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Jerusalem and Carthage



Abstract: In recent years, Tertullian's iconic distinction between Jerusalem and Athens has been frequently cited as a point of departure for discussion of the relationship between the thought of the Bible and the philosophy of ancient Greece. Historically, Tertullian's dichotomy launches a discourse based on two familiar premises: that "faith" and "reason" name distinct and opposed aspects of mankind's intellectual endowment; and that the tradition of thought found in the Bible represents and encourages the first of these, whereas Greek philosophy embraces the second. My own view is that both of these premises are almost certainly false. In what follows, I offer preliminary remarks concerning one aspect of this topic, which is the question of whether the Bible can reasonably be seen as representing the position labeled "faith" in the Tertullianic disputation between faith and reason. In my view, the kind of faith that bears the label "Jerusalem" in the discourse inspired by Tertullian cannot be found in the Hebrew Bible at all. To speak intelligently about the thought of the Hebrew Bible and its place in the history of the West, one must learn to think in terms of an unaccustomed and very different opposition, that between Jerusalem and Carthage.

1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT HAS TERTULLIAN TO DO WITH JERUSALEM?

In recent years, Tertullian's iconic distinction between Jerusalem and Athens has been frequently cited as a point of departure for discussion of the relationship between the thought of the Bible and the philosophy of ancient Greece.¹ Historically, Tertullian's dichotomy launches a discourse based on two familiar premises, by now often presented as if they

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¹ See, for example, Leora F. Batnitzky, "On Reaffirming a Distinction Between Athens and Jerusalem," *Hebraic Political Studies* 2:2 (2007), pp. 211–231. The revival of the "Athens and Jerusalem" trope has been largely due to Leo Strauss, whose own

were self-evidently correct and in need of no further discussion: these are the assumptions (i) that “faith” and “reason” name distinct and opposed aspects of mankind’s intellectual endowment; and (ii) that the tradition of thought found in the Bible represents and encourages the first of these, whereas Greek philosophy embraces the second. These premises have been extraordinarily fruitful in the history of the Christian West, inspiring some to defend faith against reason, others to champion reason against faith, and yet others to argue that the two can be reconciled—all of this within the framework established by Tertullian and while treating his two premises as an appropriate basis for discussion.

My own view is that both of these premises are almost certainly false. I do not believe the dichotomy between faith and reason is very helpful in understanding the diversity of human intellectual orientations. I say this, among other reasons, because I think it is an empirical fact that the faithful are in many cases quite reasonable individuals, whereas those who are most intransigent in their unreason are often the most unfaithful as well. And I do not believe that either the tradition of inquiry preserved in the biblical Scriptures or the tradition of discovery represented by the writings of Plato and Aristotle is particularly well suited to play the role usually assigned to it in the often facile debate that ensues once the supposed opposition between faith and reason is taken as a point of departure.

In what follows, I would like to offer some preliminary remarks concerning one aspect of this topic, which is the question of whether the Bible can reasonably be seen as representing the position labeled “faith” in the Tertullianic disputation between faith and reason. Tertullian, of course, champions a very specific kind of Christian faith. And it is this kind of Christian faith that he and many others after him are pleased to give the name “Jerusalem.” In my view, this nomenclature derives from Tertullian’s rhetorical posture with respect to his own opponents within the Church in his home city of Carthage and elsewhere, and it can teach us next to nothing about the thought of Jerusalem. Indeed, I wish to suggest that the kind of faith which bears the label “Jerusalem” in the discourse inspired by Tertullian cannot be found in the Hebrew Bible at all. To study the Hebrew Scriptures is to encounter an entirely different worldview (or rather, a complex or school of worldviews) from that

dichotomy between Jerusalem and Athens seems to build on Tertullian’s view of the Bible as standing in irreconcilable conflict with philosophy. See Leo Strauss, “Reason and Revelation,” in Heinrich Meier, ed., *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1948]), pp. 141–167; Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 74–85; Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis” and “Jerusalem and Athens,” in Kenneth Hart Green, ed., *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997 [1957, 1967]), pp. 359–405.

which is so often called “faith”—a worldview as easily opposed to that emanating from Carthage as it is to the thought of Athens. To speak intelligently about the thought of the Hebrew Bible and its place in the history of the West, one must therefore learn to think in terms of this unaccustomed and very different opposition, that between Jerusalem and Carthage.²

What follows, then, is a preliminary exploration of the opposition between Jerusalem and Carthage. I begin with a brief recapitulation of the opposition between Jerusalem and Athens as it appears in the writings of Tertullian and those who follow his lead. I will then argue that the Tertullianic conception of “Jerusalem” cannot be reconciled with the texts of Hebrew Scripture, but must be considered another position altogether, which may be represented by the city of Carthage.

2. TERTULLIAN’S JERUSALEM AND TERTULLIAN’S ATHENS

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was born in 155 C.E. in Roman Carthage, where he was raised as a pagan and became a convert to Christianity. He was the first significant Christian thinker to write in Latin and is for this reason sometimes called the Father of the Latin Church. According to most accounts, he eventually left the Church after concluding it was heretical.³ His last works date from no later than the year 222.

² I have said that what Tertullian calls “Jerusalem” cannot be reconciled with Hebrew Scripture. But there is another, no less significant question, which is the degree to which Tertullian’s faith can be reconciled with, say, the teachings of Paul, or the Gospel of John. This is a question I will not try to answer here. This is not for lack of interest, but because I believe trying to answer it in the context of a discussion of the Hebrew Scriptures can only confuse matters. The Hebrew Bible is a different corpus from the New Testament, presenting a different teaching and a different worldview. I do not mean by this that Christianity should distance itself from the Jerusalem of the Hebrew Bible, or that it should embrace Tertullian’s Carthage. On the contrary, I suspect the health of Christianity requires that it make the opposite choice. But I do not think anything is gained by the continued papering over of the differences between the New Testament and Hebrew Scripture. To find what is worthy and true in Christianity requires a clear view of the Hebrew Scriptures—just as an understanding of the West more generally requires a clear view of the Hebrew Scriptures. To recover the Jerusalem of the Jews is thus an important effort in its own right, and one that must precede other investigations whose purpose is to ask how the teachings of this Jerusalem are to be related to those later associated with Athens or Rome. In drawing a sharp distinction between Jerusalem and Carthage, I believe we move an important step closer to attaining such a clear view of the Hebrew Scriptures. For related discussion, see Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

³ This view has been challenged by David Rankin in *Tertullian and the Church* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Tertullian lays out a view according to which the faith of a Christian and the philosopher's pursuit of truth are seen as irreconcilable and mutually antagonistic. I will touch on three aspects of his thought that are especially significant in this regard. These are, *first*, his adoption of an authoritative catechism by means of which a Christian can gain access to needful knowledge; *second*, his disavowal of the worth of a life devoted to seeking truth; and *third*, his endorsement of the idea that what a Christian is called upon to believe is in some sense absurd, and therefore antithetical to reason.

