Strauss' work as a political philosopher is inseparable from his experience as a German Jew, conscious of the precarious existence of his people during his own lifetime and throughout history. By his own admission "since a very, very early time the main theme of my reflections has been what is called the 'Jewish question.'"\(^1\) In part, this was due to his awareness of belonging to a people whose religious, intellectual, and cultural achievements formed one of the two major traditions of Western civilization. But Strauss is also conscious of the fact that being a Jew made him a member of a historically persecuted minority.\(^2\) While in his later work the theme of persecution would be expressed in terms of the relationship between the philosopher and the city, it is the ongoing historical experience of the Jews that most pointedly forces the question of the best regime. For Strauss, the plight of the Jewish people throughout history "is the most manifest symbol of the human problem insofar as it is a social or political problem."\(^3\)

\(^1\) "Why We Remain Jews," 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), p. 312. Subsequently cited as *Jewish Philosophy.* Given Strauss's explicit statements concerning the impact that his Jewish identity has had in determining the direction his work has taken, it is difficult to fathom how one of his most notable students could make the following observations about him: "The story of a life in which the only real events were thoughts is easily told...There is nothing in his biography that explains his thought, but it is to be noted that he was born a Jew in that country where Jews cherished the greatest secular hopes and suffered the most terrible persecutions..." Allan Bloom, "Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899 – October 18, 1973," in *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960 – 1990,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), pp. 235-236.

\(^2\) Leo Strauss, "Why We Remain Jews," in *Jewish Philosophy,* p.313.

\(^3\) "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion,*" in *Jewish Philosophy,* p.143.
To identify the "Jewish problem" as the epitome of the socio-political problem is not, however, to claim that it is solvable on the level of politics. Despite his own distance from the faith of his birth⁴, Strauss insists that those who come to the problem must deal with what lies at the most fundamental stratum of Jewish tradition — the claims of biblical revelation. Regardless of where one stands in relation to these claims, they must be confronted. Within the context of western civilization, any serious engagement with the question of the best way to order life in society must come to terms with the biblical tradition. Western civilization cannot be understood apart from this heritage. Of course the Bible is not the only wellspring of the western tradition. The other source is the heritage of classical Greece and Rome. Whoever wishes to consider contemporary human affairs at the deepest possible level must reflect on the meaning of both Jerusalem and Athens:

All the hopes that we entertain in the midst of the confusions and dangers of the present are founded positively or negatively, directly or indirectly on the experiences of the past. Of these experiences the broadest and deepest, as far as we Western men are concerned, are indicated by the names of the two cities Jerusalem and Athens...In order to understand ourselves and to illuminate our trackless way into the future, we must understand Jerusalem and Athens.⁵

There is, then, a relationship between Strauss's lifelong reflection on the Jewish question and the centrality of the theme of "Jerusalem and Athens."⁶ It is also the case that the Jewish question cannot be addressed without taking into account the ways in which Jews have been victimized

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⁴ Later in life, Strauss would observe how, without being aware of it, and without rebellion, he had, even at a relatively early stage, drifted far from the religious observance and belief of his parents' home. Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," in *Jewish Philosophy*, p. 460.


throughout their history. Strauss is acutely aware of the reality of victimization, and this awareness provides a backdrop for much of his writing. This raises the possibility of an encounter between his thought and that of Rene Girard, whose illuminating understanding of the role of victimization in culture is widely recognized. My purpose in this essay is to bring a Girardian perspective to bear on the manner in which Strauss takes up the theme of Athens and Jerusalem and its relationship to the possible realization of the good society. I first offer a brief account of Strauss’s teaching on the relationship between Jerusalem and Athens. This will be followed by a discussion of what I take to be probable reasons for Strauss’ approach to Athens and Jerusalem in light of the concerns that motivate his political philosophy. Here the emphasis will be on the ways in which Girard’s thought can enter into conversation with that of Strauss. A concluding section considers the problem of victimization within the context of the previous discussion.

II

Nowhere does Strauss speak about Jerusalem and Athens with greater clarity than in the following passage:

Western civilization consists of two elements, has two roots, which are in radical disagreement with each other. We may call these elements, as I have done elsewhere, Jerusalem and Athens, or to speak in nonmetaphorical language, the Bible and Greek philosophy.

In other places, Strauss describes the relationship as one of “conflict,” “antagonism,” “fundamental tension,” or “fundamental opposition.”

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7 I believe there is ample support for this interpretation of Strauss. One of his most important and characteristic books, Persecution and the Art of Writing, deals with the theme of how authors convey the socially disruptive truth of their message in a way that protects them from persecution. Strauss’s famous (even notorious) distinction between exoteric and esoteric teaching is very much tied to a context in which people must be careful about what they write for fear of punishment. Even in works in which he does not focus explicitly on persecution; there is often an undercurrent of concern about the threat posed to individuals and minorities by the majority.

8 Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” in Jewish Philosophy, p. 104.
Jerusalem and Athens stand for "opposite," and "incompatible" claims. At the basis of western culture we find conflict.

The opposition between Athens and Jerusalem is not, however, to be viewed negatively; rather "we must be aware of the fact that the vitality and the glory of our Western tradition are inseparable from its problematic character." For Strauss, the conflict between the two cities gives life to the West:

The recognition of two conflicting roots of Western civilization is, at first, a very disconcerting observation. Yet this realization has also something assuring and comforting about it. The very life of Western civilization is the life between two codes, a fundamental tension. There is, therefore, no reason inherent in Western civilization itself, in its fundamental constitution, why it should give up life. But this comforting thought is justified only if we live that life, if we live that conflict.

Living the conflict may not be the ideal situation for human beings, but we must be prudent, and accept our fate, with the realization that "it is not the worst fate which men could imagine."

Before specifying the differences that constitute this fundamental tension, it may be helpful to note the areas of agreement between Athens and Jerusalem. Strauss recognizes the ways in which Athens and Jerusalem are alike with regard to their differences from modernity. Specifically, he notes how pre-modern thought rejects modernity's anthropocentrism, its shift in moral orientation from duties to rights, and its emphasis on the historicity of human existence. The modern change in moral orientation involves an emancipation of the passions and a corresponding de-emphasis on virtue as restraint and guide. The biblical tradition and Greek philosophy are also in agreement as to the importance of morality, the content of morality, and its ultimate insufficiency. Both traditions refuse worship to human beings, and

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11 "Progress or Return," pp. 116, 121.
classical philosophy, while not achieving the same level of insight as the Bible, tends toward monotheism. Classical philosophy and biblical faith look to realities that transcend the human in order to ground morality. They extol justice as the highest virtue, and identify it with obedience to divine law. In both traditions there is a corresponding awareness that such obedience will be costly for those who accept its discipline.\(^{12}\)

Above all, it is the important role granted divine law that constitutes the common ground between the two traditions.\(^{13}\) More specifically, both recognize the *problem* of divine law to be of central importance. However, from this common ground, the Bible and Greek philosophy will move in sharply diverging directions. Ancient peoples, when confronted with a multiplicity of divine codes, each claiming to be true and frequently contradicting each other on the most important matters, are faced with a perplexing dilemma. Which divine law is authoritative and why? Confronted with this difficulty, Athens and Jerusalem offer alternatives that, according to Strauss, are fundamentally at odds.

