women refrain from violence and follow the stabilizing customs and traditions of society should not be explicitly undermined. In a situation in which the biblical orientation has gained the upper hand its salutary aspects must be preserved, i.e., those beneficial to social stability; while those that contribute to the dangerous tendencies of modernity must be resisted. Strauss insists on preserving the tension between Athens and Jerusalem not because he sees them as possessing equally valid claims to guide civilization, but because modernity represents the triumph of Jerusalem, a triumph that must be offset as much as possible by the revival of classical wisdom. The teaching of Athens must be restored to prevent the total triumph of the biblical.

## The Bible and the Myth of Philosophy

If Strauss and Voegelin stand out among contemporary political thinkers in recognizing the import of the challenge posed by the Bible to philosophical wisdom, and if furthermore, they are notable for their recognition of the abiding relevance of that challenge, it does not follow that they handle the challenge adequately. In fact, their treatment of biblical materials is susceptible to criticism on a number of points. Here I can do no more than delineate some possible points of departure for a more substantive critique.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Lebanon, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>31</sup> I attempt such a critique in a manuscript bearing the same title as this essay, currently under review with the University of Missouri Press.



## 1. A one-sided approach to modernity

Strauss and Voegelin can be scathing in their comments with regard to what they take to be naïve, pacifist-leaning, humanitarianism as well as modern revolutionary politics, and they are critical of the biblical tradition to the extent that it contributes to these movements. Yet even though they both give extensive attention to threats to social and political order, they remain relatively silent about the enormous achievements of modernity in terms of the alleviation of human suffering. Their criticism of the Bible is not balanced with an equally appreciative appraisal of its role in the formation of the modern concern for victims.

## 2. The role of victimization.

Ironic here is the fact that a concern about victimization is a driving force in the work of both Strauss and Voegelin. In their preoccupation with problems of social and political order and in their arguments on behalf of culture-preserving violence, we find an evident desire to prevent a recurrence of the destructive events of the twentieth century. One does not have to read much of the work of either man in order not to be struck by how their treatment of seemingly purely “philosophical” issues frequently reflects an underlying focus on the plight of victims. Strauss may write with cool detachment about the need to preserve the possibility of the philosophical life within society, but in nearly all his analyses there is the ever present worry about violence being used against unpopular minorities, whether Jews or philosophers. His *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is an entirely typical work, one which epitomizes Strauss’s mature philosophy. Throughout his writings Strauss never loses sight of the reality of persecution; one of his indictments of charity’s effect on modernity is that it leads to greater violence against victims. But Strauss is far less sensitive to the possibility that the ability to offer this critique has its source in the very biblical text he criticizes. He writes as if it is the moderation of the classics that inspires his aversion to victimization. Philosophy is thereby absolved of any complicity with violence.

Voegelin’s anger over the unwarranted destruction of innocent people is often palpable in his writing. He is particularly distressed by the ways in which fanatics and ideologues in modern times have drawn upon the Bible in order to justify the annihilation of their foes. However, what Voegelin does is to

accept such violence as somehow legitimately derived from biblical source, rather than as a resurgence of the archaic violent sacred, a sacred violence from which, however haltingly, the biblical text is moving away. Unfortunately, for both Strauss and Voegelin, fear of the destabilizing tendencies wrought by the biblical message outweighs, and to some degree blinds them to the Bible's role in the rehabilitation of victims.

### **3. The artificial character of their philosophical critique.**

To criticize biblical teaching from the perspective of classical political philosophy is to engage in a critique on the basis of a highly idealized abstraction. In other words, to compare the Bible with classical philosophy is to compare a tradition that is still very much alive and active in the world with one that is essentially non-existent except in university departments. The Bible continues to inspire and inform living traditions in a way "philosophy" does not. People actually attend church and synagogue and try to translate what they hear into effective practice in their personal and public lives.

With this in mind, one of the more striking aspects of Strauss's and Voegelin's treatment of biblical materials is the almost complete absence of any discussion of the role of worship. For philosophers wishing to be faithful to the spirit of the texts they analyze, this is a remarkable omission. It raises serious questions about the adequacy of their philosophical critiques, for communal worship is a central concern in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Philosophy, for both Strauss and Voegelin, focuses mainly on individuals; if there is any communal dimension to the philosophical life this results from the efforts of these rare and like-minded persons to seek out and to prefer the company of others like themselves. Unlike biblical peoples, philosophers do not take their fundamental bearings from being members of a community of worship. To the quite reasonable objection that philosophy as philosophy is not concerned with divine worship, one can say in reply that if this is so, then a philosophical approach to biblical materials is necessarily inadequate, since it treats as negligible what is central to those who formed the Bible. But both Strauss and Voegelin wish to understand the biblical writers as they understood themselves, hence their neglect of this dimension of biblical experience is problematic.

