

## Biblical Scholarship

Robert D. Sacks

Somewhere time ago, I happened to be visiting New Orleans. My hotel was across a wide and bustling street from the Old French Quarter, where the streets were narrow and the buildings tall and finely worked. I was impressed not so much with what my eyes saw, but with that which can only be seen in that strange world which leaves hazy the distinction between sight and imagination. I could almost see it as it must have been: tight little center of urban life kept small and compact in the middle of a thousand miles of nothingness. Only the sight of the “was” in the “is” can make the “is” to be what it is.

The following afternoon, I wandered over to the aquarium. The penguins, so austere and August on land, yet so playful in the water, attracted my eye. As some of you may remember, they were all the rage in my childhood, and held the same fascination for children then that dinosaurs do in our own day. I suppose the last vestige of that craze is Willie the Penguin. I suddenly realized that it hadn't been too long since Admiral Parry had discovered the South Pole, and that must have stirred people's interest. It further occurred to me that a few years before I was born, someone must have asked a friend, "Tell me, what does one of those penguins look like?" I imagined to myself that the answer must have been, "I'm not quite sure how to describe it. I guess it looks something like some sort of a queer duck." An empty phrase which I had heard and so often thoughtlessly used myself

revealed itself to be the product of human thought and human insight. Man, they say, invented the wheel. Well, man may indeed have slowly learned to roll a great object on a log, but it must have taken the thought of a single human mind to put it on an axle.

A human mind--this "I" who became interested in Biblical studies, is far from the famous Cartesian *tabula raza*. It is more of an ancient and sprawling mansion, haunted by the ghosts of thoughts, which once lived and thrived in minds not my own. When I was in New Orleans, I believed I caught one of those minor and petty ghosts, the queer duck, and was able to bring him back to life by seeing him as part of a living human thought.

Most of us today, as we say, can feel inertia in the pit of our stomachs, so deep have the thoughts of one Sir Isaac Newton worked their way into our viscera. In all manner of contexts we speak of men and women we know as having or not having inertia. We think of inertia as if it were out there like an apple tree or a mountain, whereas in fact mountains and the apple trees are much older than idea and even the feeling of inertia. This example we have given, the talk about the inertia that some men and woman are described as having, turns out to be a particularly fruitful example precisely because the notion of inertia, which it implicitly contains is quite far from what Newton intended. It is, in fact, a kind of melange of Newton and the earlier concept of impetus, which he had intended to replace.

Images, metaphors and language itself are the haven of the ghosts, and yet without them we could not even begin to think and would be mute as stone. The thoughts of other men from other times, men like Newton and Galilee, even going back to Philoponus and perhaps others, seem like seeds or

viruses that have buried themselves deep in our guts. These ghosts of once living thoughts can become airborne and flit from mind to mind, and like a virus or a cancer, they masquerade as being our own.

How then shall I understand this "I", which became interested in Biblical studies, this "I" that contains the ghost of the thought of inertia? this "I" partly to be found between the covers of a moth eaten copy of Newton unopened for centuries? Spelling myself out to myself, then, requires catching sight of these thoughts as they once lived in the minds of men long since dead.

Einstein saw this problem as clearly as any thinker ever had. In many of his writings, he often tries to retrace his thought in order to recapture the grounds upon which things first came to light. Answers are fine things; we spend our lives searching for them. Yet, Einstein was aware of their seductive character. For him answers run the danger of settling and therefore of erasing the very questions, which gave rise to them, and in so doing they erase themselves as answers. And in such a way as this, they degenerate into common opinion and become no more than simple prejudice or a dogma. The proofs themselves, of course do not run away. They can be written down, perhaps in some cases even simplified, and copied out into any fine textbook, but without reading, say, his paper of 1904, we do not see the problems which were at hand, available to him from within his horizon and which gave raise to his concern.