The Greeks proceed on the basis of inquiry. To obtain knowledge of the "first things" it is necessary to begin by observing that which is accessible to all human beings, and by means of further questions and demonstration, to comprehend something of the order of things. In the course of this process, the authority of divine law is diminished:

Because the quest for the beginning, for the first things, becomes now philosophic or scientific analysis of the cosmos, the place of the divine law, in the traditional sense of the term (where it is a code traced to a personal god), is replaced by a natural order which may even be called, as it was later to be called, a natural law – or at any rate, to use a wider term, a natural morality. So the divine law, in the real and strict sense of the term, is only the starting point, the absolutely essential starting point for Greek philosophy, but it is abandoned in the process.\(^{14}\)

This insight is critical if we would understand Strauss's conception of philosophy—the philosophical life originates in a questioning of divine law and of those authorities that support it.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., pp.105-107.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 107.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., pp. 113-114.
By contrast, the Bible adheres to a particular divine law, and insists that this law alone is true. All other codes are false, human inventions. This acceptance of one code as uniquely divine does not allow for independent questioning in the manner of philosophy. The biblical authors were wise enough to understand the implications of their claims, and with bold consistency they drew out the consequences of their assertions:

How has one to conceive of the whole if one particular, and therefore contingent, law of one particular, contingent tribe is to be the divine law? The answer is: it must be a personal God; the first cause must be God; He must be omnipotent, not controlled and not controllable. But to be knowable means to be controllable, and therefore he must not be knowable in the strict sense of the term.\(^\text{15}\)

With this God there is "no necessary and therefore intelligible relation." For Strauss, the idea of a personal God is evidence of the chasm that separates belief from philosophy:

There is only one objection against Plato-Aristotle: and that is the factum brutum of revelation, or of the "personal" God. I say factum brutum – for there is no argument whatsoever, theoretical, practical, existential…not even the argument of paradox from the agnoia theou which characterizes the genuine philosopher to belief. (Italics Strauss')\(^\text{16}\)

Instead of attempting to bridge the divide between human questioning and divine mystery by means of philosophical argument, the Bible speaks of the covenant God makes with his people. While God freely enters into this relationship, it is not accurate to speak of the covenant as free from the perspective of the human partner, because the chosen people were commanded, not asked, to fulfill the divine laws.

The biblical God, as presented by Strauss, is omnipotent, inscrutable, omniscient mysterious, incomprehensible, unpredictable, and free.\(^\text{17}\)

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 114.


While the God of the Bible is, like the god of Aristotle, a "thinking being," Strauss consistently stresses the divine will. From a biblical perspective God's will is beyond human grasp, although it is exercised with the welfare of God's people in mind. Unlike the gods of the Greeks, this is a loving and merciful God who makes promises to the chosen people, including the promise of ultimate redemption. At the same time, the God of the Bible is capable of punishing severely those who disobey divine commands, even when such disobedience seems to spring from an evidently moral or even noble response to the situation at hand. God's commands must be obeyed, however unintelligible or contrary to morality they may seem.

These seemingly contradictory characteristics of the biblical God are, in Strauss's view, a manifestation of the mysterious nature of God:

If God is incomprehensible and yet not unknown, and this is implied in the idea of God's omnipotence, it is impossible to speak about God without making contradictory statements about him. The comprehensible God, the God about whom we can speak without making contradictions, we can say is the God of Aristotle and not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In Strauss' view, "the mysteries of the Torah are the contradictions of the Torah; the mysteries of God are the contradictions regarding God." The apparent discrepancy between divine love and mercy on one hand, and divine commands that seem to violate both intelligence and morality on the other hand, is a consequence of the fact that "God alone is unqualifiedly, if unfathomably just."

Parallel to their differences in understanding the nature of God, Jerusalem and Athens disagree as to the proper human orientation toward transcendent reality. Strauss observes how, "according to the Bible, the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord; according to the Greek philosophers, the beginning of wisdom is wonder." The Bible teaches that human beings are to live in "child-like simplicity and obedience to God." The appropriate human response to this God is

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18 "Jerusalem and Athens," pp. 196, 198-199
21 "Jerusalem and Athens," pp. 182, 188.
one of trust and loving obedience regardless of the content of the divine command. Within the biblical horizon, God’s love frequently manifests itself in ways that defy human comprehension. Strauss contrasts the exemplary philosophical man, Socrates, with Abraham, a model of biblical piety. Faced with an unintelligible command to sacrifice his son, Abraham obeys without question. Socrates confronted with a far less morally problematic command from Apollo, questions whether the god’s command makes any sense. From a biblical perspective the apparent unintelligibility of the demand placed upon Abraham is “disposed of by the consideration that nothing is too wondrous for the Lord.” Abraham’s obedience is attributed to “his supreme trust in God, his simple, single-minded, child-like faith.” Strauss describes the alternatives of faith and philosophy as a choice between a life of “obedient love” and a life of “autonomous understanding” or “free insight.” The Bible should be read as teaching that “man is not meant to be a theoretical, a knowing, a contemplating being; man is meant to live in child-like obedience.” A life of faith is not compatible with a life of genuine freedom: “The Bible...confronts us more clearly than any other book with this fundamental alternative: life in obedience to revelation, life in obedience, or life in human freedom, the latter being represented by Greek philosophers.” It appears as if for Strauss, there is little possibility of combining a life of inquiry with the way of faith. He creates the impression that while philosophy is for thoughtful, mature, adults; faith is better suited to the simple and the child-like.

This disagreement with respect to the best way of life carries over into a conflict concerning what it is that completes morality:

According to the Greek philosophers...it is understanding or contemplation. Now this necessarily tends to weaken the majesty of the moral demands, whereas humility, a sense of guilt, repentance, and faith in divine mercy, which complete morality according to the Bible, necessarily strengthen the majesty of the moral demands.

22 “Progress or Return,” pp. 119, 110.
24 “Progress or Return,” p. 104; Natural Right and History, p. 74.
26 “Progress or Return,” p. 108.
Strauss describes some of the consequences of these differences; noting how biblical humility "excludes magnanimity in the Greek sense," and how for the Bible (in contrast to Greek philosophy) the terms "poor" and "pious" are nearly synonymous. He also points out how compared to the Bible, classical philosophy is rather "heartless." The stringent demands of biblical morality create an atmosphere in which men and women live in "fear and trembling," but these believers also live in hope because of the divine promise of final redemption. This is not the case for the philosopher, who "lives in a state above fear and trembling as well as above hope," resulting in a state of "peculiar serenity," a serenity rooted in resignation.\(^{27}\)

Not surprisingly, Strauss believes that "no one can be both a philosopher and a theologian, or, for that matter, some possibility which transcends the conflict between philosophy and theology, or pretends to be a synthesis of both."\(^{28}\) Between Athens and Jerusalem, no synthesis is possible; because "syntheses always sacrifice the decisive claim of one of the two elements"\(^{29}\) Their incompatibility is of a depth that any attempt at synthesis will suppress or eliminate the distinctive character of either Athens or Jerusalem. The seeming syntheses of the Bible and classical philosophy, so characteristic of Western civilization, are, in fact, the subordination of one tradition to the other. Even when a synthesis appears successful, it will undoubtedly be the case that the subordinated element will rebel against the dominant partner.\(^{30}\) For Strauss, "Every synthesis is actually an option either for Jerusalem or for Athens."\(^{31}\)


\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 116.

\(^{29}\) "On the Interpretation of Genesis," p. 224.


