



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 11 | Number 1

Article 8

1999

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Title Directions That Diverge: “Jerusalem and Athens” Revisited

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Reference *FARMS Review of Books* 11/1 (1999): 27-87.

ISSN 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Abstract Review of *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled* (1991), by Hugh Nibley.

Hugh W. Nibley. *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991. xi + 515 pp., with source and subject indexes. \$21.55.

Reviewed by Louis Midgley

Directions That Diverge: "Jerusalem and Athens" Revisited

There is nothing so painful to anyone as is separation from Athens and one another, for those who have been comrades there.

Gregory of Nazianzus¹

Within the "limits of reason" one can create a science, a sublime ethic, and even a religion; but to find God one must tear oneself away from the seductions of reason with all its physical and moral constraints, and go to another source of truth. In Scripture this source bears the enigmatic name "faith," which is that dimension of thought where truth abandons itself fearlessly and joyously to the entire disposition of the Creator: "Thy will be done!"

Lev Shestov (1866–1938)²

I do not know. That may sound like a profession of ignorance that would constitute my closest possible approach to Socrates, but it is more plausibly understood as an admission of incompetence. Only rarely does

¹ Quoted from Gregory's *Carmina* [Poems] 2.211–64, in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 175.

² Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, trans. Bernard Martin (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1966), 67–68.

incompetence ever stop anybody from anything, and it will not stop me.

Werner J. Dannhauser³

The ten essays by Hugh Nibley included in *The Ancient State* appear to be scholarly treatises on topics like education, or on rhetoric and its corrupting influence on ancient and modern civilization, or on ancient statecraft and its related ideology and supporting rituals, and so forth. These essays are certainly not conventional or even arcane scholarship fashioned for the sake of a struggle for tenure, promotion, and an academic career. The essays assembled in *The Ancient State* are not unlike Nibley's other efforts to explicate Mormon things by means of intellectual history—whatever else they appear to be, they are apologetic “Mormon essays.” From my perspective this is a strength—they are part of Nibley's larger effort to defend the gospel of Jesus Christ against its critics.

Though Nibley occasionally employs both the product and the authority of philosophical inquiry as a tool in defense of divine special revelations and hence as an element in his effort to warrant faith in God as revealed in the scriptures,⁴ his scholarly endeavors constitute intellectual history (which is often coupled to stinging social criticism); they are not genuinely philosophical, since he already begins with the understanding of the objects or contents of faith as revealed by God.

Instead of commenting on the full range of essays found in *The Ancient State*, as tempting as that might be, I will focus exclusively on two essays written in 1963 and published in this book for the first time nearly three decades later. Nibley first set forth his schema in lectures entitled “Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic” (pp. 311–79) delivered on 1, 2, and 3 May 1963

³ Werner J. Dannhauser, “Athens and Jerusalem or Jerusalem and Athens?” in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited*, ed. David Novak (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 156.

⁴ A fine example can be found in Nibley's essay entitled “Goods of First and Second Intent,” in *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 524–53. The title and the structure of Nibley's analysis in this essay are borrowed from Book XII of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and then put to use in explicating and defending a morality grounded in divine special revelations.

at Yale University.⁵ (At approximately the same time he drafted a manuscript entitled “Paths That Stray: Some Notes on Sophic and Mantic,” pp. 380–478). In these essays he depicts what he argues was an old but also continuing struggle between the quest for or a claim to a wisdom available through human reason and a longing for a wisdom that comes from another world.

Nibley compared and contrasted “two basic human attitudes” (p. 315), which he also described as addictions (p. 319), expectations (p. 314), hopes (p. 317), traditions (p. 319), or inclinations (p. 331). He called these attitudes mantic and sophic. The term *mantic*, which will be recognized in the name “praying mantis” (*Mantic religiosa*)—an insect that holds its forelegs in a position suggestive of hands folded in prayer—is a Greek word identifying the prophetic, that is, the words of those claiming to be in various ways the spokesmen for the will of God (*prophētai*). Both mantic and sophic attitudes are, it turns out from Nibley’s perspective, thoroughly religious even when their advocates disdain that label. Nibley found evidence in Greek literature, and especially in the poets, for these two contrasting and competing religious dispositions. He also sketched the presence of sophic and mantic moods in the literature of both classical antiquity and the modern world.

Though Nibley focuses on Greek literature and religiosity, the New Testament also displays something similar to what he describes as contrasting sophic and mantic attitudes. I will demonstrate that the products of these longings and expectations either constitute or flow from the competing claims to wisdom now widely symbolized by Jerusalem and Athens. I will also show that the literature on this confrontation of religious attitudes bolsters and also corrects some of what Nibley has written on these issues.