I turn first to Tertullian's advocacy of catechism. In *Prescription Against Heretics*, Tertullian argues that Christians must abstain from the philosophers' quest for truth, because open-ended seeking for understanding leads to heresy. Christians are to concern themselves only with what he calls the "rule of faith" (or "law of faith"), which is a kind of catalogue of the things a Christian needs to believe. Tertullian's rule of faith reads as follows:

Now the rule of faith... is unquestionably that wherein our belief is affirmed that there is but one God, the selfsame with the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through his word sent down in the beginning of all things; that this word is called his son, who in the Name of God was seen in diverse forms by the patriarchs, was ever heard in the prophets, and lastly was brought down by the spirit and power of God the Father into the Virgin Mary, became flesh in her womb, and being born of her, lived as Jesus Christ; that thereafter he proclaimed a new law and a new promise of the kingdom of heaven, wrought miracles, was crucified, and on the third day rose again, was caught up into the heavens, and sat down at the right hand of the Father; that he sent the vicarious power of the Holy Spirit to lead believers; that he will come with glory to take the saints into the enjoyment of life eternal and of the heavenly promises, and to adjudge the wicked to perpetual fire, after the resurrection of both good and bad has taken place together with the restoration of their flesh.⁴

Tertullian thus argues that there is one definitive body of knowledge that man must acquire. Moreover, this body of knowledge is not itself in any sense the result of some kind of human quest for truth. These are teachings that Jesus received directly from God and handed down directly to his apostles, who then made them known through the

⁴ Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 13:11–15. Quotations from this text are based on the translation of Peter Holmes from 1870, available at <http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-24.htm>. I have edited them slightly for clarity.

apostolic churches. Regarding the question of how one is to know which is the proper doctrine, Tertullian argues that this can be known because it is the doctrine of those churches whose lineage can be traced directly back to the apostles:

All doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches... must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which these churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God. Whereas all doctrine must be prejudged as false which savors of contrariety to the truth of the churches and apostles of Christ and God.⁵

The question of how mankind can gain access to truth is thus for Tertullian a matter of ensuring that one has gained access to authoritative doctrine by receiving it from an apostolic church. The possibility of real disagreement among such churches cannot even arise, because the truth is one and evident. As Tertullian tells us, "Where diversity of doctrine is found, there... must the corruption both of the Scriptures and of the expositions thereof be regarded as existing."⁶ Simply stated, the rule of faith, being one, authoritative, and perfectly clear, is able to put an end to human questioning and seeking with respect to matters of ultimate significance. As Tertullian says, "This rule of faith... was taught by Christ, and raises among ourselves *no other questions* than those which heresies introduce..."⁷

What, then, are we to make of that famous exhortation of the Gospels, "Seek and you will find"?⁸ For Tertullian, this call to seek truth refers only to those who have not yet found Christ's rule of faith. Once this rule of faith is found, all other seeking is to come to an end. As he writes,

I lay down this position: That there is some one, and therefore definite, thing taught by Christ, which the Gentiles are by all means bound to believe, and for that purpose they "seek," in order that they may be able, when they have "found" it, to believe. However, there can be no indefinite seeking, for that which has been taught [is only one] definite thing. You must "seek" until you "find," and believe when you have found. Nor have you anything further to do but to keep what you have believed... and therefore nothing else is to be sought, after you have found and believed what has been taught by [Christ,] who charges you to seek no other thing than

⁵ Ibid. 21:13–14.

⁶ Ibid. 38:12.

⁷ Ibid. 13:15. Emphasis mine.

⁸ Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9. Unless otherwise noted, New Testament quotations are from the *New English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford and Cambridge, 1970).

that which he has taught.... What you have “to seek,” then, is that which Christ has taught, and you must go on seeking... until indeed you find it. But you have succeeded in finding when you have believed.⁹

Thus, for Tertullian, one should seek only until one has found the rule of faith. This having been found, all other seeking of knowledge should in principle come to an end. Indeed, he insists that beyond what is taught by Christianity, there is no truth of significance to be sought:

We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the Gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our... faith: That there is nothing we ought to believe besides.¹⁰

Tertullian does not, of course, expect that Christians will cease to have questions, but he urges that the only proper outlet for such questions is the learning of the Gospel with Christian teachers. All other seeking must be seen as endangering the rule of faith.¹¹ And if one were to complain that such a worldview, in effect deriding all seeking of truth other than the study of the Gospel, would condemn mankind to a life of blind ignorance, Tertullian says he is willing for men to remain in ignorance of other things so that they learn nothing that might undermine their faith. As he writes:

[I]t is better for you to remain in ignorance, lest you should come to know what you ought not, because you have [already] acquired the knowledge of what you ought to know.... To know nothing in opposition to the rule of faith is to know all things.¹²

We thus have from Tertullian an extraordinarily extreme statement of the relationship between Christianity and the search for knowledge. In his view, there is some “one, and therefore definite” thing that is to be quested after: Christ’s teaching, which can be known easily and fully by consulting an authoritative source. Beyond this, there is simply no point in inquiry and argument. There is simply no other knowledge worthy of being quested after.

⁹ Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 9:3–4, 10:2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 7:25.

¹¹ “Let our ‘seeking,’ therefore, be in that which is our own [teaching], and from those who are our own, and concerning that which is our own—that and only that... can become an object of inquiry without impairing the rule of faith.” *Ibid.*, 12:10–12. Compare: “No one is wise, no one is faithful, no one excels in dignity but the Christian...” *Ibid.* 3:10–11.

¹² *Ibid.* 14:4, 9.

It is in this context that Tertullian declares himself to be opposed to philosophy and asks, famously, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord can there be between the Academy and the Church?” And in this context, the reasons for Tertullian’s understanding of Athens as being fundamentally hostile to Jerusalem are plain. The point having already been made that a Christian had best remain ignorant “lest he should come to know what he ought not,” there is clearly nothing to be gained by reading the writings of the pagans. And indeed, in *The Soul’s Testimony*, Tertullian argues that a Christian should have nothing to do with the literature and teaching of the pagans, including even the works of philosophers who argue that there is only one God. “[L]et it be granted,” he writes, “that there is nothing in heathen writers which a Christian approves.”¹³ More specifically, the Christian—whose only concern should be “to keep what he has believed”—can gain nothing from the philosopher’s art “of building up and pulling down” beliefs. All such an art can do is propose reasons for pulling down the Christian’s rule of faith. In *Prescription Against Heretics*, Tertullian thus declares philosophy to be inimical to Christianity. As he writes,

Unhappy Aristotle! Who invented for these men dialectics, the art of building up [arguments] and pulling [them] down; an art so evasive in its propositions,... so productive of contention—embarrassing even itself, retracting everything, and really treating of nothing! ... [W]hen the apostle would restrain us, he expressly names philosophy as that which he would have us be on our guard against. Writing to the Colossians, he says: “See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men”¹⁴.... He had been at Athens, and had in his interviews with the philosophers become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, while it only corrupts it.... What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord can there be between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians?¹⁵

¹³ Tertullian, *The Soul’s Testimony* 1:4. See the S. Thelwall translation (1869), <http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-20.htm>.

¹⁴ I Colossians 2:8. Compare I Timothy 1:4; II Timothy 2:17.

¹⁵ Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 7:15–22. Here and elsewhere, Tertullian accuses philosophy of being incapable of learning the truth about anything because its methods lead to the tearing down of all things rather than building up true positions. Compare: “So then, where is there any likeness between the Christian and the philosopher? Between the discipline of Greece and of heaven?... Between the talker and the doer? Between the man who builds up and the man who pulls down?” Tertullian, *Apology* 46:18. See the S. Thelwall translation (1869), <http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-05.htm>.