III

In considering possible reasons for Strauss’ approach to the relationship between Jerusalem and Athens, we take as our starting point the agreement of Girard and Strauss with regard to an important characteristic of modernity. Both men see in modernity an unfettering of desire, and both see this as problematic. Strauss discovers in modernity a lowering of the horizon with regard to the role of the virtues in the pursuit of the good life, along with an indulgence toward and a redirection of the selfish passions.32 While he does not employ the language of mimetic theory, he is very much aware that modernity “emancipated the passions and hence ‘competition’.” He believes “it is merely a shallow hope to expect that the uninhibited ‘growth’ of each individual to its greatest height will not lead to serious and bloody conflict.” The “desire for recognition” and the “ignoble passion of envy” combined with modern ideas of equality will result in a leveling of humanity, culminating in the equivalent of the Nietzschean “last man.”33 Strauss worries about the “decline of liberal democracy into permissive egalitarianism,” because the latter replaces the “conscientious individual” with the “individual with his urges.”34 Girard is equally concerned with the effects of desire freed from guiding restraints:

To the extent that desire does away with the external obstacles that traditional society ingeniously established to keep it from spreading, the structural obstacle that coincides with the effects of mimesis—the living obstacle of the model that is automatically transformed into a rival—can very advantageously, or rather disadvantageously, take the place of the prohibition that no longer


works... The more people think that they are realizing the Utopias dreamed up by their desire... the more they will in fact be working to reinforce the competitive world that is stifling them.\textsuperscript{35}

Both Strauss and Girard acknowledge the wisdom of pre-modern traditions in attempting to control the adverse effects of desire by means of prohibition and custom. Despite the profound disagreement between Jerusalem and Athens, Strauss sees them as allies against modernity in their understanding of the limits placed upon desire by nature and law. For the Bible, "righteousness is obedience to the divinely established order, just as in classical thought justice is compliance with the natural order." In Strauss' view, the modern tradition, "originated by Machiavelli and perfected by such men as Hobbes and Adam Smith," "came into being through a conscious break with the strict moral demands made by both the Bible and classical philosophy; those demands were explicitly rejected as too strict."\textsuperscript{36} In similar fashion, Girard chastises modern thinkers for their dismissive attitude toward religious prohibitions. He contrasts their naivete with regard to the liberation of desire, with the realism of the Decalogue. Modern notions of individualism do not take into account the mimetic character of desire, hence they do not recognize what the tenth commandment knows so well—"we tend to desire what our neighbor has or what our neighbor desires."\textsuperscript{37}

This agreement concerning the modern problem of desire and the role of prohibitions in containing desire must not be allowed obscure the differences between Strauss and Girard. While noting the prominence of prohibitions in the Bible, Girard believes biblical thought evolves in a direction that moves beyond a reliance on prohibitions:

The disadvantage of the prohibitions, however, is that they don't finally play their role in a satisfying manner. Their primarily negative character, as St. Paul well understood, inevitably provokes in us the mimetic urge to transgress them. The best way of preventing violence


\textsuperscript{36} "The Three Waves of Modernity," p. 86; \textit{On Tyranny}, p. 192.

does not consist in forbidding objects, or even rivalistic desire, as the
tenth commandment does, but in offering to people the model that
will protect them from mimetic rivalries rather than involving them
in these rivalries.\textsuperscript{38}

Strauss does not appear to have had a similar insight. For the most
part, he emphasizes law, command, and prohibition in his interpretation
of the biblical message. Nor is this surprising. Understanding the
problematic character of the passions, he views the biblical teaching as a
useful aid in preventing these desires from disturbing the social order.
For those incapable of philosophy the Bible’s admonitions can serve as
an effective restraint on the passions. In a particularly revealing passage,
he takes Franz Rosenzweig to task for abandoning what Strauss
understands as the orthodox Jewish attitude toward the Law:

Rosenzweig could not believe everything which his orthodox
Jewish contemporaries in Germany believed…He opposed to their
inclination to understand the Law in terms of prohibition, denial,
refusal, and rejection, rather than in terms of command, liberation,
granting, and transformation, the opposite inclination. It is not
immediately clear, however, whether the orthodox austerity or
sterningness does not rest on a deeper understanding of the power of
evil in man than Rosenzweig’s at first glance more attractive view…\textsuperscript{39}

Here Strauss’ conception of Torah resembles closely the biblical
notion of \textit{katechon} or restraining power, an idea recovered and
incorporated into Girardian studies by Wolfgang Palaver.\textsuperscript{40} The idea of
\textit{katechon} (2Thess. 2:1-12) reflects a sacrificial reading of the biblical text

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 14.
\textsuperscript{39} “Preface to \textit{Spinoza’s Critique of Religion},” p. 153.
\textsuperscript{40} Wolfgang Palaver, “Hobbes and the \textit{Katechon}: The Secularization of Sacrificial
pp. 57-74. Since Girard believes that cultures are ultimately founded upon scapegoating
violence, and biblical revelation is a gradual unveiling of this scapegoating, the Bible can
be said to undermine cultural stability. At the same time, the radical implications of
revelation are resisted. Even the direct recipients of revelation find it difficult to abandon
ingrained cultural practices that have worked relatively well in the past. It is only by a
misreading of their scriptures that Jews and Christians can use revelation to sacralize
their violence. However effective this practice may be in sustaining culture, it is nonetheless
a distortion of the biblical message.
that has not been entirely freed from its connection to sacred violence.\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Katechon} refers to the culture-preserving power that keeps the forces of social chaos at bay. It seems clear from his criticism of Rosenzweig, that Strauss sees the Law as fulfilling this katechonic function. The Law is needed to keep evil intentions from becoming evil deeds. To this extent, his is a sacrificial reading of Torah.\textsuperscript{42} The Bible, in Strauss' teaching, plays a tremendously important role in sustaining civilization by restraining evil through the threat of divine sanction and the inculcation of a spirit of reverence for divine law. From a Girardian perspective, law and sanction are frequently tied to ideas about God that bear traces of their origin in the violent sacred. The primary thrust of the Bible is away from the sacred, i.e., the sacrificial, toward a God of love who has no part in violence. There is no question that these biblical ideas undermine the sacrificial mechanisms at the heart of culture.

There is evidence in his writings that Strauss is cognizant of the Bible's challenge to cultural order. Like Girard, Strauss recognizes the differences between the Bible's view of cultural origins and that of classical civilization:

- That asocial perfection which is contemplation normally presupposes a political community, the city, which accordingly is

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\textsuperscript{41} On the connection between sacrifice and the sacred, Girard says: "The word 'sacrifice'—sacri-fice—means making sacred, producing the sacred. What sacrifices the victim is the blow delivered by the sacrificer, the violence that kills his victim, annihilating it and placing it above everything else by making it in some sense immortal. Sacrifice takes place when sacred violence takes charge of the victim...", \textit{Things Hidden}, p. 226. Sacrificial religion then, is religion that grants an aura of legitimacy or even holiness to certain kinds of violence that produce beneficial effects for the community. Whether the victim is transfigured into a god or whether the god is perceived to be the author of punishment, violence and divinity are linked.

\textsuperscript{42} Strauss' understanding of God and religion contains elements of what Girard has referred to as the theology of divine caprice and the theology of divine anger. Of the latter Girard writes: "In this perspective the God is fundamentally good but is temporarily transformed into a wicked God. He crushes the faithful in order to bring them back to the straight path...He who loves greatly punishes greatly. This solution...introduces the rare idea among men that their scapegoat is not the only incarnation of violence. The community shares the responsibility for evil with the god; it begins to be guilty of its own disorders. The theology of anger comes very close to the truth, but it is still closely tied to the representation of persecution."

considered by the philosophers as fundamentally good, and the same is true of the arts, without whose services, and even model, political life and philosophic life are not possible. According to the Bible, however, the first founder of a city was the first murderer, and his descendants were the first inventors of the arts. Not the city, not civilization, but the desert, is the place in which the biblical God reveals Himself.\textsuperscript{43}

Elsewhere he observes how:

Cain—like his fellow fratricide Romulus—founded a city, and some of his descendants were the ancestors of men practicing various arts: the city and the arts, so alien to man’s original simplicity, owe their origin to Cain and his race...It goes without saying that this is not the last word of the Bible on the city and the arts but it is the first word...