Foolishness or What?

In the New Testament we find the claim that “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached” concerning Jesus as the Messiah or Christ “to save those who believe,” even though “the world through its wisdom did not know him” (1 Corinthians 1:21 NIV). Many who heard the prophetic message

⁵ The original subtitle for these lectures, “The Confrontation of Greek and Christian Religiosity,” was not included in the published version.

concerning Jesus Christ, of course, rejected it. At least part of the reason for this rejection, according to the Apostle Paul, was that the Greeks turned instead to their own "wisdom" (v. 22).⁶ From this and similar remarks, it appears that at least some of the Greeks seemed to Paul to have been charmed by pagan philosophy, that is, they were enthralled by the wisdom of this world. Paul thus ridiculed a life dedicated to philosophy, one endeavor for which the ancient Greeks are still very much celebrated.

Paul thus insisted on a radical disjunction between "the wisdom of God" made available through Jesus Christ (and supporting special revelations) and the "wisdom" that some of the more sophisticated Greeks were then apparently demanding. But the quest for worldly wisdom, it turns out, constituted a life driven by a noble effort to acquire knowledge of the highest or divine things by reason alone. Something like Paul's radical separation between opposing truth claims was later set forth by the first prominent Latin Christian writer, the remarkable Tertullian (ca. A.D. 160–225),⁷ in a famous enigmatic question: "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?"⁸

It seems that Tertullian read Paul—and I believe correctly—as yearning "to confound even philosophy itself. For (philosophy) it is which is the material of the world's wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and the dispensation of God."⁹ In setting forth his argument, Tertullian pointed to the "unhappy Aristotle

⁶ See I Corinthians 1:17–25 and compare 2:6–16. The closest parallel in the Old Testament to Paul's contrast between the world's wisdom (or philosophy) and divine wisdom manifest in Jesus Christ is found in language in Isaiah which indicates that, when God seeks to "do marvelous things with this people," then "the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning shall be hid" (Isaiah 29:14 RSV). But this passage cannot be read as a criticism of the pursuit of knowledge by unaided human reason, but only as a warning against the employment of something like skill or cunning in governing human affairs apart from genuine obedience to the will of God.

⁷ His full name was Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus.

⁸ *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.9. This essay can be found in English translation as "On Prescription against Heretics," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 246.

⁹ *Ibid.*

... who invented for these men dialectics, the art of building up and pulling down" among those he saw advancing an ultimately and radically corrupting worldly wisdom (or philosophy). But his primary target was the Academy, which was, incidentally, an effort to revive a school originally founded by Plato. Tertullian specifically mentions Platonism and "Plato's school,"¹⁰ which may have been for him either Alexandrian Platonism or the incipient Neoplatonism attributed to Ammonius Saccas,¹¹ who is sometimes thought of as the founder of this school. Be that as it may, Tertullian's position on the danger to Christian faith found in the teachings of Platonism (and certain other philosophical schools) seems clear: "Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!"¹²

My first encounter with Tertullian's stunning contrast between what he considered the wisdom available from God through inspired men—prophetic wisdom—and the teachings of pagan philosophy came when I heard Hugh Nibley read an address entitled "Prophets and Philosophers" over KSL, a Salt Lake City radio station, on 16 May 1954, on what was then the regular 9:00 P.M. Sunday evening LDS radio program.¹³ Nibley quoted passages from Tertullian that illustrated at least some early Christian qualms about philosophy.

Though noting that "the subject of philosophy" was one with which he was "not competent to deal,"¹⁴ Nibley indicated that he

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, 175–235.

¹² Ibid. "What is there, then, about them that is alike, the philosopher and the Christian—the disciple of Hellas and the disciple of Heaven—the dealer in reputation and the dealer in salvation—one occupied with words and one with deeds—one creator of error and its destroyer—friend of error and its foe—the despoiler of truth and its restorer—its robber and its warden?" (Tertullian, *Apology* 46.18).

¹³ See Nibley's "Prophets and Philosophers," which was the tenth in a series of radio addresses initially circulated in pamphlet form under the title *Time Vindicates the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1954), and then published as chapter 5 in *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 35–36, 39; and currently available both in audiotapes from FARMS and also in an expanded edition in the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 3:39–40. Subsequent citations are from the 1987 version.

¹⁴ Nibley, *The World and the Prophets*, 33.

would, instead, report the opinions of some of the earliest Christian writers on the encounter of the faithful with the teachings of pagan philosophers. This then constitutes the content of Nibley's essay on "Prophets and Philosophers," as well as part of additional remarks concerning philosophy found in portions of *The World and the Prophets*.¹⁵

The Famous Question

It turns out that Tertullian's famous enigmatic question is still very much with us.¹⁶ There is a recent, sizeable, and sophisticated literature that attempts in one way or another to deal with it.¹⁷ We

¹⁵ Ibid., 11, 44–62, 71–97, 100–102, 107.