Galilee was once almost killed for teaching that the Earth moved around the sun. It disturbed those who could see the sun rise and set every day with their own eyes. Within a century everyone believed that Copernicus was right,

but how many of them had reasons as cogent as those who had once claimed. "The sun rises every morning. I see it with my own eyes." Surely in grade school I was taught why it might appear that the sun had moved even though in fact it was I who had moved, but since the explanation came from someone who already believed that the Earth moved, I never saw the problems that would cause one to leave the more obvious way of understanding the appearances. I have great admiration for my fourth grade teacher, but I seriously doubt whether she knew anything more than that today we all know that the Earth moves.

There is another side of things. About sixty years ago, a bit more perhaps, I had a brief conversation with my father. He could remember a time when he was about three and a half, and was taken off to visit the home of his grandfather in Biala Podlasca, Poland, some thirty miles from his own home in Brzesc. He spoke of a large house with a small house in back. There was a garden in between with four pathways leading to a central well. To the right was a pigeon loft. He remembered that well because it was there they had once been forced to hide when there was the threat of a pogrom. On the other side was an encampment where the cavalry of the Czar's army was stationed. He remembered that too because one of the soldiers had once even given him a ride.

Last summer I returned to Poland: in some sense I had never been to Poland, and yet this shaggy thing called "I" which lies partly in dead books and partly in grandfather tales could return to Poland. I spent the night in Warsaw and in the morning, together with a friend, a Polish-speaking friend, I took the train to Biala Podlasca. The station was about a mile from town,

and as we walked we spotted a man who seemed to be about the right age. I turned to my friend and said, "He's the right man. Ask him where the Russian cavalry unit was stationed." The conversation lasted about half an hour as we walked. It was all in Polish, and I didn't understand a word. There were so many hand gestures however, that I assumed that I had a general understanding of what was being said. I was, of course, totally wrong.

When the conversation was over, my friend told me that he learned that the cavalry camp no longer existed. The neighborhood had been destroyed, and cheap government housing erected on the I spot, but still we could go and see the ground on which things had once stood. He also spoke of a Jewish graveyard, and had some vague information concerning a small museum somewhere in the town.

I went off to the place of the public housing, wandered around a bit, and watched some children at play. But there are always children at play, and nothing meant very much. Then we went I to the graveyard. It was an empty field surrounded by a fence. The dead were gone and their stones were gone. Some say they were used to build the ovens, some say they were used to pave roads. An organization of Americans Jews who had emigrated from that city some time before or during the war, had collected enough money to pay the city to put up a fence and a park. It was a strong wrought iron fence, but by the time I was there a part of the fence had been thrown down to make a short cut for passers-by, and the field still stood empty. There was no park.

We went to the museum. The director said that there had been a mistake. The man I had spoken to was not old enough, and could I only remember where the cavalry had been stationed since 1912, but my story went back to

1904. Again I understood nothing of conversation, but followed my guide. This time we seemed to be in an older part of town. The houses were Russian gingerbread made of boards put together as we once did log cabins, notched and crossed at the corners. As we turned the corner, I looked up and saw a street sign with the words "ulicia Brzesc" written on it. I paused for a moment and said to my friend, "I'm lost. My memory is so vague that I don't even know whether I'm remembering, or whether this is a story that I'm making up on the spot, but I seem to myself vaguely to remember that a distant cousin once told me that there was a strange inter-relationship.

The memory said that one great-grandfather lived in the city of Brzesc in Biala, Russia, while the other great-grandfather lived in the city of Biala Podlasca on a street called Brzesc, and here we are in the city of Biala Podlasca on a street called Brzesc. I think we're here." "Indeed" said my friend, "we are here." Memories that feel as if they came from the inside are also part of my story. We walked for about two blocks, and suddenly the architecture changed. In the middle of the old wooden houses, there was a small cheaply-made, but reasonably kept hotel, and a somewhat seedy milk company. The compound, which housed the hotel, was very large, and I could not see the end. "Ah", I said to myself, "that must be the grounds of the old 9th cavalry unit of the Czar's army." Now, there was a small, yellow, gingerbread house next to the factory. I was terribly disappointed. I know the magnification that takes place in childhood memories, but I had hoped for something more. None-the-less, we approached the house and an old man came out. "O yes." He said, "There is much larger house on the other side of the compound." We walked and walked. Past the milk company and past the hotel, and there it