On the basis of such observations, he concludes “Civilization and piety are two very different things.”\textsuperscript{44} Here we have another Girardian insight, which Strauss pursues in a completely un-Girardian direction. In the passages just cited, he clearly identifies the contrast between biblical and classical views of cultural origins. Yet throughout his writings, Strauss takes the position that, if the classics are the primary support and bearers of civilization, then society should do all in its power to recover the insights of the classical tradition. Strauss welcomes the biblical message in the degree to which it supports these aims. Unlike Girard, he never seriously considers the implications of the fact that the first murder points to a first victim at the beginning of culture.

As part of the larger question of the Bible’s relationship to culture, Strauss addresses the question of biblical influence on modernity. Strauss clearly sees the biblical heritage (and Christianity in particular) as having contributed to the formation of the modern world.\textsuperscript{45} Responding to

\textsuperscript{43} “Progress or Return,” p.109.
\textsuperscript{44} “Jerusalem and Athens,” pp. 190-191.
\textsuperscript{45} Strauss is far too careful a thinker to see modernity as a direct manifestation of the biblical message. For example, he distinguishes carefully between modern notions of progress and biblical ideas about history. At the same time, he admits that the idea of progress can be derived from a “certain interpretation of the Bible.” See “Progress or Return,” pp. 96-97.
Kojève, Strauss asks whether “the attempt to restore classical social science [is] not utopian since it implies that the classical orientation has not been made obsolete by the triumph of the biblical orientation.” In a letter to Karl Lowith he writes:

On the querelle des anciens et des modernes: I do not deny, but assert, that modern philosophy has much that is essential in common with Christian medieval philosophy; but that means that the attack of the moderns is directed decisively against ancient philosophy... Further: the greatest exponents of the ancients' side in the querelle, that is, Swift and Lessing, knew that the real theme of the quarrel is antiquity and Christianity.

Strauss believes that the greatest inroads made by biblical teaching in modern times pertain to the moral realm. He notes how the virtue of charity, which would have been considered an “extreme” by the ancients, has become synonymous with the “natural” for the moderns:

The Enlightenment’s aim was the rehabilitation of the natural through the denial (or limitation) of the supernatural, but what it accomplished was the discovery of a new “natural” foundation

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46 On Tyranny, pp. 177-178. Also Leo Strauss, “On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy,” Social Research, Vol. 13, (September 1946), pp. 328, 338. There Strauss writes, “It was especially due to the influence of the Bible that the classical view became questionable, even for many of its adherents.”

47 “Correspondence Concerning Modernity,” p. 106. Elsewhere Strauss says “it is not the Bible and the Koran, but perhaps the New Testament, and certainly the Reformation and modern philosophy, which brought about the break with ancient thought. The guiding idea upon which the Greeks and the Jews agree is precisely the idea of the divine law as a single and total law which is at the same time religious law, civil law and moral law” (Leo Strauss, “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” Interpretation, Vol. 18, no.1, (Fall 1990) p. 4-5). While this passage might seem to be evidence against the Bible’s influence on modernity, we must bear in mind the manner in which Strauss interprets the Bible here and elsewhere. His consistent emphasis is on the Bible understood as command and restraint. To the extent that the New Testament is a development of other ideas also found in the Jewish Bible, these same ideas already contained in the Jewish Bible will also enter into tension with classical thought.

Strauss’ attitude toward Christianity is complex, and an adequate discussion is beyond the scope of this essay. I have avoided as much as possible any critique of Strauss based on insights Girard would see as peculiar to Christianity.
which, so far from being natural, is rather the residue, as it were, of the "supernatural"...[The] extreme ("theological") virtue of charity becomes the "natural" ("philosophic") virtue...\(^{48}\)

The advance of biblical notions of charity dovetails nicely with modern ideas of democracy and the alleviation of suffering:

The modern conception of philosophy is fundamentally democratic. The end of philosophy is now no longer what one may call disinterested contemplation of the eternal, but the relief of man's estate. Philosophy thus understood could be presented with some plausibility as inspired by biblical charity, and accordingly philosophy in the classic sense could be disparaged as pagan and as sustained by sinful pride. One may doubt whether the claim to biblical inspiration was justified and even whether it was always raised in entire sincerity...Thus was ushered in the age of tolerance. Humanity, which was formerly rather the virtue appropriate in one's dealings with one's inferiors—with the underdog—became the crowning virtue. Goodness became identical with compassion.\(^{49}\)

It is questionable, though, whether Strauss views the advance of this biblically inspired morality as entirely salutary for society. Writing to Lowith, Strauss speaks of the possibility of "correcting" the way of feeling that modern men and women have absorbed from the biblical heritage. Strauss follows this observation with an expression of admiration and approval for the Aristotelian "great-souled" man, "not only theoretically, but practically."\(^{50}\) An indication of some of the substantive differences implied in this comparison become clearer in another context, where Strauss contrasts the Bible's concern for the poor, with the relative indifference of Aristotle's magnanimous man. "Compared with the Bible, Greek philosophy is heartless in this as well as in other respects."\(^{51}\) Describing the context in which Machiavelli's doctrines germinated, Strauss goes even further in suggesting the problems that have arisen from the influence of biblical morality:


\(^{49}\) *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, pp. 20-21.

\(^{50}\) "Correspondence Concerning Modernity," p. 111.

\(^{51}\) "Progress or Return," p. 108.
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.\(^{52}\)

In the discussion that follows, Strauss does not challenge Machiavelli’s judgment concerning “the Biblical principle;” his dispute with the Florentine thinker has to do with the erroneous conclusion he draws from this judgment. In Strauss’ view, Machiavelli concluded that the cruelty he witnessed around him was the result of human beings “aiming too high.”\(^{53}\) In this he was mistaken. Strauss believes that in the classics we find splendid examples of how it is possible to aim high without becoming inhuman.

One of his more sympathetic readers sees in Strauss’ work a continuation of Nietzsche’s project to “revive antiquity in the midst of modernity,” and she attributes to him the following belief:

When morality became understood, as it had in modern times, primarily as compassion or the selfless serving of others, it became irrational, as Nietzsche argued, insofar as it entailed better (more moral and more talented) human beings sacrificing themselves and their interests for the sake of preserving and promoting the interests of their more narrowly selfish inferiors. Strauss’ call for a return to the ancients thus involved, first and foremost, recapturing an understanding or view of a form of human life in itself worth living, which, as such, could become the source and justification of lesser, more instrumental forms of human endeavor.\(^{54}\)

\(^{52}\) “What Is Political Philosophy,” pp. 43-44.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., p. 44.

\(^{54}\) Catherine H. Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 116-117. In a footnote to this passage, Zuckert cites the following line from Strauss’, The City and Man, p. 34-35, to support her view: “an egalitarian society...looks up to such uncommon men as devote themselves to the service of the common man.” I am not as sure as Zuckert that this passage is sufficient to substantiate her claim, but as I have noted elsewhere, Strauss finds in the life of the philosopher and that of the gentleman estimable models for human beings.
Whether or not this is an exaggeration of Strauss' actual position, there is little doubt that he desires to recover the "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" of Athens, a city whose philosophers and gentlemen see the needs of society "with a freshness and directness which have never been equaled." Greek "heartlessness" may indeed be preferable to biblical "charity."

Despite the ambiguity in Strauss' evaluation of the biblical heritage, there is little reason to doubt the truth of his words that he will "not for a moment forget what Jerusalem stands for." As the embodiment of the majestic and unquestionable law of God, the Bible is to be accorded respect and, on the part of those who believe, obedience. With its stern moral teaching and commandments, it is a most welcome voice of restraint in the midst of a modernity in which the liberated passions can all too easily descend into anarchy. For Strauss, obedience to the unfathomable will of God would appear to be both the central message of the Bible and its greatest value for civilization. Conscious of the Bible's promise of redemption, he prefers to speak of it as an inspiring idea, whose corresponding reality is recognizable mainly by its absence. He is notably silent with regard to the socially transformative possibilities announced in the biblical proclamation. This gives to Strauss' treatment of biblical texts a lopsided quality, when viewed in conjunction with his almost exclusive focus on law and prohibition.