¹⁶ Though some writers would deny this. Some of this literature provides a thorough and carefully documented and hence rather useful account of biblical materials seemingly drawn from or perhaps merely similar to the literary forms and language of pagan philosophical and poetic literature. Abraham J. Malherbe's *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1989) provides a model of careful scholarship on this issue. Malherbe notes that "one could have begun a recitation of denials of philosophic influence [on the New Testament] with Tertullian's question, which calls for the reply that Athens has nothing whatever to do with Jerusalem. Tertullian, of course, was interested in preserving what was distinctive about the Christian faith" (p. 1). Malherbe, unfortunately, does not contrast philosophy, understood as a way of life, with prophetic faith. He therefore brushes aside Tertullian's question on the assumption that it is merely a rhetorical flourish and that, hence, nothing much is behind it. For other similar studies, see Lancelot A. Garrard, *Athens or Jerusalem? A Study in Christian Comprehension* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), or E. G. Welton, *Athens and Jerusalem: An Interpretive Essay on Christianity and Classical Culture* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1987).

¹⁷ If the authors have roots in Roman Catholicism, then what one finds is a concerted effort to justify the large role traditionally occupied by philosophy in medieval Roman Catholic theology or an effort to reach a synthesis between Jerusalem and Athens in which philosophy has a significant place. See, for example, Jack A. Bonsor, *Athens and Jerusalem: The Role of Philosophy in Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), or Stephen R. L. Clark, *From Athens to Jerusalem: The Love of Wisdom and the Love of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984). Jewish authors who have appropriated Athens and Jerusalem as symbols standing for something like reason and revelation (or faith) have sometimes merely described efforts of medieval Jews to find a place within their own faith for at least some of the teachings they found attractive in pagan philosophy. See, for example, Yaacov Shavit, *Athens in Jerusalem: Classical Antiquity and Hellenism in the Making of the Modern Secular Jew*, trans. Chaya Naor and Niki

are certainly entitled to ask: Was Tertullian right when he argued that the claims to wisdom symbolized by Athens and Jerusalem are not equivalent or commensurate? Are they, instead, when properly understood, dissimilar and competitive? And, if Tertullian was in some fundamental way right, how can one justify (or even account for, apart from an apostasy) the appropriation by Christian theologians of the categories and explanations, and not merely some of the vocabulary, of pagan philosophy? And how can one justify the work of those who fashioned the great ecumenical creeds that have subsequently more or less defined God? These creeds employ categories borrowed from or controlled by pagan philosophy. Yet they are found in the more sophisticated versions of orthodox Catholicism and Protestantism to the perhaps surprising inclusion of the Protestant evangelical or fundamentalist faction.

“Jerusalem and Athens” in Recent Jewish Thought

If Nibley has not seen himself as competent to deal with ancient pagan philosophy in more than rhetorical and historical ways, is there someone from whom we might begin to glimpse the intellectual horizon of pagan philosophy, who could also assist us in reflecting upon its possible impact on the life of communities claiming to manifest prophetic faith? I believe there is such a one. I have in mind Leo Strauss (1899–1973), an influential Jewish philosopher whose celebrated lecture entitled “Jerusalem and

Werner (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), or Jacob Neusner, *Jerusalem and Athens: The Congruity of Talmudic and Classical Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). Other Jewish writers have taken seriously the opposition of the two as set forth by Tertullian and have passionately rejected philosophy or the quest for wisdom apart from the divine revelation as found in the Bible. See Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, for an example of this literature. Others stress the tensions as they struggle to find a synthesis between the two. See, for example, Paul Eidelberg, *Jerusalem vs. Athens: In Quest of a General Theory of Existence* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983). Finally, volumes of essays like that edited by Novak, *Leo Strauss and Judaism*, manifest different degrees of anguish over whether to turn (or return) to Jerusalem (and what is believed to be divine revelation) or to continue to grasp Athens (and be satisfied with merely the longings for human wisdom).

Athens" first appeared in 1967. When I discovered this lecture in booklet form,¹⁸ I was fascinated by its somewhat enigmatic contents. Here was an atheist Jew, or so I supposed,¹⁹ deeply involved in explicating and defending ancient philosophy against certain of the excesses of modernity (that is, modern, as opposed to pre-modern, notions of the limits of rationality). And yet he also had much to say about the confrontation of two competing claims to wisdom that he, silently following Tertullian, symbolized as Jerusalem and Athens. He did not, as one might have expected, just assume that even his own brand or understanding of philosophy—which was deeply indebted to, if not identified with, what he believed was ancient philosophy properly understood—necessarily had the final word.