was, a large house. We walked around back. There was the small house. There was a field of weeds where once the garden must have been, and there were the four pathways leading to the central circle, but there was no well. It was over in the corner by the large house. I later discovered that only one year before, the well had gone dry, and had to be moved. All of this changed greatly my understanding of language. Actions are often preserved in myth and story, but seeing the sounds of an old tale pulling themselves into solid buildings is more profoundly at the heart of the things we have been talking about.

There was a man of about thirty-five in the corner shoveling coal. He did not look up. We were there for more than an hour. He did not look up. The women and children came out. "No" they said, "no Jews ever lived here."

A camera is the best way making a friend. Few are those who do not want there picture taken, 'though I sometimes admire them all the more for that. Pictures were taken by the door with arms 'round necks and I asked the old woman if I might enter, enter an every-day front door for her, a crypt ninety years unopened for me. She told me how much, as a child she had loved that house and how she had always wanted to live in it, and now it was hers. Yes, I too can feel the joy in the old woman's story; it was I who told it to you. And yet I knew that she had known them all, my uncles, my cozens, and perhaps even the old scholar himself, my father's father's father. I also knew that she knew through what events it was that she had come by all that joy. Memory is a strange beast. As I was going over this passage there was perhaps no more the half a second in which I almost reached for a cigarette, although I've not

smoked in about twenty-five, maybe thirty years. But I did then.

I'm home now, back in Santa Fe.

As a child, I had a rather strange view of the world in which I lived. Of course I somehow knew that Shakespeare wrote in English, and that he had written a very long time ago. At the same time, I was confused by the fact that the grandfather of the kid next door could speak English as well as I could. "Grandfathers", I thought, "speak Yiddish." I was raised in the reformist of the reform. No hats allowed in the temple, and all Hebrew was to be sung to the tune of a Lutheran hymn. But the holidays were different, then we would visit my grandfather. The tunes were somehow better fitted to the words. They seemed to be more within their own horizon. Even as a child, I had the sense that this thing we call the "I" flowed back into a barely sensed world, partly into Grandpa's Shoul and, as I later realized, partly back into the pages of Newton's Principia.

Little boys grow up, and I turned from grandpa to Newton and Plato. My parents had wanted me to attend Brandies College, but fortunately for me Brandies had no room, in those days, for young men with cerebral palsy, and so there was no family squabble. My own imagination had more been caught by a man named Jasha Klein of St. John's College. Klein was fascinated by the act of trying to see how the everyday world revealed itself to each person, and in what way each particular horizon implied, and hence led to a world beyond itself.

For Klein this facing the world meant coming to terms with those books and thinkers of the past which have helped to form us and our ways of thought, not because we had read them, I but precisely because we had not

read them but only absorbed them passively and thoughtlessly through cheap talk and terms of speech we supposed ourselves to command. To understand ourselves, our own haunted house, then, means to see that horizon opening up by reconsidering the labor of that thinker for whom it first opened, and to listen his own voice. Knowledge, for Klein, was not something that could be written down in a book. Our own voice is the only voice able to articulate all those blurred and obscured thoughts which are first stirred up from within our own particular partial awareness of the surface of things as it lies within our own particular shaggy and ill-defined horizon. Other thoughts may have a brilliant central focus, but when they have been poured from one mind into another, they loss that particular periphery which once connected them to the land in which they war born. For this reason there are no pathways, which could lead a person back to his own horizons and beyond. Too often, what is a living thought for the teacher becomes a hardened dogma for the student precisely because he has no access to, and therefore cannot reach out to that horizon but is continually forced to return to the center which he can repeat in comfortable repetition.