Despite the fact that the Bible is full of contradictions, Strauss defends the reasonableness of the choice for Jerusalem. He argues that reason is incapable of disproving the claims of revelation (although it cannot demonstrate them either). The failure of reason to eliminate the possibility of revelation means that philosophy may not be the self-evidently best way of life. A life of piety remains a viable and not unreasonable option.

This defense of the option for Jerusalem is not difficult to explain. Whether or not he shares the belief of many of his fellows Jews, he

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55 "What Is Political Philosophy," p. 27.
56 Ibid., p. 10.
57 "The mysterious God is the last theme and highest theme of the Bible" in "On the Interpretation of Genesis," p. 225.
58 "Why We Remain Jews," pp. 327-328.
exhibits tremendous loyalty to the tradition in which he had been reared. However much he may drift away from the faith of his youth, he does not believe that the modern critique of revealed religion has been successful. In light of our discussion so far, we must also recognize how, for Strauss, to concede that the choice for Jerusalem is irrational would be to undercut his argument on behalf of religion's social utility. Strauss speaks on behalf of the Bible in order to avoid Nietzschean conclusions about the arbitrariness of all orthodoxies. Following a discussion of modern thought as culminating in "atheism from intellectual probity" (which he associates with Nietzsche), Strauss warns that such atheism is ultimately rooted, not in reason, but in an act of will. This makes it fatal to any genuine philosophy. The problematic character of modern philosophy has itself led to this impasse, but Strauss cautions orthodox believers not to take too much comfort (or delight) in the demise of their old foe:

The victory of orthodoxy through the self-destruction of rational philosophy was not an unmitigated blessing, for it was a victory, not of Jewish orthodoxy, but of any orthodoxy, and Jewish orthodoxy based its claim to superiority to other religions from the beginning on its superior rationality (Deut. 4:6).

Confidence in reason may have collapsed, but it is being replaced by the belief that all significant commitments are fundamentally arbitrary, including religious beliefs. The new atheism's voluntarist tendencies lead to the erosion of the idea of objective truth, thus contributing to modernity's exaltation of subjective desire. This, of course, was anathema to Strauss (however much he may have sympathized with other aspects of Nietzsche's project), and he committed himself to mounting a defense against these dangerous trends. The Bible could hardly be a reliable ally in this struggle if the option for faith was just another rationally indefensible act of will. If the choice for Jerusalem was not reasonable, then it was no different from any other ungrounded commitment. In that case, to defend the option for faith would be to defend implicitly

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any arbitrary choice, thereby eroding belief in the rational foundations of social order. Whether or not Strauss actually believes in the reality of biblical revelation, he defends it against attack because of his conviction that reason cannot disprove it and because belief in revelation can be good for society. The former conviction is important for Strauss in so far as it deflates the exaggerated scientific and epistemological claims of modernity, while the latter is a way of counteracting the deleterious effects of modernity’s liberation of the passions. We must be careful, though, not to be misled by Strauss’ defense of the Bible; when he looks for lasting solutions to the problems of modernity, he returns to Athens, not to Jerusalem. His arguments on behalf of Jerusalem are meant to defend a set of beliefs that help to sustain a society in which philosophy can flourish. As to the substance of faith, “the religious indifference of the philosopher knows no limits.”

Seeking in classical philosophy the therapy for modern problems, Strauss’ thought is plagued by the same difficulties present in the work of his revered Greek philosophers. Here again a comparison with Girard may be instructive. In Girard’s reading, Plato is responding to a sacrificial crisis, i.e., a situation in which sacrificial rituals and the myths that accompany them are losing their efficacy in preventing society from once again descending into reciprocal violence. The distinction between “good” and “bad” violence is called into question. Myths are criticized for their unseemly depictions of the gods; and their ability to disguise

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62 Zuckert notes: “Unlike his medieval predecessors, he did not attempt even seemingly to reconcile reason and revelation…By showing that reason could not disprove revelation, Strauss sought to protect the grounds of popular morality and so the political preconditions for the pursuit of philosophy as well as the grounds for popular hope for happiness in the hereafter from the modern rationalist attack” (Postmodern Platos, p. 127).

63 Persecution and the Art of Writing, p. 115. The fuller context of this quotation supports this interpretation: “The religious indifference of the philosopher knows no limits: he does not oppose to the ‘errors’ of the positive religions the religion of reason; he does not demand that a philosopher who as such no longer believes in the religion of his fathers, should reveal his religious indifference, proceeding from unbelief, by openly transgressing the laws of that religion…he considers it perfectly legitimate that a philosopher who as such denies Divine revelation, adheres to Islam for example, i.e., complies in deed and speech with the requirements of that religion and therefore, if an emergency arises, defends that faith which he cannot but call the true faith, not only with the sword, but with arguments, viz., dialectical arguments as well” (italics mine).
the scapegoating violence of the community wears thin. Philosophy looks to replace myth with a more "rational" account that eliminates traces of divine violence. However, philosophy itself is but another stage in the obscuring of the victim at the center of myth. Unlike the Jewish and Christian scriptures, philosophy does not perceive the truth about the victim. Plato never sees the victim behind the text, but he has some apprehension of the violence that is reflected there. This, in part, explains his suspicion of tragedy, which gets uncomfortably close to a truth that ought not to be confronted directly. For similar reasons, Plato fears mimesis. Unfortunately, he is never able penetrate to the source of his fear:

If Plato is unique in the history of philosophy because of his fear of mimesis, he is for the same reason closer than anyone to what is essential, closer than primitive religion itself. Yet Plato is also deceived by mimesis because he cannot succeed in understanding his fear, he never uncovers its empirical reason for being. Plato never relates conflict to acquisitive mimesis, that is, with the object that the two mimetic rivals attempt to wrest from one another because they designate it as desirable to one another.

Plato proposes to deal with the problem of imitation by expelling the practitioners of mimesis, the poets, from the city:

Even when he is not actually espousing suspect causes, the poet retells ancient, time-honored legends in a new way, giving them a slightly impious and seditious ring. The city, says Plato, must protect itself from subversion, therefore it must rid itself of subversive elements. Sophocles must join Oedipus on the road to exile; the poet too must become a pharmakos.

In expelling the poets, Plato perpetuates the very violence he fears. The violence of the sacred is transfigured into the violence of contending

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64 The Scapegoat, pp. 76-80.
66 Things Hidden, p. 15.
67 Violence and the Sacred, p. 293.
philosophical positions, each claiming for itself the mantle of “reason” as it denounces its opponents. Philosophy’s blindness to its own explosive and violent tendencies guarantees that it will never arrive at the truth about scapegoating violence; for in the very act of expelling the ignorant it reinforces its own ignorance.

So it is that in Plato, philosophy does not do away with the sacred; it purifies and rationalizes it. According to Cesareo Bandera, Plato’s avoidance of the sacred victim “is a ruse, a new form of expulsion to repair or substitute for the old sacred veil, which was wearing thin and becoming a little too transparent.” Plato wishes to transform the unanimity of sacred violence into a matter of rational, philosophical persuasion. At the same time:

He wants philosophy to be like the old sacred, to borrow its strength, to work with the same effectiveness. He does not want to substitute philosophy for the old sacred. He just wants to take the sacred victim out of the picture. Philosophy equals the old sacred minus the ambiguous, poetic, victim; because the only victim which philosophy can contemplate, qua victim, must be fully guilty, fully deserving of expulsion.69

Violence committed in the name of philosophy justifies itself on the basis of its claim to superior rationality. With such impeccable credentials, there can be little doubt that its victims are guilty.