We have seen, then, that Tertullian calls upon Christians to reject philosophy and to cease the pursuit of truth once they have come to believe in the Gospel, which is the only belief a Christian needs.¹⁶ This would already seem to be a hard-core anti-philosophic position, granting the rule of faith an unchallengeable and exclusive rule in the soul. But for Tertullian, even this is not quite enough, as it leaves open the possibility that faith in Jesus may ultimately be something reasonable, in the sense that it can somehow be made to square with what human beings call reason. Tertullian rejects even this, arguing that the things the Gospel asks Christians to believe are, if judged by any worldly standard, just so much foolishness. What is asked of the Christian, he says, is to hold fast to faith, even though that which is to be believed is absurd. He lays out this view in a famous passage in *The Flesh of Christ*:

[C]onsider well this Scripture, if indeed you have not erased it: "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world, to confound the wise."¹⁷ Now what are those foolish things?... Will you find anything to be so "foolish" as believing of a God that has been born, and of a virgin, and of a fleshly nature too, who wallowed in all the... humiliations of nature?... There are, to be sure, other things also quite as foolish.... For which is more unworthy of God, [and] which is more likely to raise a blush of shame: That *God* should be born, or that He should die? That He should bear the flesh, or the cross? Be circumcised, or be crucified? Be cradled, or be coffined? Be laid in a manger, or in a tomb? *Talk of "wisdom!"* You will show more of *that* if you refuse to believe this [concerning his death] also. But, after all, you will not be "wise" unless you become a "fool"

¹⁶ For a more charitable interpretation of Tertullian's relation to philosophy, see R.E. Roberts, *The Theology of Tertullian* (Southampton: Southampton Times, 1924), pp. 63–78.

¹⁷ I Corinthians 1:4. This text concerning "the folly of the Gospel" gives Tertullian the crucial toehold he needs in the writings of Paul: "[Christ sent me] to proclaim the Gospel; and to do it without relying on the language of worldly wisdom, so that the fact of Christ on his cross might have its full weight. The doctrine of the cross is sheer folly to those on their way to ruin, but to us, who are on the way to salvation, it is the power of God.... The world failed to find him by its wisdom, and he chose to save those who have faith by the folly of the Gospel.... My brothers, think what sort of people you are, whom God has called. Few of you are men of wisdom, by any human standard.... Yet to shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly.... He has chosen things low and contemptible, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order.... Make no mistake about this: If there is anyone among you who fancies himself wise—wise, I mean by the standards of this passing age—he must become a fool to gain true wisdom. For the wisdom of the world is folly in God's sight.... We are fools for Christ's sake." I Corinthians 1:17–18, 21–22, 26–28, 3:18–19, 4:10. Similarly, "Of course we all 'have knowledge,' as you say. This 'knowledge' breeds conceit; it is love that builds. If anyone fancies that he knows, he knows nothing yet, in the true sense of knowing. But if a man loves, he is acknowledged by God." I Corinthians 8:1–3.

to the world, by believing “the foolish things of God”: ... The Son of God was crucified—I am not ashamed, because men must be ashamed of it. And the Son of God died—it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried and rose again—the fact is certain, because it is impossible.¹⁸

In this passage, the opposition between faith and reason is elevated to an absolute, inasmuch as God has chosen to ask mankind to believe things that are frankly and simply repugnant to reason. Just as God chooses to use the weakness of the Christians to defeat what is, by human standards, considered powerful on this earth, so too does God choose the foolishness of the Gospels to defeat what is, by human standards, considered wisdom. By any measure that the human mind is capable of devising, what God asks us to believe must be regarded as foolishness. Tertullian thus argues for a kind of Christian faith that is irreconcilable with human reason, and in fact repugnant to it.

3. THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE IDEA OF A ‘RULE OF FAITH’

Tertullian’s views are those of a fanatic. But they have not been without influence. A certain strand within Christianity has always applauded this posture, and its echoes continue to be heard down to our own day. We find a similar position, in which Christian faith is taken to be “an absurdity to the understanding,” being advanced in the writings of Kierkegaard, for example:

What, then, is the absurd? The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come into existence... as an individual human being.... [In other words,] the absurd is precisely the object of faith, and only that can be believed.... Christianity... has required the inwardness of faith with regard to what is... an absurdity to the understanding.¹⁹

In the same vein, C.S. Lewis speaks of the things that Jesus asks mankind to believe, if judged by human standards, as “asinine fatuity” and “lunacy”:

¹⁸ Tertullian, *The Flesh of Christ* 4:5–6, 5:1–4. See the translation of Peter Holmes (1870), <http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-39.htm>.

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to “Philosophical Fragments”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 210–213. A subtle exploration of Kierkegaard’s relation to philosophy can be found in Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[Y]ou will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.... Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give.... In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history.... A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said... would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell.²⁰

It is with some discomfort that I quote these passages. But we need to look such texts in the eye if we are to understand why Tertullian's opposition between Jerusalem and Athens continues to have so much traction. It is this recurring trope, according to which Christian faith requires belief in things that are repugnant to human reason, which permits contemporary commentators to speak of biblical faith as though it purposely stands in opposition to the dictates of human reason.²¹

But as I say, I believe this understanding of the Bible is deeply mistaken. Tertullian's faith is not that of the Bible—certainly not of the Hebrew Bible. Carthage is not Jerusalem. Indeed, each time I encounter this kind of religious faith, I am moved to wonder anew:

What has Tertullian to do with Jerusalem? What concord can there be between the faith of Carthage and the teachings of Hebrew Scripture?

I would like to share with you a few considerations as to why the claim that the Hebrew Bible in some way partakes of the worldview of Tertullian must be rejected.

Let us begin with the crux of Tertullian's religion, the assertion that there exists a certain paragraph, consisting of a list of concrete propositions, which encompasses all that must be believed—all the knowledge that must be acquired—if humanity is to attain its highest end.²² In laying down this rule of faith, it is possible, perhaps, to argue that Tertullian is following the example of Paul.²³ But it is not possible, I believe, to argue that he is following an example or precedent that can be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed, in the entire vast corpus of texts that

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996 [1952]), pp. 55–56.

²¹ For example: “[T]he improbable character of biblical belief is admitted and even proclaimed by the biblical faith itself.... [T]he improbability of the truth of the Bible is a contention of the Bible.” Strauss, “Interpretation of Genesis,” pp. 360–361.

²² We may assume that Tertullian exaggerates in saying that human beings should remain in ignorance of all other things. A man must know that he is human, that he has certain obligations toward his fellow man, that he has erred, and so on.

²³ I Corinthians 15:1–7.

make up the Hebrew Bible, we find nothing that presents itself as a definitive catalogue of beliefs or actions considered necessary and sufficient for the attainment of salvation. Neither the Ten Commandments, nor Moses' stirring summation of what God requires of us in Deuteronomy ("And now Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you..."),²⁴ nor the passages collated and recited in the prayer *Shema Yisrael*,²⁵ presents itself as such a definitive catalogue encompassing everything that mankind (or the Jews) must believe. Even the most concrete of these texts, the Ten Commandments, is not in any sense complete as a guide to proper action, much less belief. The Bible offers us no catechism.²⁶

But I would like to take this a step further. For I think it is not merely a matter of contingency or happenstance that the Hebrew Bible offers no catechism. I believe the Hebrew Bible positively *defies* catechism—that it was purposely structured so as to make catechism difficult, if not impossible. The Bible is, after all, a collection of books by very different authors. And while the first half of the Hebrew Bible can be regarded as a single narrative composition ultimately assembled by a single hand,²⁷ the same cannot be said of the twenty-six additional works that comprise the second half of the Hebrew Bible. These constitute a broad spectrum of opinions even on essential issues. One would have a hard time reconciling the political understanding of the book of Daniel, for example, in which faith in God is virtually all one needs to gain political salvation, with that of the book of Esther, which comes closer to the view that in politics, God tends to help those who help themselves. Nor can one harmonize Isaiah's claim that in the time of the king to come all the earth will have one God, with the prophet Micha's vision in which each nation will walk with its own god and the children of Israel will walk with

²⁴ The full passage reads: "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but [i] to fear the Lord your God, [ii] to walk in all his ways, and [iii] to love him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, [iv] to keep the commandments of the Lord and his statutes which I command you this day for your good?" Deuteronomy 10:12–13. But this is precisely the opposite of a catechism such as that offered by Tertullian. Instead of a finite list of concrete things that are to be believed, there is a series of four different principles, each of which opens upon an entire world of effort, belief, and action.

²⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:13–21; Numbers 15:37–41.

²⁶ Some suggest that Deuteronomy 5 or passages from the first chapters of Proverbs may have served as catechism among Jews. I have to say that reading these passages leaves me unconvinced. But even if this were the case, it would hardly change the force of the argument, which is that the Hebrew Bible was purposely assembled in such a way as to make catechizing efforts seem alien and implausible.

²⁷ On the unity of this "primary history," see David Noel Freedman, *The Unity of the Hebrew Bible* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 5–6, 102; Donald Harman Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), pp. 19–63.

theirs.²⁸ In the same way, Isaiah sees mankind beating its swords into plowshares and coming to be judged at Jerusalem. But the vision of Joel is different, saying that when the nations come to Jerusalem to be judged they will beat their plowshares into swords—for judgment will come on the battlefield.²⁹ And countless other examples could be adduced. To understand the Hebrew Bible, then, is first to recognize it as an artful compendium, whose purpose is not—and never was—to present a single viewpoint.

I do not mean by this to say that there is no center or heart to this biblical tradition. There is indeed such a center, such a heart. But this center of the biblical teaching is not something handed to us. It must be sought, and the Bible points to it not by way of one brief and sharply delineated understanding, but by way of a family or school of viewpoints, each of which aims to bring us to this center from a different place. It is therefore impossible for the reader of the Hebrew Bible to say, together with Tertullian, that where diversity of doctrine is found, there must be “corruption... of the Scriptures and the expositions thereof.” It is of the essence of what we mean when we speak of something as being *biblical* in character, that it presents certain core truths, but by means of a diversity of views.

In part, this conception of religion is the result of the fundamentally political character of biblical Judaism. Biblical religion cannot afford the parochialism of a narrow religious sect because it consciously aims to serve as the basis for an entire nation. But the biblical defiance of catechism goes deeper than this. Biblical religion must be skeptical with respect to attempts at imposing a “rule of faith” or catechism due to the Bible’s oft-repeated observation that ultimate knowledge of God’s thoughts is beyond the powers of man, which are by nature fallible and frail. This is not just a latter-day view to be found in medieval mysticism, or in Maimonides’ negative theology. Encounters with God are in the Hebrew Bible elusive, and fraught with lack of clarity and uncertainty.³⁰ This is so even with respect to Moses himself, who seeks time and again to gain a clear view of God’s name, his face, his ways. Yet even Moses, the greatest of the prophets, can apparently do no better than to stand in the cleft of a rock, covered by God’s hand, and to catch a glimpse of God’s back after he has passed.³¹ And this same impression of an elusive God

²⁸ Isaiah 2:2–4; Micha 4:2–5.

²⁹ Joel 4:9–12.

³⁰ For a compelling presentation of this view, see James Kugel, *The God of Old* (New York: Free Press, 2003), pp. 5–36.

³¹ Exodus 33:11–34:10. But even with such severe limitations, Moses is said to understand God clearly in comparison with other prophets. Compare Numbers 11:6–8.

returns time and again elsewhere in the Bible—in Elijah's quest at Sinai, which ends in silence's thin voice; in Isaiah's vision of God on his throne in a hall filled with smoke; and so on.³²

Moreover, this elusive character of God's presence in the world refers to the best case, in which an individual has been gifted with relative clarity of vision and the personal strength to accept and assimilate what has been seen. For the individual who does not possess the prophet's gifts, the challenge is much greater. Consider, for example, the encounter between Israel and God at Sinai. There, God himself appears before each and every Israelite—and yet the people gain almost no knowledge from this encounter. Why? Because the people flee from insight: at first they cry out in terror and beg for Moses to receive God's word in their place; and shortly thereafter they have lost any sense or meaning that God's presence may have had for them and make themselves a bovine god of gold.³³ The lesson here is bitter and abundantly clear. Human beings do not necessarily have the strength of character to accept the truth, even when it is before their eyes.

It is no surprise, then, that the biblical authors so consistently depict the common Israelite, who has had no such direct experience of God, as being adrift on a sea of conflicting opinions as to what God wants. The orations of Isaiah and Jeremiah depict a Jerusalem whose citizens have before them the views of well-meaning idolaters who argue for the traditional gods of the land; those of confused prophets, who see only the goodness of the present time and cannot imagine its end; those of blinkered priests, who study the Scriptures with great care and yet cannot get past the shallowness of their own interpretations to find the word of God buried in their texts; and so on.³⁴ In the writings of these prophets, we find that every route to knowledge has become difficult in the extreme: tradition, prophecy, and Scripture are all of them corrupted, so that it is not at all obvious how or when the truth will come to be known.

In the religion of the Hebrew Bible, God's word is thus seen as present in the world. To find it, however, one must hack one's way through an epistemological jungle and try to break free to something that is enduring and true. In the absence of success in such efforts, the relationship between the many things that are said in God's name and what one is in fact to think, to believe, to do, remains chronically unclear.

³² I Kings 19:8–15; Isaiah 6:1–8.

³³ Exodus 20:16–18, 32:1–6.

³⁴ Isaiah attributes their failures not to deceit, but to the reading of the Scriptures line by line, without knowledge of the spirit of the law. See Isaiah 28:7–13.

In the religion of Tertullian, Christ's message possesses an unsurpassed clarity. One has it in a paragraph. It "raises among ourselves no other questions." Biblical religion, for all its astonishing beauty, possesses no such clarity. And the form of the Hebrew Bible can be seen as a reflection of this pessimistic—one may also say realistic—epistemology, or theory of knowledge. The very existence of the Bible as we have it reflects the elusive nature of what is needful for man's salvation, which cannot be trapped in a paragraph and must be sought through numerous approaches.

4. THE BIBLE AND 'UNASSISTED' HUMAN REASON

In the last section, I suggested that both the form and the content of the biblical teaching are such as to deny the possibility of catechism. But if this is right, the implications must be far-reaching. For it means, among other things, that man has no option of seeking once, as Tertullian proposes, and then ceasing to search because he believes. Indeed, on the biblical view, almost the opposite is the case. If we wish to learn from the Hebrew Bible, we have no choice but to embrace what must be a lifelong search for the truth.³⁵ Those who assembled the biblical canon evidently lived such lives themselves. And while their search must have been different in many ways from the philosophical quest of the Athenian tradition, their rejection of the possibility of authoritative catechism also means that their search has next to nothing in common with the faith of Carthage. Indeed, the entire purpose of Tertullian's catechism is to put an end to the epistemic jungle and ongoing search that characterizes the universe of the Hebrew Bible.

In the next sections, I would like to look more closely at how the biblical authors understood their search for truth.