I was led to opine about Strauss and what I could make of his arcane remarks regarding the eventual impact of the quest for knowledge by reason alone on the faith of Jews and hence on their commitment to the Bible and their fidelity to its moral demands.²⁰ Whatever his own personal predilections might have been, Strauss seemed to me to have steadfastly and correctly left open the question of whether a life focused on faithful obedience

¹⁸ Leo Strauss, *Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections* (New York: City College of New York, 1967). This was the inaugural lecture in a series on Judaic affairs honoring Frank Cohen. It is conveniently reprinted in Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 147–73; as well as in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth H. Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 377–405.

¹⁹ There is a complicated and passionate debate among the followers of Leo Strauss on this issue. See, for example, the various essays included in *Leo Strauss's Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement*, ed. Alan Udoff (Boulder, Co.: Rienner, 1991), those in Novak, ed., *Leo Strauss and Judaism*, and some of the essays included in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994). See also the introductions to the two volumes of Strauss essays cited in note 18 above and various essays cited by Kenneth H. Green in his *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 248–64.

²⁰ See Louis Midgley, "The City and Philosophy: Leo Strauss and the Question of God," in *Toward a Humanistic Science of Politics: Essays in Honor of Francis Dunham Wormuth*, ed. Dalmus H. Nelson and Richard L. Sklar (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), 23–50.

to God or a life dedicated to the quest for knowledge by unaided human reason was the proper way to live. He also brushed aside as unworthy choices other ways of living on the grounds that those who followed them were oblivious to the evils that haunt human nature and afflict this world or they were inattentive to the noble possibilities within. And he seems to have insisted, silently echoing Tertullian, that no synthesis was ultimately possible between the claims of Jerusalem and those of Athens.

Quite unlike Nibley, Strauss saw himself as engaged in a radical quest for knowledge by unaided human reason; he was thus a philosopher even or especially when he was engaged in composing histories of ancient or modern philosophy, and also when he was dealing with the claims he symbolized by Jerusalem and Athens. Precisely because of his own commitment to the philosophic life—to the quest for knowledge by reason alone—it is possible to draw upon his account of ancient philosophy with some confidence that his writings can assist us to begin to understand the inner structure and hence charms of that world. Grasping philosophy in its nascent forms may facilitate our own effort to clarify exactly how and why the commitment to the philosophic life may challenge the faith of communities grounded on prophetic truth claims or may corrupt and transform the faith of those who see themselves as guided by the Bible.

Strauss seems not to have mentioned that it was Tertullian who first used the symbols of Jerusalem and Athens to identify competing claims to wisdom, nor did he draw attention to Tertullian's writings.²¹ The reason may have been that he was Jewish and Tertullian was Christian. To me, Strauss seems to have been at least somewhat contemptuous of Christian theologians.²² Why? Because they were not Jewish? There seems to have been a somewhat deeper reason. From his perspective, Christian theologians were

²¹ Werner Dannhauser is the only student of Leo Strauss I have found who even mentions Tertullian as the "origin of . . . 'Athens' and 'Jerusalem' as symbolizing the differences between reason and revelation." Dannhauser, "Athens and Jerusalem or Jerusalem and Athens?" 170 n. 12, citing Tertullian's *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 7, and also Harry A. Wolfson's famous *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 3rd. ed. rev. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 102ff.

²² I either agree with Strauss on this matter or I attribute to him my own bias.

too anxious to draw upon pagan teachings: they rushed into the arms of philosophy, perhaps without knowing what they were doing. They did not comprehend the tensions between the two claims to wisdom. In their understandable desire for the polemical weapons they could borrow from pagan sources and their equally understandable desire to fashion a systematic, rational structure and support for their faith, they either knowingly or perhaps unwittingly ended up corrupting their faith. They also garbled what they borrowed from pagan sources by turning it into a set of dogmas rather than understanding that it is a radical quest for knowledge and hence a way of life rather than a specific teaching or set of finished dogmas.

When Jews like Moses Maimonides (1135–1204)²³ eventually took an interest in pagan philosophy, they never forgot that it was dangerous both to themselves and also to the faith of the community they loved and in which they lived. They often thought that much of what they really believed ought to be concealed from the uninstructed or vulgar. They understood that what they had appropriated from pagan sources was profoundly threatening—at least to the faith of uninstructed believers (that is, to most of those in their own faith communities).

Strauss wrote as if the practice of contrasting Athen's wisdom (understood as ancient pagan philosophy) with Jerusalem's (or divine revelation) was the intellectual property of Jewish writers and hence not Christian at all. What he did not acknowledge publicly was that his own favorite way of contrasting what he saw as the tensions between what appear to be radically competing claims to wisdom had its origin with a remarkable Christian writer.