Strauss’ attitude toward philosophy combines Girardian insights with Platonic blindness.70 Although he does not use Girard’s terminology, there is evidence in Strauss’ writings that he is aware of the violent origins of culture, and that he understands philosophy as arising in response to what Girard refers to as a “sacrificial crisis.” Indeed, in Strauss’ view, the origin of political philosophy “belongs to fertile

69 Ibid., p. 60.
70 Strauss follows Plato even to the extent that he deliberately excludes “poetry and the other imitative arts” from his definition of civilization, which he sees as resting on the pillars of science and morals. See Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism,” *Interpretation*, Vol. 26, No.3, (Spring 1999), pp. 365-366.
moment when all political traditions were shaken”\textsuperscript{71} In the following passage, he betrays some awareness of the relationship between violence and the sacred:

Why did the Athenians believe in their autochthony, except because they knew that robbing others of their land is not just and because they felt that a self-respecting society cannot become reconciled to the notion that its foundation was laid in crime?... Man’s freedom is accompanied by a sacred awe, by a kind of divination that not everything is permitted. We may call this awe-inspired fear “man’s natural conscience.” Restraint is therefore as natural or as primeval as freedom. As long as man has not cultivated his reason properly, he will have all sorts of fantastic notions as to the limits set to his freedom; he will elaborate absurd taboos. But what prompts the savages in their savage doings is not savagery but the divination of right.\textsuperscript{72}

Here Strauss comes as close as he ever does in understanding the violent origins of culture. Much like Plato, though, he hesitates to pursue his insight completely, and he falls back on an explanation that appeals to “man’s natural conscience.” Similarly, he detects the link between “sacred awe” and restraint, but attributes it to an inherent principle of human nature. What is also so characteristic of Strauss, and where he moves in a very different direction from Girard, is his confidence that with the proper cultivation of reason the “fantastic notions” and “absurd taboos” of savage peoples can be avoided.\textsuperscript{73} He does not realize, any more than did Plato, how “reason” remains deeply enmeshed in the sacred. By contrast, Girard would argue on behalf of the Bible as the true source of rationality, in the sense that it reveals the scapegoating mechanism at the

\textsuperscript{71} “What Is Political Philosophy?,” p. 27.
\textsuperscript{72} Natural Right and History, p. 130. Strauss makes similarly suggestive comments, when, in discussing the seemingly arbitrary manner in which some happen to be well-born and others not so fortunate, he says: “It would indeed be foolish to deny that old wealth sometimes has its forgotten origins in crime. But it is more noble to believe, and probably also truer, that the old families are the descendents from the first settlers and from leaders in war or counsel; and it is certainly just that one be grateful” (“Liberal Education and Responsibility,” p. 12).
\textsuperscript{73} For someone so critical of modernity, Strauss does not seem to have escaped the Enlightenment’s orbit in his critique of religion.
basis of culture. The knowledge provided by the Judeo-Christian scriptures allows reason to be itself, since it liberates human intelligence from the lies that have previously sustained culture. Intelligence needs to be freed from culture's myths in order to be fully rational, and the Bible holds the key to the deconstruction of these myths. Indeed, for Girard, "reason" is never as blind to its own violence as when it asserts its purity and detachment. With his advocacy of the proper cultivation of reason as the vaccine against "absurd taboos," one wonders if Strauss has not succumbed to this temptation.

The parallel between Strauss and Plato extends also to the elusive character of philosophy's relationship to the sacred. If Girard is correct in understanding philosophy as the heir to myth in its hiding from view the truth about the victim, then philosophy both seeks to know and to cover over the truth; it simultaneously reveals and conceals. Gil Bailie writes of philosophy's ambivalence:

> Part of the purpose of philosophical reflection is to deflect truths that must not be directly encountered. However helpful philosophy might be for arranging certain observations and conceptualizing certain relationships, in the first instance philosophical reflection is a precaution taken to avoid a discovery that is philosophically unthinkable.\(^7^5\)

This ambivalence is present in Strauss' account of philosophy. Philosophy is "not the possession of truth, but quest for the truth," "the attempt to replace opinions about the whole by knowledge of the whole."\(^7^6\) Yet the pursuit of knowledge runs up against the elusiveness of the whole and the fact that the "roots of the whole are hidden."\(^7^7\) The philosopher's love for the "unchangeable ideas" is equivalent to the realization that "philosophy as such is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems; i.e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems."\(^7^8\)

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\(^7^4\) *Things Hidden*, p. 277.


\(^7^6\) "What Is Political Philosophy?," p. 11.


\(^7^8\) "What Is Political Philosophy?," p. 39; *On Tyranny*, p. 196; *Natural Right and History*, p.35.
Philosophy is oriented to a mystery whose source remains hidden from view. This does not mean philosophy is completely ignorant of reality; it discerns the laws that structure the order of things, even if their ultimate foundation escapes us. Philosophical knowledge replaces ideas about the gods and impersonal cosmic forces with ideas of nature and intelligible necessity. But these intelligible necessities have their origin in the hidden roots that philosophy can never reach. Or is it rather the case that the language of hiddenness obscures a truth philosophy does not wish to face? We have already noted Strauss’s observation that no self-respecting society wants to be made aware of its origins in crime.

While it is possible to read Strauss’s description of philosophy and its limits in terms of the reaching out of human wonder toward the intelligible universe, I think it is also plausible to understand it as an account of philosophy’s ambiguous relationship to the sacred. The elements for such an interpretation are certainly present; i.e., the “hidden roots” of the whole which philosophy can approach but not too closely; the placing of unchanging “problems” at the heart of the philosophical quest; and the transformation of the Olympian pantheon into “intelligible necessities.” Philosophy circles around something that it can not and dare not reach; and that something is the scapegoated victim from which the community wishes to divert its eyes. Strauss’ clear teaching that philosophy is a dangerous enterprise further reinforces this interpretation. The philosopher comes as close as is humanly possible to a truth that would thoroughly discredit the myths and opinions upon which society depends for its order and its peace of mind.79 Drawing near to a truth that would shake the foundations of society, philosophers must take special precautions:

79 “Philosophy or science, the highest activity of man, is the attempt to replace opinion about ‘all things’ by knowledge of ‘all things’; but opinion is the element of society; philosophy or science is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society. Hence philosophy or science must remain the preserve of a small minority, and philosophers or scientists must respect the opinions on which society rests. To respect opinions is entirely different from accepting them as true.” (Leo Strauss, “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” in What Is Political Philosophy?, pp. 221-222. See also Persecution and the Art of Writing, pp. 21, 34-36, and On Tyranny, p. 27.)
Philosophers...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...\(^{80}\)

As in Plato, the philosopher possesses some awareness of the dangerous truth behind the city's foundation; but the philosopher is also acutely conscious of what the city requires in order to survive. This conviction does not spring from any love on the part of the philosopher for the city. Nor is the philosopher as philosopher under any obligation to engage in political activity. The philosopher simply realizes that to antagonize the city is to risk becoming its victim. Perhaps even more importantly, the philosopher knows that without a healthy city, the philosophical life would be impossible.

Philosophy, then, becomes an accomplice in the perpetuation of the scapegoating mechanism that sustains all societies. In the form of political philosophy, philosophy mediates the truth in a way that best contributes to the realization of the good society. Philosophy as such questions the ancestral wisdom of the city; therefore the philosopher must find a way to defend the practice of philosophy before the city. He or she must convince the city that "philosophers are not atheists, that they do not desecrate everything sacred to the city, that they reverence what the city reverences, that they are not subversives."\(^{81}\) Philosophy as political is able to view the needs of the city from the perspective of the enlightened citizen or statesman:

It reproduces, and raises to perfection, the magnanimous flexibility of the true statesman, who crushes the insolent and spares the vanquished. It is free from all fanaticism because it knows that evil cannot be eradicated and therefore that one's expectations from politics must be moderate. The spirit which animates it may be described as serenity or sublime sobriety.\(^{82}\)

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\(^{80}\) "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," p.222.