In addition to the neglect of biblical worship (but certainly related to it), the artificiality of the critiques launched by Strauss and Voegelin against the Bible depends to a significant degree on the ability to confine the comparison between Athens and Jerusalem to the realm of theory. Their criticisms of the biblical tradition increase in strength and forcefulness the more we are content to remain in the realm of ideas. In *theory* it is possible to contrast the wisdom of Athens with the teaching of the Bible as if they are both viable options for contemporary civilization. By analyzing the Bible from a philosophical perspective this is what Strauss and Voegelin do; they pull the biblical message into the realm of theory where it can be contrasted with philosophy. The effectiveness of their critique hinges on abstracting from history. Western civilization is thereby explained in terms of competing sets of ideas represented by Athens and Jerusalem; which Strauss construes in terms of conflict and Voegelin in terms of a tradition that carefully preserves the balance of consciousness versus one with an inherent tendency toward imbalance. In fact, though, the realistic choices confronting contemporary civilization are not between the way of Athens and the way of Jerusalem, but how best to deal with the defacto “triumph of the biblical orientation.” Historically and concretely it is the biblical tradition (even in its secular guises) that has been left with the responsibility for preserving and developing modern western civilization. In the theoretical sphere it may be otherwise, but concerning the actual ordering of modern society we have no opportunity to compare societies under the sway of the Bible’s insights with comparable societies operating in accordance with Platonic moderation. How easy it becomes then, to take the biblical tradition to task from a perspective that has no institutional existence apart from academia. The historical sins of societies influenced by the Bible have been and will continue to be amply chronicled. By contrast, Platonically ordered societies can not be similarly criticized because they do not exist. This is one of the primary reasons why the anti-modernism of Strauss and Voegelin is ultimately unsatisfying. For readers are left wondering how seriously Strauss and Voegelin intend the return to classical philosophy, and whether they sufficiently think through the consequences of “repeating antiquity at the peak of modernity.”<sup>32</sup> Both men realize that a Platonic polis is no longer a possibility in the contemporary world. At the same time they both convey a sense that everything would be better if only the

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<sup>32</sup> Lowith-Strauss, “Correspondence”, 183.

world had taken Plato's teaching to heart. They accept a certain myth about "philosophy" which they employ in their critique of the biblical tradition.

#### 4. The myth of philosophy's purity.

At the heart of this myth is the belief that philosophy is never wrong – it always takes the side of truth. According to Rene Girard, in this regard the self-understanding of philosophy differs profoundly from that of the Bible:

But what is so extraordinary about the biblical rehabilitation of victims? Isn't it a common practice that dates right back to antiquity? Yes, but previously the victims were rehabilitated by one group in opposition to another. The faithful remain gathered around the rehabilitated victim and the flame of resistance is never extinguished. Truth is not allowed to submerge...Take the death of Socrates, for example. "True" philosophy never enters into it. It escapes the contagion of the scapegoat. There is always truth in the world; even though this is no longer so at the moment of Christ's death. Even his favorite disciples are speechless in the face of the crowd. They are literally absorbed by it.<sup>33</sup>

In similar fashion, the Hebrew Bible allows little room for the Israelites to congratulate themselves on their adherence to God's truth.<sup>34</sup> By comparison, philosophy, from the time of its birth, is not able to recognize its own complicity in scapegoating. Athens may have demanded the death of Socrates, but philosophy knows it had nothing to do with this injustice – its hands remain bloodless. This conviction is possible as long as consciousness of scapegoating is lacking.

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<sup>33</sup> Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 105. Elsewhere Girard makes a similar point: "[The] Gospel tells us there are moments in which there is absolutely no truth in culture; and I do not think any other source tells us that with quite the same conviction. There are some anticipations in Greek culture, in particular the death of Socrates, but in the accounts of the death of Socrates, philosophy always knows the truth, whereas in Christianity, the Christians themselves say 'Peter, our leader was ignorant.' In other words, the New Testament says that truth is not a human truth, that truth is outside of culture and has to be introduced into the world against the grain of culture itself..." Walter Burkert, Rene Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith, *Violent Origins*, ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 143.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 17-18, 49-55, 147-49.

Is it really the case, as Strauss maintains, that the biblical notion of charity is responsible for modern fanaticism? Does reversing the millennia-old “pampering” and “softening” associated with belief in a loving Providence actually serve the best interests of humanity? With respect to Voegelin’s criticism it must be asked whether it is the vision of Moses, Isaiah, Jesus and Paul that needs to be balanced and approached with caution. Taking “metastatic faith” to be the greatest threat facing contemporary civilization runs the risk of ignoring those aspects of the same biblical sources responsible for the most humane aspects of the modern world. This criticism also tends to evade questions about philosophy’s own suitability in correcting alleged biblical imbalance.