³⁵ A few readers have suggested to me that my use of the expression "search for truth" is problematic because what the biblical authors are seeking is the good, rather than the true. This objection raises several crucial issues that I cannot fully resolve here. But a few points should be emphasized by way of beginning this discussion. I agree that the use of the term "truth" in this context may be slightly misleading, since the biblical *emet* and its cognates refer to something different from truth as it is understood in Greek philosophy. In the Bible, the true is that which is reliable, steadfast, and sure, as in the English "true heart" or "true friend." This understanding of truth is in fact closely related to the biblical conception of the good, because the principal epistemological concern of the prophets is distinguishing that which can be relied upon to bring about mankind's well-being from that which appears reliable but is not. The search for the truth in the Bible is therefore, roughly, the search for that which can be relied upon, or *trusted*, to bring about the good in this world. Thus, my understanding of what is being sought in the Bible is not, I think, so different from that of my readers. However, we may disagree on the degree to which the Bible is in this respect removed from the concerns of Greek philosophy. For a fuller discussion, see Yoram Hazony, "Truth and Being in the Hebrew Bible" (forthcoming).

It is often said that a distinction must be drawn between the teaching of the Bible and philosophy, because the latter represents free and “unassisted” reason, whereas the former represents a fettered reason “assisted” by God’s commands. I am not sure that such a distinction is even coherent. But it does suggest that we should take an especial interest in the following question: what is the Bible’s view of individuals who seek knowledge, reason on the basis of this knowledge, and take action, all in the absence of anything that can be recognized as “assistance” from God or from a human being speaking in God’s name? What do the authors of the Bible really think about the “unassisted” search for the truth?

Consider some obvious examples:

1. *Shifra and Pua*. Look first at the case of the Hebrew midwives in Egypt. Pharaoh commands that the male children of Israel be put to death, but the midwives, Shifra and Pua, refuse his order. Later, we are told that God rewards them for this. But they have no decree from God to the effect that the murder of infants is wrong. The reasoning here is entirely their own.³⁶

2. *Joheved, Miriam, and Pharaoh’s daughter*. Similarly, the infant Moses is saved by his mother, Joheved, who sets him on the Nile; by his sister, Miriam, who risks her life to track the basket; and by Pharaoh’s daughter, who draws him out of the Nile and raises him in contravention of her father’s decree. None of these women has a decree from God or his prophets to teach them that to save the child is right. The reasoning that leads them to this is entirely their own.³⁷

3. *Moses*. We are told that Pharaoh’s daughter gives Moses his name and raises him as her son. Other than this, the first thing we learn about him is that when he is grown, he goes out to his brothers and sees their suffering. When he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, he kills him and buries him in the sand. No word of God suggests to him that it is right to inquire after one’s people, or that one should slay their oppressors. The reasoning that leads him to these things is entirely his own.³⁸

And what is said concerning these examples can be said about countless others. Indeed, the Bible is filled from end to end with stories of individuals who exercise their own reasoning and judgment in the

³⁶ Exodus 1:15–21. In this specific case, we are told that the midwives “feared God,” but in biblical parlance this does not mean that God spoke to them, only that they feared to do wrong. For discussion, see Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2000), pp. 98–100.

³⁷ Exodus 2:1–10.

³⁸ Exodus 2:11–15. See also the story of Tzipora’s circumcision of their son, also at her own initiative. Exodus 4:24–26.

absence of “assistance” from God or of those speaking in his name. What are we to make of this? On the face of it, the sheer volume of such examples seems to suggest that the Bible has a clear position concerning free human inquiry and action taken as a result of such inquiry. The Hebrew Bible—in this regard, nearly all of its very different authors—appears to take these individuals as exemplars of a life properly led. More than this, there are biblical works in which such truth-seeking is explicitly presented as the foundation of the good life for the individual and for the state. For Jeremiah, for example, it is precisely the lack of truth-seeking that will bring about the destruction of Jerusalem:

Run through the streets of Jerusalem, and see, and know; and seek in her broad places, whether you can find a man, if there be any, who does justice, who seeks truth, and I will pardon her.³⁹

Indeed, it is clear that for Jeremiah, this search does not require any special communication from on high. It is a search that anyone can undertake:

Thus says the Lord: stand on the highways and see, and inquire of the paths of old, which is the good way; and walk upon it, and you will find rest for your souls. But they said: “We will not walk upon it.”⁴⁰

This motif of searching out truth by standing on the highways is fascinating in itself. The different roads that are open to us are there to be compared. We can look at them and discern “which is the good way” almost empirically, without need for God’s instructions, because the evidence is there to be discovered by those who look. A similar motif appears in the book of Proverbs:

Wisdom cries aloud in the street. She sounds her voice in the squares. She cries in the chief place of the concourse, at the entrances to the city gates. In the city she speaks her message: “...I have called and you refused. I have stretched out my hand and none regarded.”⁴¹

What kind of wisdom are we talking about exactly, which the book of Proverbs insists is available in the streets? The Bible itself offers us numerous examples of the kind of reasoning that can be employed by women and men who wish to escape from the depravity of their illusions,

³⁹ Jeremiah 5:1. Translations from the Hebrew Bible are my own.

⁴⁰ Jeremiah 6:16.

⁴¹ Proverbs 1:20–24.

and to break free to an understanding of the truth. Here is an example, concerning the evils that come of drinking:

Look not upon the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup.... In the end, it bites like a snake, and stings like a viper. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart will utter perverse words. You will be like one who lies down in the ocean, like one who lies down atop a mast. They have struck me, but I was not pained. They have beaten me, but I felt it not. When will I awake? I will seek it yet again.⁴²

And here is another example, concerning adultery:

[K]eep you from an evil woman, from the smoothness of a strange tongue. Lust not after her beauty in your heart, nor let her take you in with her eyelids. For... the adulterous wife hunts your precious soul. Can a man take fire in his breast, and not be burned? Can one walk on hot coals, and his feet not be scorched? So it is for him that goes in to his neighbor's wife. Whoever touches her will not go unpunished.... He who commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding. He destroys his soul.... For jealousy is the rage of a man, and he will not spare you on the day of his vengeance. He accepts no compensation, and will not be content, though you give him many gifts.

And another, from Isaiah, concerning idolatry:

They have neither knowledge nor understanding.... And none considers in his heart, neither does he have knowledge or understanding to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire. I have even baked bread upon its embers. I have roasted meat and eaten it. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down to worship the stock of a tree?"⁴³

In these examples, the wisdom that is available in the streets is seen to be nothing other than reasoned argument as to what things are and are not truly of worth. Thus the biblical authors argue that one should not drink because it dulls one to pain and is addictive, that one should not commit adultery because a man will have his vengeance, that one should not attribute divine power to that which one burns for fuel because it is obviously powerless to help even itself. In these and other similar cases, the authors have no need to make an explicit appeal to God's word, because the experience of the streets itself is able to teach truth. Arguments based on experience are taken to be an inseparable part of the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Isaiah 44:19–20.

individual's search for truth. Indeed, the fool is consistently depicted as one who has paid no heed to the counsel of experience, and has thereby brought about his own ruin.⁴⁴ Here, the distinction between the biblical search for truth and that of the philosopher becomes exceedingly vague, bordering on nonexistent.