\(^{81}\) *On Tyranny*, pp. 205-206.

\(^{82}\) "What Is Political Philosophy?," p. 28.
As an example of the profound difference between the philosophical “moderation” of Athens and the prophetic moral vision of Jerusalem, Strauss recalls the biblical story in which the prophet Nathan confronts David for having arranged the death of Uriah in order to obtain his wife, Bathsheba (2Samuel 12: 1-15). Strauss cites this text at least three times, and in two of these instances he compares the biblical tale with passages from Xenophon depicting the manner in which either Socrates or the poet-philosopher Simonides deal with a tyrant. 

Nathan’s rebuke of David is direct and uncompromising. In the case of Socrates and the tyrant Critias, Strauss highlights the *indirection* of Socrates in responding to the offender. In similar fashion, Strauss contrasts Nathan’s reaction to David’s “one murder and one act of adultery” with how Simonides “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.”

It should be noted that Strauss uses this comparison to illustrate the way in which Greek philosophy weakens the force of moral demands in comparison with the Bible. It is not entirely clear, though, that Strauss views this weakening as a something to be decried. Those who find in these comparisons evidence for the view that Strauss sees philosophy as morally deficient when compared to biblical teaching have, I think, missed the point. For Strauss, it is not a matter of philosophy’s moral failing; rather philosophy as a purely intellectual pursuit is simply *beyond* the moral. The weakening of moral demands that he attributes to Greek

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83 The passage from 2Samuel occurs, at least in part, just before the introduction to *Natural Right and History*, at the very end of “Jerusalem and Athens” (pp. 206 -207), and in “Progress or Return?” (p. 109).

84 “Jerusalem and Athens,” p. 207. The quoted passage from Xenophon reads in part: “Socrates said *somewhere*, that it seemed strange that a herdsman who lets his cattle decrease and go to the bad should not admit that he is a poor cowherd; but stranger still that a statesman when he causes the citizens to decrease and go the bad, should feel no shame nor think himself a poor statesman. This remark was *reported* to Critias” (italics Strauss’s).

85 “Progress or Return?,” p. 109-110.


87 “That the philosophic life, especially as Plato and Aristotle understood it, is not possible without self-control and a few other virtues almost goes without saying. If a man is habitually drunk, and so on, how can he think? But the question is, if these virtues are understood only as subservient to philosophy, and for its sake, then that is no longer a moral understanding of the virtues.” “A Giving of Accounts,” p. 465.
philosophy has the effect of granting philosophy in its political form the flexibility to offer guidance to political leaders that will strengthen the city, and in the process protect philosophy. The intransigence of prophetic, biblical morality with regard to the failings of rulers jeopardizes the peace of the city, while the enlightened persuasion of the philosopher takes into account the inherent limitations of politics. This is not to deny the importance of morality. But it seems as if for Strauss, morality is required for the multitudes, while philosophy, in its purest form transcends the moral, and in its political guise adopts a stance of cautious prudence when deigning to advise the city. He states unambiguously: "philosophy as such is transpolitical, transreligious, and transmoral, but the city is and ought to be moral and religious."88

The philosopher does not seek to rule, but to influence those who exercise political authority. No one is better suited to exert this kind of influence, the philosopher is free from the desire for recognition that afflicts other mortals. Unlike the political leader, the philosopher is not attached to "human things" and does not crave the approval of the crowd; hence he or she is able to do what is required to help the city.89 In the interest of the city, the philosopher must be willing to tell "noble lies;" presenting them in a way that comforts the ignorant and intrigues the intelligent.90 Modeling itself on the example of Socrates, philosophy "is animated by the spirit of social responsibility." It understands "that there is a disproportion between the intransigent quest for truth and the requirements of society, or that not all truths are always harmless."91

Strauss offers his readers a Socrates, whose cosmological interests in his early years did in fact call into question the reality of the traditional Greek gods. But Socrates moderated his views as a result of the Aristophanic critique and turned his attention to the world of politics.

88 "A Giving of Accounts," p. 463. In the selections from the question period that followed this presentation, Strauss admits that Klein places a higher value on morality than he does. What counts for the philosopher is "thinking and investigating and not morality" When Klein says "I cannot agree that the ultimate consideration of things, as far as one is capable of doing that, ever, ever, frees men of the compulsion to act rightly," Strauss replies, "Yes, I think that you believe that." (p. 465).

89 On Tyranny, pp. 203-204.
90 Persecution and the Art of Writing, p. 35-36, 140; Brague, "Leo Strauss and Maimonides," p. 105.
91 On Tyranny, p. 27.
Unfortunately, the Socratic “turn” came too late to save him from a death sentence. Discussing Socrates’ decision not to escape from Athens after his trial, Strauss revisits the scene in the Crito in which Socrates asks Crito to imagine what he would say, if when fleeing the city, they were confronted with a personification of the city’s laws. The “Laws” acknowledge that Socrates has been treated unjustly, and they place the blame on his human accusers. But they also berate Socrates for considering escape, pointing out how ungrateful he would appear to the city which raised and educated him through its laws, and reminding him that there can be no more sacred duty than to obey the laws. Even if he is punished unjustly in this world because of human passions, his situation will be entirely different in Hades, where there is no discrepancy between the Laws and those who execute them. There, the injustice committed against him will be apparent. But if he disobeys the Laws by escaping from the city, the verdict against him in the afterlife will be harsh. Human beings may have acted in error, but Socrates must still die for the good of the city. The sacrificial tone of the dialogue becomes even more pronounced as Socrates likens the arguments of the Laws to the music that inspires the frenzied dance of the Corybantes. Their arguments make him “incapable of hearing anything else,” and the dialogue ends with Socrates’ submission on the grounds that this “is the way the god is leading us.”

From Strauss’s perspective, Socrates’ decision to “sacrifice his life in order to preserve philosophy in Athens,” “was a political choice of the highest order.” With reference to the Crito, he notes how a philosopher, who has benefited from the city, must be willing to die at the behest of the city, and that Athens acted beneficently in allowing Socrates to reach the age of seventy. He also appears to share Plato’s ambivalence concerning Socrates innocence. Strauss thinks the young Socrates was

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95 See Girard, Violence and the Sacred, pp. 295-296. “As regards Socrates, whom the community—unwilling to soil its hands by contact with an impious creature – asked to do away with himself, Plato’s sympathy is every bit as suspect as Sophocles’ sympathy for his pharmakos-hero.”

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dangerously naïve about the city’s reaction to philosophical inquiry. In his early years as a philosopher, Socrates did not understand what Plato came to know; that, through the mediation of political philosophy, philosophy and the city can live in peace. It was part of Plato’s genius to understand this; and, according to Strauss, his insights were kept alive in the work of Maimonides and Farabi. Strauss holds Farabi’s interpretation of Plato in high regard, and he derives important insights from the Islamic philosopher:

The Platonic way, as distinguished from the Socratic way, is a combination of the way of Socrates with the way of Thrasymachus; for the intransigent way of Socrates is appropriate only for the philosopher’s dealing with the elite, whereas the way of Thrasymachus, which is both more and less exacting than the former, is appropriate for his dealings with the vulgar... By combining the way of Socrates with the way of Thrasymachus, Plato avoided the conflict with the vulgar and thus the fate of Socrates.\(^{96}\)

With the help Farabi, Strauss is better able to understand why, for the classics; “the conflict between philosophy and the city is as little tragic as the death of Socrates.”\(^{97}\) The most profound difference between Athens and Jerusalem continues to elude his grasp.