### **5. The necessity for a critique of reason.**

To the extent that Strauss and Voegelin equate philosophy with the life of reason, their acceptance of the myth of philosophy’s innocence makes them relatively uncritical of reason’s own liabilities. Reason is also susceptible to sacrificial thinking. It must become aware of its own scapegoating tendencies in order to be faithful to the exigencies of its own reasonableness. The life of reason is best able to flourish where the victimage mechanism has been called into question and exposed. Strauss and Voegelin critique the Bible from the perspective of philosophy – what is required, though, is that the anthropological insights of the biblical text be permitted to help philosophy fulfill its commitment to self-knowledge.

In varying degrees, Strauss and Voegelin resist this conclusion, preferring to correct or oppose the biblical message in light of philosophy. Strauss is not mistaken in recognizing the Bible’s wariness with regard to philosophy. But he misinterprets that wariness, reading it as further evidence of the contrast between the unquestioning obedience demanded by the Bible and the freedom of thought typical of the philosophical life. Voegelin, unlike Strauss, does not oppose reason to revelation – on the contrary, he understands reason as being constituted by revelation.<sup>35</sup> Yet no more than Strauss does he submit reason to biblical critique. Neither Voegelin nor Strauss conceives of a biblically derived epistemological critique of philosophy.

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<sup>35</sup> *The Ecumenic Age*, 228-29.

With both men, rationality is sometimes associated with the proper use of violence. Plato is judged to be more reasonable than biblical thinkers because his attitude toward the use of violence is considered by Voegelin to be more judicious. Platonic rationality is intimately tied to the violence of order. Yet what Voegelin considers to be Platonic balance is in fact one more manifestation of sacrificial thinking – the Platonic resort to violence is undertaken with the confidence that it proceeds from the rational exigencies required by the pursuit of order. Similarly, the flexibility with which Strauss endows the idea of natural right would place no limit on the forms of violence to be used in defending society. From the perspective of natural right (as he understands it) the decision to make use of violence on behalf of society, is left in the hands of the “true statesman” whose own “magnanimous flexibility” mirrors this natural right as he “crushes the insolent and spares the vanquished.”<sup>36</sup> Rhetorically invoking the balance and moderation of the classics somehow legitimates violence in the present. But this appeal is made to a tradition that has paid little attention to its own involvement in violence. Strauss and Voegelin argue that violence is legitimate when it is reasonable; but neither of them provides an adequate account of how such rationality is to be determined. Instead their readers are frequently left with the impression that the standard of rationality they employ coincides with their own political judgments and commitments.

A case can be made that the destruction wrought by of modern ideological movements is a consequence of their *departure* from the spirit of the Bible. These movements are most lethal precisely when they forget to take victims into account; they are most awful when they cloak their deeds in the seemingly impartial talk of rational necessity and the impenetrable conviction of the “sublime sobriety” of philosophy. It is when reason convinces us that our violence stems from a sober assessment of what needs to be done, when we take pride in the “realism” of our position, and when we regret the unfortunate “necessity” of having to do harm – it is then we need to be most alert to our scapegoating. Perhaps our problems stem, not from naively imagining that we can live in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount, but from naively following Machiavelli.

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<sup>36</sup> “What Is Political Philosophy?”, 28.

## 6. The difference between account and performance.

Despite these criticisms, I believe that performatively Strauss and Voegelin go beyond, and are in some sense even at odds with, the narratives they employ when speaking about the Bible and philosophy. I mean this in two ways. First there is my previously mentioned point about their preoccupation with victimization. The second area in which I detect a discrepancy between their account and their performance concerns their attitude toward philosophy. The highly idealized descriptions of philosophy which both Strauss and Voegelin present perpetuate the myth of philosophy's invulnerable correctness and superiority. This portrait, however, does not correspond to their actual practice in many cases. Intelligence, as concretely operative in their work, is generally open, dynamic, and critical. To some extent Strauss and Voegelin remain prisoners of the narratives they tell about Athens and Jerusalem. This deprives them of the possibility of fully appreciating the meaning of the biblical text. In critiquing the Bible from the perspective of philosophy they do not allow the biblical voice to be heard in a way that might actually serve as a purifying challenge to philosophical thought. Plato did not have the benefit of the insights disclosed through the biblical text. Today we do, and if philosophy would be true to itself these insights must be considered. For it may well be the case that the knowledge of scapegoating disclosed in the Bible represents the decisive truth about human societies and cultures from which there can be no turning back. If so, then we are left with the task of living out the implications of this knowledge. And with all due respect to the achievement of Strauss and Voegelin, the crucial question becomes not whether the biblical message is in need of moderation, but whether philosophy is open to conversion.

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