It is no wonder, then, that in the rhetoric of the prophets, wisdom gained from experience, and from reasoning based on this experience, at times become *interchangeable* with having heard God's voice, as in the following passage from Jeremiah:

And I will make Jerusalem heaps, a lair of jackals; and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation, without inhabitant. Who is the man so wise that he may understand this; and to whom the mouth of the Lord has spoken that he may declare it?...⁴⁵

We find a similar understanding in Isaiah, who looks forward to the king to come, upon whom, he tells us, will rest the spirit of God. And yet this "spirit of God," as Isaiah has it, is itself indistinguishable from wisdom, understanding, and the ability to judge wisely and with justice:

And the spirit of the Lord will rest upon him: The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of good counsel and bravery, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.⁴⁶

5. SEEKING TRUTH IN GOD'S PRESENCE

Until now, I have sought to show that the Bible has a far more favorable relationship with the "unassisted" search for truth than can be reconciled with the thought of Tertullian. In particular, the biblical authors see the individual as being—much of the time—well removed from an accessible source of knowledge concerning God's word, and side with those who struggle to obtain knowledge of that which is true, wherever and however it can be found.

Of course, this is only a part of the picture. The Bible also describes direct encounters between man and God, encounters in which truth is—if not perfectly manifest—then at least clear enough. But even here,

⁴⁴ Consider, for example, the report of the book of Kings to the effect that the downfall of Solomon's kingdom begins with Rehavam's decision to ignore the voice of experience, represented by the "old men" of his father's court, and to heed instead the advice of his young friends. I Kings 12:3–17. The conclusion that the fool is he who ignores experience is stated explicitly, for example, in Proverbs 1:24.

⁴⁵ Jeremiah 9:10–11.

⁴⁶ Isaiah 11:2–3.

I believe that Tertullianic religion, which demands a submissive faith before God's decrees, cannot be reconciled with the picture of interaction between man and God presented in the Hebrew Scriptures. In this regard, we can consider again the opening passages of Exodus, in which God's salvation is depicted as getting under way as a result of a series of righteous deeds undertaken in the absence of assistance from God—the deeds of Shifra, Pua, Joheved, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter, and finally Moses. The story of Exodus, of course, constitutes the most overt intervention by God in the affairs of man that is to be found in the Bible. And yet this story is told as though God reacts in the wake of extensive and "unassisted" human reasoning and action based on such reasoning. Indeed, even when God finally awakens and addresses man directly, it is only after man sets out to seek God:

Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. *And he led the flock beyond the desert, and came to the mountain of God*, to Horev. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. And behold, the bush burned with fire, but the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." *And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses."*⁴⁷

If what we are looking for is unilateral acts of God, this is pretty strange stuff. For it turns out that even God's appearance at the burning bush is in response to Moses' seeking: first Moses drives his herd deep into the wilderness. Only *after* he reaches "the mountain of God" is he presented with a distant sight that draws him in. And only *after* taking up the challenge and turning aside to pursue it does God finally respond.⁴⁸

Other first encounters between the prophets and God exhibit a similar quality, as though God speaks in response to human searching. I have already mentioned Elijah's quest to Sinai in search of an apparently absent God. No less striking in this regard is the call of Isaiah, which begins not with a command but with a question:

In the year that King Uziahu died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne.... And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Who shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me." And he said, "Go..."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Exodus 3:1–4.

⁴⁸ Compare the story of Gideon, whom God approaches because he sees that Gideon resists the rule of Midian over Israel. Judges 6:11–12.

⁴⁹ Isaiah 6:1–9. The full passage is in fact even more evocative. The *saraf* moves to attend to Isaiah only after Isaiah speaks out loud, expressing his fear that he is impure.

As in Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush, there is here a distinct hesitation on God's part. He refrains from initiating contact. He waits to see whether the prophet wishes to be addressed. He waits to see how the prophet will respond.⁵⁰ A similar passage describes Jeremiah's first prophecy, which also depicts God not as issuing commands, but as posing a question:

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see the rod of an almond tree." Then the Lord said to me, "You have seen well, for I watch over my word to perform it." And the word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying: "What do you see?" And I said: "I see a seething pot, and the face of it is to the north." Then the Lord said to me, "Out of the north the evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land."⁵¹

Here, too, God poses a question—*Jeremiah, what do you see?* Why does God play this game? Why does he not simply tell Jeremiah what he wants to tell him? The answer, it seems, is that at least sometimes prophecy does not work this way. God offers a question, and not an answer. The prophet sees or does not see—he can "see well," as God says here, or he can see less well.⁵²

It is of course the case that biblical figures do hear God's voice without any prior human search being reported to us. Even so, the evidence that prophetic insight is often the result of a human search is too abundant to be ignored. Especially striking is the case of God calling upon Abraham, because here, in this first clear instance of Hebrew prophecy, God's message—to depart Mesopotamia and go to found a nation in Canaan—seems to be unprovoked, out of the blue. But even here, the narrative is careful to inform us that God's approach to Abraham follows an unexplained but also unambiguous case of human initiative—that of his father, Terah, who conceives of a journey to Canaan and even sets out on it, apparently without any call from God.⁵³

Against this backdrop, we are more easily able to understand the famous lines of Jeremiah, in which God himself calls upon man to search for knowledge:

⁵⁰ In Habakuk as well, the prophet begins by challenging God: "O Lord, how long shall I cry and you will not hear?" Only thereafter is he met with a response. See Habakuk 1:1f. God responds only in 2:2.

⁵¹ Jeremiah 1:11–14.

⁵² Compare Zecharia 2:1–6, 4:2–6.

⁵³ Genesis 11:31–32.

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was yet shut up in the court of the guard, saying: ... Call unto me, and I will answer you, and I will tell you great things, and hidden, which you knew not.⁵⁴

Here, it is God who makes it clear that he longs for Jeremiah's initiative, his questions, his search for knowledge. The fact that God promises that if called upon, he will tell Jeremiah "things which you knew not" seems to rule out any relationship based on a fixed catechism that is to rule in Jeremiah's soul. If the relationship between man and God were supposed to consist of man's acceptance of a paragraph of propositions that "raises among ourselves no other questions," there would be no sense at all in God's promising that if man inquires and seeks, he will be told "great things" that had been hidden.

As these examples suggest, the God of the Hebrew Bible is not in the business of demanding belief in some fixed body of propositions. The biblical God is portrayed as revealing his truths and unleashing his deeds in response to man's search for truth. He even longs for man's questioning and seeking. Indeed, God's preference for human beings who seek and question is such as to have given rise to an entire tradition of biblical figures questioning God's decrees, conducting disputations with God, and at times even changing God's mind. I have in mind Abraham's argument with God over the justice of destroying Sodom and Gemora; two occasions in which Moses challenges God's intention to destroy the Israelites entirely; and the arguments of Jeremiah, Jonah, Habakuk, and Job that question God's justice.⁵⁵ In all of these cases, man is shown as being capable of challenging even God's decrees and earning the respect of God as a consequence. In the cases of Abraham and Moses, it would appear that a view presented by a human being can prevail even over that which God initially sees as right.

In addition to these texts, there is another that is perhaps the capstone of this tradition, that in which Jacob struggles all night with an angel and in the morning receives a new name from God—the name of Israel:

And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him there until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he did not prevail, he touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. And he said, "Let me go before the day breaks." And he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him: "What is your name?" And he

⁵⁴ Jeremiah 33:1, 3. Compare Zecharia 1:3.