When I was graduating from St. John's, Mr. Klein introduced me to Professor Leo Strauss. To my good fortune, he was to spend the following year in Israel which meant that I did not have to make the hard choice between going out to Chicago, or going to Israel in order to learn Hebrew first. It also meant the Strauss would be spending a good bit of his time on Judaic studies. He was most generous with his time, and we would spend many hours together each Shabath reading Bereshit. At Five or Five Thirty there would always be tea and little cakes, and on rare occasions we would just

relax with Gunsmoke. He was particularly attracted to the delicate character of Miss Kitty.

For Strauss, understanding ourselves primarily meant understanding what for him were the two fundamental alternatives that uneasily sat together to form the foundation of our western world; one is The Bible, the other Greek philosophy. From Strauss I learned to respect the Bible enough to expect it to hold its own in any conversation. For me piety meant the expectation that the Bible, if pressed, would seriously address even my most impious questions.

Strauss began with the notion of man as a rational animal. By this, he meant nothing more than that by day men work together and in the evening they talk. Of what do they speak? Of the way to plant corn, the way to go out on the hunt; the way to bake bread, the way to bury the dead, and of the way to live as one of us.

Without these ways, there would be no corn, there would be no bread, there would be no life. These ways must be taught and they must be learned. They must be taught, some by the fathers and some by the mothers, and it is the children who must learn them. But we humans are such that the stories that teach these ways cannot be shared unless they touch upon the first things and tell of a world, which holds all of our ways together. Without a whole, we are empty and life is without taste. Unity meant a cause, and a cause meant a beginning, and a beginning meant a god or the gods.

But how united is the world? Did not the wind destroy what the sun had built? And if the sun God was at war with the God of the winds, what determined the outcome of that war and what the terms of its battles? The

world had become a world of consciously willing gods and a world of necessity. Then things began to happen.

A traveler came to a village one day and found a different way of baking bread and a different way of planting corn. The bread back home was better because it was real bread, but he could see with his own eyes that their corn was higher and fuller and richer than his corn. Then too there was the half-breed; the man with two stories instead of one. Which story was his story? For Strauss, we of the western world are such a half-breed, perhaps the bastard par excellence.

Someone among the ancient Greeks, someone whose name I do not know, must have been the first to say: "There is a vast difference between the bread and the corn. It is we who prefer the bread because we have grown up with it; but there must be something about the corn itself that makes it grow best in the way in which it does". In some such way as this, nature was distinguished from custom. This man, or another like him was then forced to ask the same question of the first things, and of his way of life, of the just and of the unjust. Were they like the bread? or were they like the corn? Others joined him and some said one thing while others said another. Necessity was transformed into nature, while the willing gods either withered away, or were transformed into man.

What holds our parents, Jerusalem and Athens, The Bible and Greek Philosophy, together and distinguishes them from myth, is that each of them came to grips with the problem of the corn and the bread. What holds them apart is the way in which they grasped that problem. Eventually, we shall have to ask ourselves whether that which holds them apart is not ultimately

that which holds them together as well. Of this moment when myth began to fall apart, Strauss wrote "Unfortunately, the divine law, the *theos nomos*, to use the Greek image, leads to two fundamental alternatives: one is the character of Greek philosophy: the other is the character of the Bible." However much this statement may require revision in the course of our study we may not forget that its first formulation begins with the word "unfortunately".

To what extent did the man or men who set down the text of the Bible divine or sniff out something of the consequences of the way taken by Greek philosophy? It is doubtful that anyone will ever have a clear answer to that question, but we can try to clarify for ourselves something of the way taken by the Bible. To deny the distinction between the corn and the bread, once a hint of that distinction is in the air, would be to assert that our God who has given us a law concerning the bread dedicated for use in temple worship is the same god by whose command the corn and all other green things come forth from the earth. This would imply one God who is both Lord over the sun and Lord over the winds, and that He has chosen a particular people to be His people. Mythic duality was replaced by an omnipotent God in the fullest sense. The willing gods became the one omnipotent God, and necessity fell under His command.