²³ For a simple but useful account of the dependence of Maimonides on Aristotle, "the only master [in philosophy] he recognized," see Abraham J. Heschel, *Maimonides: A Biography*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 25. For an introduction to Strauss on Maimonides, see his "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 140–84; compare Strauss, "On the Plan of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Harry Austryn Wolfson: Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* (Jerusalem: American Academy of Jewish Research, 1965), 2:775–91. See also Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965). For a useful commentary, see Green's *Jew and Philosopher*.

Is Nibley's sophic, from the perspective provided by the treatment of Jerusalem and Athens by Strauss, just another name for ancient pagan philosophy? I believe that what Nibley calls sophic is what Strauss (and his many disciples) most emphatically associate with philosophy understood in its ancient form. Ancient philosophy is perhaps best known and accessible to us in the popular teachings of various Epicureans and Stoics, and then in the Neoplatonic elements found at the heart of Augustine's highly influential Christian "theology."

Augustine does not seem to have described himself as a theologian, but rather seems to have favored the label *philosopher*. In Books IV and VI of his famous *City of God* he introduces the Christian world to the classification of theology known at least within the Stoic school of philosophy. Following the famous Stoic philosopher Varro, Augustine distinguishes political (or civil) from poetic theology and condemns both as absurd and unseemly. But instead of then introducing a presumably revealed theology, Augustine again follows Varro and describes instead "natural theology," which turns out to be what philosophers, and specifically what he, believed were Plato's views concerning divine things. He obviously understood that natural theology was the work of various philosophers attempting to discover divine things by reason alone. Augustine argued that Plato, as he understood (or, more likely, misunderstood) him, drawing upon Neoplatonic sources for his command of Plato, provided a necessary intellectual grounding for a mature Christian faith. It also seems that Augustine saw Christian faith, when properly understood, as somehow rising above what one might find even in the Neoplatonism with which he was familiar. But one way to read the scriptures was through the lens of Neoplatonism. If we accept Augustine's own account of his conversion to Christianity as set forth in his *Confessions*, the role of Neoplatonism seems to have been crucial in his coming to see that God is incorporeal. This also seems to account for his favorable remarks concerning the Neoplatonist manifestations of natural theology that he sets forth in the *City of God*.

If something like this is true, are we not then, in the final analysis, still forced to deal with the issues raised by Tertullian, only now under a somewhat different set of labels? The efforts of Leo Strauss to sort out and assess the merits of the competing

claims to wisdom symbolized by Jerusalem and Athens are thus, I will strive to demonstrate, potentially useful for Latter-day Saints. But to see exactly why this is so, we must examine Nibley's early essays on the mantic and sophic.

Nibley on "The Confrontation of Greek and Christian Religiosity"

As early as 1954, Nibley argued that "the unique thing about Mormonism is that it is a *nonspeculative* religion in a world of purely speculative religions." From his perspective,

that remarkable characteristic establishes at once the identity or kinship of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with the original, primitive Christian church, which in ancient times also had the unique distinction of being a nonspeculative religion in a world completely "sold" on philosophy.²⁴

In this early distinction between speculative and nonspeculative religions we seem to have access to a key element in what Nibley later claimed is the struggle between religion that is either dominated by sophic or by mantic components. Once such a distinction is clearly in mind, it is possible to begin to trace the dialogue between those alternatives among the ancients and also in the modern world, especially among a cultural Mormon fringe group currently operating on the margins of the Mormon intellectual community.²⁵

As is well-known, Nibley has long been engaged in the corroboration of prophetic wisdom, or of what he also labels

²⁴ Nibley, "Prophets and Philosophers," 33.

²⁵ In a number of essays I have dealt with the appropriation by cultural Mormons of ideologies flowing from Enlightenment skepticism concerning divine special revelations. These folks tend to question or deny the miraculous and hence strive to explain the prophetic truth claims which both ground and form the content of the faith of Latter-day Saints in secular, naturalistic terms. See, for example, Louis Midgley, "Atheists and Cultural Mormons Promote a Naturalistic Humanism," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 229-97; and Louis Midgley, "A Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy Challenges Cultural Mormon Neglect of the Book of Mormon: Some Reflections on the 'Impact of Modernity,'" *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 283-334.

“nonspeculative religion.” As part of the historical clarification and vindication of prophetic religions, he contrasted the claims of the vast array of teachings generated and maintained by the host of often competing philosophers, theologians, mystics, officers, reformers, scholars, and preachers²⁶ with the essentially nonspeculative manifestations of mantic religiosity. The latter rest, among other things, on the attitudes and yearnings of people interested in (or at least open to the possibility of) a wisdom from another world—people who are thus open to divine special revelations.