**IV**

With these comments on the death of Socrates, we return to the plight of the victim. The question was considered first in light of Strauss’ posing of “the Jewish problem.” It was noted how, from Strauss’ perspective, the question could not be addressed without taking up the issue of the relationship between Jerusalem and Athens. Having examined Strauss’ teaching on this issue, and having brought his thought into dialogue with that of Girard, what conclusions can be drawn?

In identifying an important dimension of the crisis of modernity as a problem of desire, Strauss and Girard are very much in agreement. They also share the conviction that pre-modern thought contains valuable

\(^{96}\) Persecution and the Art of Writing, p. 16.

\(^{97}\) On Tyranny, p. 206.
insights, capable of speaking to our current situation. Nevertheless, Strauss and Girard diverge sharply in their interpretations of biblical and classical thought. Sharply critical of modernity, Strauss advocates a recovery of classical rationalism. He is convinced that the philosopher’s transcendence of the liabilities that beset other human beings will have the salutary effect of bringing reason to bear in the political realm. Like Plato, he seems blind to philosophy’s role as the city’s accomplice in hiding the victim from view. It is not that Strauss is oblivious to philosophy’s skill in protecting society from dangerous truths. He simply fails to understand that the truth obscured by philosophy is the truth about the victim. Strauss trusts classical philosophy to provide a model of “reason” that can remedy the excesses and deficiencies of modern thought. He does not realize, as Girard does, that “our own rationality cannot reach the founding role of mimetic victimage because it remains tainted with it…Reason itself is a child of the foundational murder.”

In a reversal of Girard, Strauss interprets Jerusalem sacrificially and Athens non-sacrificially. To be more precise, he identifies as central those aspects of the Bible that can be interpreted sacrificially, while cloaking the sacrificial character of philosophy in the language of rationality. Both men know that “civilization and piety are very different things,” but having come to this conclusion, Strauss is determined to save civilization, praising piety only to the extent that it contributes to this effort.

Behind Strauss’s overriding concern to preserve a strong and vigorous western civilization, there is, I believe, an ever-present awareness of his status as a member of an often-persecuted minority. It is clear from his writings that Strauss is always mindful of the precariousness of life for minorities in even relatively decent regimes. Liberal democracy is certainly imperfect, but Strauss believes it to be the most viable option in the contemporary world. A child of modernity, liberal democracy needs to be fortified and taught restraint by the wisdom of classical philosophy, mediated to society through the rule of “gentlemen” educated in the great books. In one of his more notorious (and

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99 It is worthwhile to note that Strauss seems to be very much aware how discrimination against Jews is symptomatic of a wider tendency within society to single out minorities for persecution. He specifically mentions African-Americans and other people of color. See “Why We Remain Jews,” p. 317; “Perspectives on the Good Society,” p. 435.

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sometimes misunderstood) comments, Strauss says, “liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society.”

Although a careful reading of Strauss’ work reveals that his alleged elitism is more subtle than some of his critics claim, one does not have to read very far in his writings before coming across some reference to the distinction between the wise and the vulgar. Unease about the threat posed by the masses in contemporary society and their relatively easy transformation into a persecuting mob is a constant subtext in Strauss’ work. Occasionally he gives direct expression to his apprehension: “Much as we loathe the snobbish silence or whispering of the sect, we loathe even more the savage noise of the loudspeakers of the mass party...If we must choose between the sect and the party, we must choose the sect.”

This fear of the potential violence of the crowd is, in effect, an unspoken recognition of the dangers of mimetic contagion. We find in Strauss’ preoccupation with distinctions and hierarchy an attempt to restore a level of social differentiation that has been lost in contemporary democracy. If we recall his comment about the danger of liberal democracy descending into “permissive egalitarianism” we can better understand Strauss’ reaction. Where differentiation collapses, the possibility of mimetic rivalry increases dramatically, and masses more easily turn into rampaging mobs. To prevent this, distinctions between the noble and the vulgar must clarified and enhanced; differences based on degrees of “excellence” must be suitably recognized. In Athens, Strauss sees a society based upon reason that recognizes the differences that exist among human beings and accords these differences their proper due. Is it any wonder he finds in the classics the best hope for stability and order?

On this reading, Strauss’ elitism can be understood as a means of fostering a society in which individuals can live safe from the threat of violence. Where human excellence is recognized and rewarded, those who are noble and reasonable will be in positions of authority. Strauss desires a society that is strong, free, and capable of preserving the life and security of all its members. In his view, a recovery of the wisdom of

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102 On Tyranny, p. 195.
Athens is the best means to bring these conditions about, aided, of course, by a biblical morality well suited for moderating the passions of the many. By opting for Athens over Jerusalem in this fashion, Strauss remains blind to the extent to which Athens perpetuates the very persecutory mechanisms he wishes to eliminate. He likewise fails to appreciate Jerusalem’s role as the source of the conviction that victims should not be sacrificed for the sake of the city.

Strauss understands, as does Girard, how certain aspects of biblical revelation do, in fact, destabilize culture. However, he wishes to protect society from these effects, so he hesitates to follow the Bible in its gradual revelation of the innocent victim. As Girard brings out so well, the Bible does undermine culture as we know it; but what it undermines is the sacrificial mechanism cultures employ to sustain themselves at the expense of victims. For Girard it is neither desirable nor possible to reverse the inroads made by biblical revelation. What we are called to do is understand the meaning and the implications of this revelation in order to resist a return to the very mechanism it is intended to dissolve. Strauss attempts to remedy the problems of modernity through an intense effort to salvage “culture,” Girard regards “culture” as having its origin in violence, and he looks toward the transformation of human life in the light of revelation. Girard’s insight in the following passage could be taken as an implicit critique of Strauss’s project:

Nowhere in the Bible will we find the idea that the city of man should accommodate itself to generative violence, making room for it under the pretext that ‘much wrong in the world thereby is healed’. In a movement that might well be termed pre-totalitarian, as in certain dialogues of Plato, Aeschylus becomes the shepherd of that violence.103

The seriousness with which Strauss considers the legacy of Jerusalem is a testimony both to how important this legacy is for him and how much it troubles him. He is capable of writing poignantly of Israel’s hope for

103Rene Girard, Job: The Victim of His People, translated by Yvonne Freccero, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 151. Of course it would be highly misleading if the impression given here would be to oppose the liberal or even “radical” Girard with the conservative or “reactionary” Strauss. In this case such labels do far more to obscure than to illuminate.
final redemption, while speaking of the faith of many of his Jewish brothers and sisters as a "heroic delusion" or a noble dream.\textsuperscript{104} He defends the choice for Jerusalem against attack because its claims may in fact be true, even as he comments on the scant evidence of God's redemptive love at work in the world.\textsuperscript{105} There is sadness in Strauss' relationship to Jerusalem, and in his inability or unwillingness to fully embrace the biblical message, the truth about the victim escapes him, a truth that resonates so powerfully with the animating spirit behind his own work.

This, I think, is the final irony in Strauss' treatment of Jerusalem and Athens. Despite his deep engagement with both the theme and the reality of persecution, he has difficulty recognizing the degree to which the Bible is responsible for exposing the lies by which societies justify their persecutory zeal. Athens does not seriously challenge society's need for victims; Oedipus and Socrates are guilty. Yet Strauss writes as one who judges the persecution of individuals and minorities to be an evil, with scant acknowledgement of the fact that concern for the victims of persecution is one of the great legacies of Jerusalem. Strauss carries out his recovery of Athens in a context irreversibly shaped by the Bible. In his writing Strauss may look to Athens, but in inspiration he remains a son of Jerusalem. \textsuperscript{☞}

\textsuperscript{104} "Why We Remain Jews," p. 328.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., pp. 327-328.