The Greek word for *nature* is Φύσις which comes from the verb Φύω, to grow. As you may know there is no Biblical word for *nature*, and even the medieval term for nature, נַטְרָה comes from a word meaning "to dip". The reference is to a signet ring. Nature is stamped into a thing from the outside; it does not grow from within the object itself. Man does not beget man nor dog beget dog because of its own nature, but in obedience to the command "Go forth and

multiply."

I believe that what struck Strauss most about the Bible is the depth of insight with which it presents what for him was the fundamental alternative to Greek philosophy. An omnipotent God was an essentially unknowable God. For Strauss, this consequence is fully expressed by the Bible in the verse which he translates as "I will be what I will be." For both Plato and the Bible our daily lives are based on trust. You all trust that the sun will rise tomorrow morning, that your coats and hats will keep you warm, and that when you leave this room, your homes, and the rest of the world will be out there waiting for you. For philosophy, this trust is based on the intrinsic intelligibility of what lies behind the world, whether that be as natures or as atoms and a void; whereas for the bible, our trust is in God's love, and the covenant which He has freely entered into with us, first with Noah and through him with all living things; then with Abraham.

While the argument between Abraham and God prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah shows that a pious man will have a care for God's justice in human terms, the binding of Isaac shows that God is not bound by His covenants in any humanly intelligible way, but that through His steadfast love He will freely keep them.

Much as these two ways, the Bible and Greek philosophy, stand as inverted images one of the other, there is one common agreement between them. Not riches nor even courage, but justice is the highest human virtue. There is also this further agreement: That the right way is not immediately to hand but must be sought after. There is, however, less agreement on where and how this search is to begin. For each, this search is the most important act that a

man can undertake, and for neither can it be undertaken directly. For each, there must be something underlying justice supporting it. To this extent, we share the same conditions that led the earliest of men to look for a story that touched upon the first things. For the Bible that underlying something is the will of God, which must be heard with humility and with awe; for Greek philosophy it is *theoria*, which must be looked into with boldness and with wonder. This means inquiring into the world round us and into the nature of all things.

But the Bible plays down the role of the world around us and in particular the role of heaven. What for Plato is a visible god is, for Genesis no more than a time piece and from it man can learn nothing more than the time of day unless he sees it as the handiwork of an all powerful, all loving God; whereas for philosophy, the discovery of nature essentially means, that there is no conclusion to be drawn from the things that are made by man and hence rely upon human art, concerning the things that are not man-made, but have within themselves their own source of motion and rest. While God's warning to Cain *If thou dost well* does seem to imply that there is available to man some sense of God's will from within himself, the remainder of the account shows only the inadequacy of this inner sense. While it may be enough to rouse a man to search out the word of God, it is not sufficient for human existence. Man is in need of divine revelation.

In both traditions the goal of this search is called wisdom. For the Bible, this simple sense of awe is most at hand in the desert and among the shepherds, but if man cannot or will not live that way, God is willing to allow him to live in a city, provided that it is holy city ruled over by His anointed shepherd as

king. Greek philosophy is at home in the *polis*. Its rise presupposes the leisure that only the city can provide. It is therefore willing to live with that certain amount of injustice which political life necessarily entails.

Where does this leave us? Mr. Strauss had a wonderfully dumb I way of putting it. One believes in miracles, the other does not. I believe that this intentionally bold and austere formulation of the question was meant to draw a clear and sharp line between what Strauss saw as the two fundamental alternatives for human existence. The reason for this harsh formulation is that much of western thought during the last two thousand years has been an attempt to harmonize our two roots and, in a sense, return us to a time before that "unfortunate" discovery which lead to the splitting up of myth into Greek philosophy on the one hand and the Bible on the other.