Nibley can be read as arguing that, by focusing on the distinction between sophic and mantic, we can begin to move beyond the more traditional discussions of such seemingly enduring issues as the confrontation of reason with revelation, or of science with religion. Both of these he pictures as later and confused offspring of an earlier confrontation between two different claims to wisdom, and hence two different types of “religion,” at least when viewed through his sophic-mantic (or philosophic-mantic) lens.

That this is possible can be seen when we sense that the mantic, which is more difficult to identify clearly than the sophic (or philosophic) quest for wisdom, seems most accessible to us when we focus on the desire for prophetic truth claims that are more or less linked to the Bible. (In the case of Latter-day Saints, they are also linked to the Book of Mormon and other revelations.) Similar yearnings are found in some but of course not all expressions of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religiosity. Nibley also sees mantic yearnings at work in much of Greek literature, poetry, and religion, and even standing behind Near Eastern cultures until “around 600 B.C.,” at what he likes to call, appropriating a label from the French scholar Lasaul, “the ‘Axial Period’ of world history.”²⁷ (The phrase is also discussed by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers.)

How does Nibley distinguish mantic yearnings and the resulting manifestations of religiosity from the stress on rational

²⁶ Various chapters in Nibley’s *The World and the Prophets* are devoted to each.

²⁷ Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 239 (originally published in book form in 1967). Nibley seems to hold that civilization as we know it was originally grounded on and expressive of mantic longings.

speculation—on *theoria* (or theory)—that constitutes both the substance and ground of sophic religiosity? In 1967 he briefly alluded to Erwin R. Goodenough's rather offhand reference to a distinction

in Judaism between the "horizontal" and the "vertical" types of religion, that is, between the comfortable and conventional religion of forms and observances as opposed to a religion of revelations, dreams, visions, and constant awareness of the reality of the other world and the poverty of this one.²⁸

Nibley then indicated that he had previously "called this the conflict between the 'sophic' and the 'mantic,' and," he added, "it goes back to the earliest records of Greece and the Levant."²⁹ He identified a quest in ancient Greece for a wisdom through unaided or unassisted human reason that yielded—to use Immanuel Kant's much later formulation—a "religion within the limits of reason alone,"³⁰ which itself called into question and strove to replace the earlier mantic religious substratum. Such essentially religious celebrations of skepticism and rationalism Nibley called sophic. He thus contrasted a "smug 'horizontal religion' with . . . its utter contempt for visionary prophets"³¹ with a longing for a wisdom that comes from or that discloses another world. And he held that one can find this going on in Greece and Egypt, as well as in Palestine. Following the terminology he first introduced in 1963, Nibley thus described a dialectic between the sophic (or philosophic) and a contrasting yearning for the mantic, or a struggle between horizontal and vertical types of religiosity. Are these affirmations, we may ask, equivalent, commensurate, and harmoni-

²⁸ Ibid., 241. Goodenough's remark can be found in his *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Pantheon, 1953–68), 1:17–22; now available in an abridged edition, with a foreword by Jacob Neusner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 20–23.

²⁹ Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 241.

³⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 2nd ed., trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), from Immanuel Kant's *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* (Königsberg: Nicolosian, 1793).

³¹ Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 241.

ous, or are they, if not simply contradictory, at least competitive? He insists that the two are at least competitive, just as Leo Strauss saw tensions and even radical contradictions between what he symbolizes as Jerusalem and Athens.

Wisdom, Wonder, and Wayfaring: Sophic and Mantic Addictions

An important discussion has been taking place both within and outside Latter-day Saint circles on the confrontation of the wisdom sought through unaided human reasoning and the wisdom that has presumably been revealed by God through prophets. If we think of those two claims to wisdom as forming the basic foundations of Western civilization, which I do, then this discussion takes on an added importance. And if one is concerned about the confrontation of Mormon things with modernity, as I am, then taking part in the conversation is crucial, and that necessitates getting clear on the historical background of the discussion, thereby bringing these issues into focus and providing the proper bearings so that we can sort them out.

What Nibley labels as sophic yields an understanding resting entirely on the resources of the human mind, or, more narrowly, it consists of the quest for wisdom through unaided human reason. By contrast mantics long for at least some glimpse of the meaning of the magnificent and also tragic drama within which they tend to see themselves. We should not, however, assume that Nibley has ever been anxious to defend from criticisms all manifestations of mantic longings. Unlike some of his early efforts to vindicate the prophetic, in Nibley's treatment of these longings we see him at work describing both the virtues and vices of the mantic. And he likewise does not shy from noting the virtues of sophic endeavors.