⁵⁵ Genesis 18:17–33; Exodus 32:9–14; Numbers 14:11–21; Jeremiah 12:1–4; Jonah 3:10–4:3; Habakuk 1:1–4, 1:12–2:1; Job 13:13–16.

said, “Jacob.” And he said, “Your name will no more be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” ... And he blessed him there.⁵⁶

As with Abraham and Moses, this story of Jacob wrestling with God ends with the sense that man can prevail even over the will of God himself. Especially striking is the fact that the Scriptures interpret the name “Israel”—which is the name given to the Jewish nation as a collective—as referring to struggling with God and man and prevailing.

The implications of these stories are so far-reaching that it seems many readers would prefer to forget them. Certainly, if we take them seriously, we are left without the possibility of seeing Hebrew Scripture as calling for man to adopt a life of submissive belief in a catechism we regard as repugnant to reason. On the contrary, it would seem that from the perspective of biblical authors, piety involves such daring in argument and action that even what appears to be God’s truth is not always permitted to stand unchallenged.

I will not delve further into the theological aspects of this issue here. For our purposes it is sufficient to say that at a minimum, the Hebrew Scriptures appear to accept that human beings must ultimately stand by the truth as they understand it, *even where it appears to them that God’s understanding is otherwise*. As Job tells his companions,

Let me alone that I may speak, and let come on me what will....
Though [God] may slay me, yet will I trust him. But I will maintain
my own ways before him. This also will be my salvation: For a flatterer
will not come before him.⁵⁷

6. THE BIBLE AND HUMAN WISDOM AND FOOLISHNESS

It is significant, in this context, that there are no texts in the Hebrew Scriptures in which those who endorse God’s word describe it as “foolishness” or “absurd,” after the example of Tertullian and those who follow his cue. True, one can propose a charitable reading of these Christian texts, according to which God’s wisdom is called foolishness or absurd only because it *appears* so from the perspective of human beings as they are today. But such an approach only serves to emphasize the point that is important here, which is this: the authors of the Hebrew Bible are *never* tempted to say that the word of God is “foolishness” or “absurd” by the standard of human beings. This is because in the Hebrew Scriptures,

⁵⁶ Genesis 32:25–30. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁷ Job 13:13–16.

God's wisdom and truth are, in principle, recognizable as such by human beings, according to the standards of the present world.⁵⁸ To be sure, there are times and places in which human beings do not see the truth and wisdom in God's word. Indeed, there are many such. But the biblical authors themselves cannot go very far in sympathizing with this failure, because to them it is obvious that the wisdom presented by the prophets as the word of God is itself precisely the wisdom that is sought by human beings for the present, human world.

We see this in a variety of contexts. Perhaps the most famous is Moses' assessment, in his address before the Israelites in Deuteronomy, that the law he has taught them can be understood as wisdom by the members of all other nations:

For this [teaching] is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, who will hear these laws and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For... what nation is so great that it has laws and statutes as just as all this teaching I set before you this day?⁵⁹

Obviously, if Moses believes that the nations will be able to see the wisdom in the law he teaches Israel, then the law must be the reflection of a standard independent of itself—a standard that many among the nations may be able to access after their own fashion.⁶⁰

One can ask whether this expectation, that the nations will be able to see the wisdom in the law of Israel, is really so different from the view of Tertullian. After all, does not Tertullian also expect that the nations of the world will come to accept Christ's "rule of faith"? Does this not make that "rule of faith" parallel to Mosaic law, which Moses believes the nations will understand as wisdom? The answer is that there is no reasonable parallel here—for the simple reason that Tertullian believes Christ's rule of faith to demand the belief in things that human reason cannot under any circumstance defend. It is only because of the miraculous nature of,

⁵⁸ This is the spirit of Moses' words to the effect that "This commandment which I command you this day is not hidden from you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, 'Who shall go up for us to heaven and bring it to us?...'” Deuteronomy 30:11–12. There is obviously a significant tension between Moses' optimism that the word of God is within reach, and the observation of Isaiah and Jeremiah that it is not. The later prophets do look forward to a time when mankind will come to the truth, so they do not disagree with Moses in principle. But for their own generations, they often speak as if the die has already been cast due to the decisions of previous generations.

⁵⁹ Deuteronomy 4:6–8. The wisdom of the nations can also be a standard against which the behavior of Israel is judged, as when Jeremiah asks whether anyone has ever heard of a nation turning its back on its own God. Jeremiah 2:10–11, 18:13–15.

⁶⁰ Similarly, when God gives Solomon wisdom, kings the world over can discern it. I Kings 5:9–15.

say, the virgin birth, or of Christ's atonement for mankind's sins, that Christians must concede that the absurd has become truth. Here, the miracles reported by the New Testament have a kind of constitutive force, as if they were axioms of logic: they come to *replace* the worldly truths that we would otherwise embrace. In the Hebrew Scriptures, there are no miracles that have this kind of logically constitutive force for reason. God's word is known by virtue of the fact that it is that which will "stand" in this world, that which will "profit" in this world, whether now or in the future. This means that God's word, in order to be such, must be reliable in practice. What is not reliable in the world is not God's word. And of course, this means that the truth or wisdom of God's word can be tested—at least in principle. Which is as Moses has it in Deuteronomy:

And if you say in your heart: "How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?" When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You shall not be afraid of him.⁶¹

Of course, there is usually no easy way to make such a test. In most cases, one will have to make a choice as to whether to obey God's law or act differently, and there will be no time to conduct an actual experiment. Nevertheless, the prophets insist that it is this quality of being able to "stand"—or to hold good in experience—which is the determining mark of God's word. Consider, for example, this passage in Jeremiah, in which the prophet argues with the people over whether they should set aside their idols and return to the God of Israel:

Then all the men who knew their wives made offerings to other gods, and all the women that stood by, a great assembly, even all the people that lived in the land of Egypt, in Pathros, answered Jeremiah, saying: "As for the word you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you. But we will certainly perform every word that has gone forth out of our mouths, to make offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and to pour out drink-offerings unto her." ...And Jeremiah said to all the people, and to all the women: "Hear the word of the Lord, all Judah that are in the land of Egypt: ...They that escape the sword will return out of the land of Egypt to the land of Judah few in number. And all the remnant

⁶¹ Deuteronomy 18:21–22. The law of Moses also expressly forbids the use of miracles as a proof that one or another moral or legal claim is true. See Deuteronomy 13:2–4.

of Judah, that are gone into the land of Egypt to sojourn there, shall know whose word shall stand, mine or theirs.”⁶²

As in numerous other places in the writings of the prophets, there is no reference to miracles as instruments for authenticating the wisdom or truth of God’s word. The criterion for judgment is taken to be an empirical test—does the word of God “stand” in our own world and in our own experience?

Similarly, the prophets insist that the word of God is that which can be seen to “profit” mankind in practice, as in this passage from Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord, your redeemer, the holy one of Israel: I am the Lord your God, who teaches you for your profit, who leads you by the way you should go. Oh, that you would hearken to my commandments! Then would your peace be as a river....⁶³

The same argument that God and his law are what “profits” is found in Jeremiah:

Pass over to the isles of the Kittites, and see, and send unto Kedar, and inquire diligently, and see if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, although they are no gods? But my people has exchanged its glory for that which does not profit.⁶⁴

In these and other passages like them, we find time and again that the biblical authors accept in principle the Mosaic claim that God’s word is that which can confer life in practice. It is God’s word that instructs as to how to live well and flourish in our own world. In this sense, God’s wisdom and truth must be seen not as something fundamentally different from that of man, but rather as something that is continuous with man’s wisdom. God’s wisdom is, we may say, that which the individual would have if he could “see to the end” of things—that is, if he had sufficient experience and knowledge, and could reason well enough on the basis of this knowledge, so as to know the future results of his actions. Man tends to “see to the end” only rarely and dimly, which is the reason that he finds it so difficult to know the truth as to what will profit him and what will be worthless or worse. How he can overcome this debility and, to some extent, attain God’s wisdom, is a question that is not simply answered, and it is the subject of the Bible. But the wisdom that is sought in the Bible, which is called God’s wisdom, is not something repugnant to human wisdom and reason or alien to it. God’s wisdom is precisely that

⁶² Jeremiah 44:15–17, 24, 28.