For Strauss, this attempt was doomed to failure. The one thing needful for man, as things looked to philosophy, autonomous understanding, was the one thing denied him according the Bible. This being the case, the only harmonization to be looked for would be a kind of handmaidenship. Either philosophy would be reduced to a method of deduction from received principles, or religion would be reduced to political exigency. In either case, neither would prosper, and the slave was sure to revolt.

Or one might try to raise oneself above the conflict. Needless to say, I am not referring to skepticism. Skepticism, in its own terms, must reply to others in their own terms. Skepticism, therefore, must be willing to place itself in the middle of the conflict. Rather I am speaking of what Strauss called by the term historicism. Historicism is the attempt to understand each thought in terms of where it was, and when it was. In so doing it prevents itself from

coming to grips with the thought of the thinker as it was thought by the thinker himself because what was of prime importance to the thinker cannot be of prime importance to the historicist. To see a thought as being important in terms of its time and its place is to deny its importance simply; But this would imply certain knowledge that the thought of the thinker was unimportant in itself, and this, of course, could only be established by returning to the plane of the conflict and again asking the question - what is justice, how is it to be found?

Part of what I mean by Strauss's "good natured theory of history" is an account of history that does not abandon the plane of history. But what would it mean then, this "returning to the plane of the conflict?" A great and totally meaningless battle would ensue, for each side argues its case in a court not recognized by the other. Spinoza's rational arguments against miracles presuppose reason. That is, they presuppose that there can be no miracles. In the same way, as Strauss goes on to argue, Pascal's argument about the wager presupposes faith. Neither side can ever defeat the other because each is wholly impervious to the weapons of the other. There is one other way in which philosophy might win. If someone could give a completely satisfactory account of the whole, that would settle the matter. But, as Mr. Strauss was so fond of putting it, *that has never occurred, so far as we know*. Note, there is no theoretical proof that it cannot happen, or that it will not ever happen. Thus, each future claim will have to be met and we will be forced either to accept it or to articulate our doubts.

Now we seem to be at a standstill. We cannot withdraw, and we have no good reason for going one way rather than the other. The only solution, then,

would seem to be simply to pick one side over the other, either at random or according to our natural bent. For Strauss this would necessarily imply accepting the way of Jerusalem over the way of Athens. To him it was perfectly clear that if it was a matter of choice alone, then to have faith in faith was simply more honest than to have faith in reason. Strauss was very moved by these considerations, and I believe that in spite of his natural sense of curiosity, he would have accepted them simply, had it not been for Socrates, the man who knew that he did not know.

We can now restate Strauss's difference from and objection to historicism. Historicism sees itself as giving a scientific account of the thoughts of the past in terms of the horizons within which those thoughts were thought. This scientific account presupposes a closed and well-defined horizon in terms of which the activity of thought within that horizon can be made intelligible. But for Strauss, no horizon is well defined. Hence, it cannot be considered closed no matter how closed it may be to someone like Meno. For Strauss it was more a matter of how wide or how narrow our horizons are, how deep we are willing to look, and how willing we are to look at their shaggy edges and hence to look beyond them. It is also a question of whether we have such a nature as to thrive *entre les deux infinites* or whether we find it a frightful land from which we must escape today. For Strauss, the existence of a realm that lay between knowledge and ignorance meant that there was a land in which inquiry could be pursued with honesty. This implies that while philosophy can proceed only by examining the way things seem to be, as long as the horizons are open, it must learn to coexist with theology. Only theology, he thought, can prevent philosophy from mistaking itself for

*sophia*, and such presumed *sophia* had no other choice than to express itself as ideology which would soon congeal itself into tyranny. I also believe that he thought that only philosophy was in a position to return the favor. It is in connection with this conclusion that he makes it clear that for both philosophy and theology, the love of justice must be prior even to love of country if love of country is to have any meaning at all.