Nibley drew his categories and descriptions from the vocabulary in which such things were discussed by ancient Greeks. That has certain advantages. By so doing, he avoids imposing modern categories upon the past, as would be the case if he had addressed what he calls the "old donnybrook between science and religion" (pp. 380–81). Instead, he borrows ancient categories with which he eventually strives to understand the modern world. He argues, much as Leo Strauss did, that our current way of seeing things is a

confused outgrowth of old, and now half-forgotten, quarrels. His approach requires the reader to acquire a subtle new vocabulary; it also demands that we avoid jumping to conclusions.

Nowadays we like to contrast science and religion, or reason and revelation, or facts with faith. And given the charming ideologies of secular modernity, when such amorphous and yet simple binary sets come to define the alternatives, it is not difficult to imagine which one will have a political or rhetorical advantage. We are, for example, often easily persuaded to see a contest between science and religion, with the word *science* presumably identifying the solid rational position, while religion is reduced to vague feelings, mere sentimentality, or raw emotion, if not to myth, magic, or superstition. Even among Latter-day Saints, some today feel the need for talk about divine things to appear credible or be vindicated in the light of the currently fashionable notions of science. When this is the case, what is labeled *science* clearly tends to call the tune. But the quarrel between science and religion is not what is directly at stake in the confrontation of sophic and mantic attitudes.

Even in *The World and the Prophets*, Nibley did not address exclusively the quarrel between science and religion, though it was mentioned here and there in that book. Instead, he argues that the old donnybrook can be better understood when examined historically, when we know something of its roots and contours over time. When this is done, it turns out that the quarrel is derivative and also confused, at least partly because it turns out to be a by-product of a more fundamental and earlier confrontation between what Nibley labels sophic and mantic.

And it is not that one of these two presumably competing expectations, attitudes, or claims to wisdom is "religious" and the other is not. For it turns out that the choice between sophic and mantic necessarily commences before the grounds for either alternative can be made entirely evident, and hence involves hopes, longings, assumptions, and beliefs. In a broad sense both are thus "religious," and both are expressions of "faith," though with radically different and even contradictory contents. Those whose attitudes can be described as sophic—whose way of life rests entirely on the resources of the unaided human mind, of reason alone, or who may be involved in a quest for knowledge of First

Things by unaided human reason—are “religious,” even when they tend to reject this label.³² It also turns out that both are necessarily articulated, explicated, and defended with words and hence involve arguments. Thus both are at least in that sense rational. It is a serious mistake to see one as rational and the other as irrational, as some have done,³³ for both have elements of what can be called the rational and nonrational.

For there to be genuine faith—a rare thing indeed, according to Nibley—the possibilities of a wisdom from other worlds must be understood unequivocally (or literally); otherwise sophic assumptions dominate. What this means is that much of the world’s pious religiosity, according to Nibley, is not genuinely mantic at all, since it is made to rest on the currently accepted intellectual fashions and involves in one way or another sophisticated equivocations about divine things. It turns out that hostility to even the possibility of wisdom from other worlds fuels one or another of the host of rationalizing naturalistic explanations of mantic longings and also of prophetic truth claims.

These essentially naturalistic explanations are sophic precisely because, among other things, they demand a closed universe of what they see as the natural and hence rule out in advance the possibility of other worlds. They are also sophic because they rely ultimately on reason alone or the unaided resources of the human mind. The post-Enlightenment tendency has been for those representing what they understand as the correct and controlling intellectual currents to find in the science of the day either a surrogate for faith (hence often called “scientism”), or to appeal to the mystique and authority of science. They thereby transform science into a secular religion. But it is hardly irrational or anti-intellectual to avoid such dogmatic scientism.

³² Marxists and some other naturalistic humanists steadfastly reject the label *religion* when it is applied to their own ideology and dogmas. For a criticism of this rhetorical practice, see Midgley, “Atheists and Cultural Mormons,” 246–51.

³³ The other slogan commonly used to gain a rhetorical advantage by those charmed by sophic (or sophistical) claims to wisdom is the charge that the mantic is anti-intellectual. Whenever one sees that charge being directed at another party, one can expect to be treated to an exercise in propaganda and not to carefully worked-out arguments.

Whatever its charms, by itself the sophic is, from Nibley's perspective, ultimately destructive, for it demands magnanimity (*megalopsychia*) and hence breeds what we know as pride.³⁴ And, for the mantic, pride is lethal. From Nibley's perspective, about the only thing in which we can appropriately and genuinely excel is repentance (when that is grounded in trust in divine mercy); everything else is a potential trap capable of decoying us away from divine things and into a world in which "religion" is de-based as it becomes another commodity to be advertised and merchandized.