⁶³ Isaiah 48:17–18.

⁶⁴ Jeremiah 2:10–11.

understanding of things which would lead mankind to well-being and flourishing in this world were mankind to possess it. It is, in other words, precisely that which human wisdom and reason aspire to attain.

In the conception of biblical authors, then, God's wisdom is not antithetical to human wisdom. It is not inherently "foolishness" or the "absurd" from the perspective of human wisdom and reason. On the contrary, it is precisely that which human wisdom and reason are supposed to be—that which can guide us to those truths that are genuine, enduring, and capable of bringing mankind to well-being. To say this, however, is to let go of the Tertullianic prejudice that what is of interest to the biblical authors is something that is simply of a different order from human wisdom and reason. From the standpoint of Jerusalem, it is precisely because the word of God is continuous with human wisdom and reason that human beings—Jews and Gentiles alike—are capable of recognizing it as wisdom.

7. JERUSALEM REVISITED

Tertullian's faith seeks something that is not of this world. It seeks a miraculous knowledge of God's will that cannot be achieved in any way other than by means of a divine suspension of the order of nature. This miraculous knowledge finds expression in (i) a brief catechism containing propositions to be believed, which is seen as (ii) making a life of truth-seeking unnecessary or even injurious, and which appears to demand, on Tertullian's account, (iii) the belief in that which is absurd by the standards of human reason.

In my remarks, I have suggested that on all three counts, what the authors of the Hebrew Bible seek is something entirely different. Theirs is a worldview that denies catechism, presenting us instead with Scriptures so variegated and so vast that they leave no alternative—if we are to take them seriously—but to embark on a lifelong search to understand what is in them and what they require of us (and this even before one takes rabbinic literature into account). Moreover, the quest described in the Hebrew Scriptures is precisely the search for "what the world calls wisdom"—for God's word as reported in the Hebrew Bible comes to teach us the truth concerning the things that are of this world.

At the outset, I said I would use these remarks as grounds for a preliminary exploration of the opposition between Jerusalem and Carthage. This goal has led me to focus on certain aspects of the biblical teaching and to neglect others. While expository argument does make appearances in the Bible, the biblical authors use instructional narrative, traditional law, and prophetic vision as the preferred vehicles for conducting their

search for God's wisdom and for presenting the results of this search. There is much to be said about each of these modes of inquiry, and about their relationship to expository argument, but I will have to leave these crucial discussions for another time. Here I will say only a few words about one of these modes in the interests of avoiding unnecessary misunderstanding. I wish to touch upon the place of the law of Moses within the scheme of the biblical search for truth.

There is a powerful impulse within the Western tradition that sees law as standing in opposition to reason, and as an ally of the faith of Carthage. According to this understanding, law requires by its nature an unthinking obedience to authority. It is the laws of Athens, after all, that put Socrates to death. Tertullian, too, speaks of a rule or law of faith when he wishes to say that certain beliefs are to be accepted on authority. And once one has subscribed to this view, the endorsement of the law of Moses by the biblical tradition (and by its rabbinic interpreters) is easily taken to be yet another indication that the Bible demands an obedient faith and rejects reason, the search for truth, and philosophy.

Such an opposition between law and reason is strange, to say the least. It is of course true that the law requires obedience if it is to achieve its aims. And it is also the case that as an instrument of collective judgment, law will always require things that someone thinks are unreasonable. But this is hardly the end of the matter. It is only the beginning. Two important considerations, at least, suggest that law is, or can be, consonant with the search for truth and with the free exercise of reason. The first is that reason, when it is at its best, may itself endorse obedience to the laws, and this even when the laws are not as we would have written them. Socrates presents a version of this argument in the *Crito*. His friends offer to help him escape Athens with his life, but he refuses, and insists on teaching them that reason requires obedience before the laws.⁶⁵ This is no open-and-shut matter: Moses, for one, makes the opposite choice and flees Egypt when Pharaoh seeks his life after he kills the Egyptian.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Socrates' argument is in many respects correct. Reason often brings us to obedience before the law, even where this poses a grave hardship for us. This is because reason admits of ends that are greater than our personal well-being at a given moment.

The second consideration is in a sense even more significant, although it is less frequently discussed. This is the fact that law itself is an *instrument of reason*. It is a tool that the individual uses as a means of confronting present needs with the reasoning that has already been done by others

⁶⁵ Plato, *Crito* 43a–54e.

⁶⁶ Exodus 2:11–15.

in the past. Reason would not require such an instrument if we could somehow found our state and our society anew every day, as Socrates founds a city in speech in a single evening in the *Republic*. But we cannot found our state and our society anew every day. This means that we need a way of conducting a process of reasoning that exceeds the needs of today and even the needs of each generation. The law is the means by which this intergenerational process of reasoning takes place. Indeed, it is doubtful that any other method of intergenerational reasoning is even possible. For the sake of this intergenerational effort, we learn to work hard at understanding the reasoning of the past and to give it a place in our present. To do so is no less important a part of sound reasoning than the discipline of generating original arguments in a manner we flatter ourselves by calling “unassisted.” That the biblical search for truth relies to a significant degree on the interpretation of a tradition of laws is therefore no grounds at all, so far as I am able to see, for declaring an opposition between the thought of the Bible and reason.

These few sentences on the relationship between reason and law serve to emphasize yet again how inadequate is the opposition between “faith” and “reason” as a device for understanding the tradition of inquiry found in Hebrew Scripture. Law is always an intergenerational effort. As such, it is always a form of tradition. But the dichotomy between faith and reason cannot make sense of law any more than it can make sense of a scriptural canon composed over several centuries, or of any other tradition-based form of inquiry. Trading on an impoverished epistemology that is blind to the role played by human collectives in the quest for knowledge in general, and in the Jewish pursuit of God’s wisdom in particular, this false dichotomy threatens to leave us in almost complete ignorance of what Jerusalem is all about.

It bears repeating that Jerusalem’s search for truth is in many ways very different from that of Athens. But Jerusalem is not different from Athens in the way that Tertullian and his followers suggest. The Hebrew Scriptures are not about the question of whether one is “assisted” or not in one’s search for truth. The figures in these texts and the authors who wrote them are troubled by other and, to my mind, far more important things. First and foremost, they struggle with the question of how one is to find that which will stand and that which can be relied upon to benefit mankind in the face of what I’ve called the epistemic jungle—a confused and frightening reality in which such knowledge is chronically distant. They believe that such wisdom can be found in the world, because they believe that God has spoken it. To find it is the difficulty, and the subject of a lifelong quest.

Far from subscribing to the faith of Carthage, what the biblical authors want, then, is precisely “what the world calls wisdom.” In this, Jerusalem is not so terribly far from Athens—and remote indeed from Carthage. The time has come to draw a sharp distinction between Jerusalem and Carthage, so that Jerusalem may begin to speak in its own voice. Only once this has been achieved will comparisons with Athens, Rome, and others become a serious possibility.

The Shalem Center