There have been, of course, according to Nibley, many attempts to find a synthesis or harmonization between the sophic and mantic. That sort of thing has been the business of swarms of popularizing preachers and rationalizing theologians and other fashionable intellectuals. Nibley treats such endeavors with scorn, describing them as sophistical and often merely rhetorical, even when they manifest considerable ingenuity; he strives to demonstrate that they corrupt and weaken what is genuine in both the sophic (or philosophic) and mantic; they tend to blur and obscure the real alternatives. In fact, they both cause and flow from confusion over the real alternatives.

From Nibley's point of view, there are only two ways between which we must choose, and phantasms result from attempts to mix or blend the two or when we do not confront clearly the radical choice we must all face. He therefore distinguishes between the prophetic, oracular, and inspired, on the one side, and essentially naturalistic accounts of "religious" things, on the other. The one attitude is mantic, while the other is sophic. This distinction places theology, traditionally understood as rational speculation about

³⁴ Consider the following: "It is commonly believed that humbleness is a precondition of wisdom. This opinion is rejected by the philosophic tradition going back at least to the Platonic Socrates. Neither Plato nor Aristotle include humbleness among the virtues. True, in the *Apology* (20–23), as in other Platonic dialogues, Socrates readily professes ignorance. But this is not *anava* so much as irony rooted in (restrained) skepticism." And "in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1123b–1124a), *megalopsychia*, translated as "magnanimity" or "pride," is referred to as the adornment of the virtues. The proud or great-souled man is one who thinks himself worthy of great things, especially honor—not out of conceit but from a just estimate of his merit and desserts." Eidelberg, *Jerusalem vs. Athens*, 48–49.

divine things, squarely within the realm of the sophic. And hence Nibley is not interested in doing theology; he abhors theology, whether dogmatic or systematic, including that done by Latter-day Saints.³⁵

Nibley thus describes what he sees as the corruption of the mantic tradition brought on by its marriage to philosophy in the Christian world of Origen, Minucius Felix, Justin Martyr, and especially Augustine.³⁶ The union between Christian faith and pagan philosophy turns out to have been a kind of shotgun wedding.³⁷ Why was faith in Jesus as the Messiah or Christ, when guided and directed by divine revelation, not sufficient? Why was philosophy needed to support faith? Putting the question in a different way, Nibley asks,

why was the marriage with philosophy necessary? Answer: "To overcome the objections of reason to revelation"—that is St. Augustine's famous reconciliation of Classical and Christian learning. But how can you call it reconciliation when it is always the church that gives way? It is always reason that has to be satisfied and

³⁵ I first encountered Nibley's antipathy toward what he called "speculative theology," as opposed to divine revelation or what he called "the apocalyptic," in a lecture he gave on 27 November 1956 entitled "Types or Varieties of Christian Theology," delivered at Orson Spencer Hall, University of Utah. He argued that theologians attempt to feel their way along by turning a little bit of information, some of which is drawn from divine special revelations, into a systematic or scientific comprehension of God. They all end up engaging in the same task, teaching the same things, and using the same or very similar arguments, which they often borrow from pagan philosophers, sometimes without genuinely understanding the medium in which they are busy trafficking. The problem is that information about divine things, even or especially when we take seriously divine revelation, is inadequate for a systematic account of all reality, and hence we end up supplementing and then replacing what has been revealed with speculation grounded in "the unaided powers of the human mind."

³⁶ See Nibley's *The World and the Prophets*, especially the essays entitled "Prophets and Philosophers," 33–43; "The Prophets and the Search for God," 53–62; "St. Augustine and the Great Transition," 80–88; and "A Substitute for Revelation," 89–97.

³⁷ Others have described similar and, from my perspective, equally unfortunate weddings between philosophy and faith that took place within medieval Jewish and Islamic communities. Leo Strauss and some of his disciples have had much to say about these developments.

revelation that must be manipulated in order to give that satisfaction; this is no compromise but complete surrender, by which Theology “becomes the train-bearer of the Old Queen Philosophy.” (p. 367)³⁸

In this and other similar passages, Nibley describes what he believes was the end result of attempts to draw upon the sophic as a way of supporting an original and now sagging mantic tradition, if not to find a place within the sophic for some elements merely drawn from the earlier mantic foundations as recorded in the sacred scriptures. But in such schemata it is always either the grounds or contents of faith that are adjusted to the currently fashionable demands of reason. And when these efforts more or less take hold, the earlier mantic tradition is thereafter seen through a lens provided by the newfangled sophic rationalization of the contents of the scriptures.³⁹

³⁸ Thus Nibley complains about what he sees as unfortunate efforts to reach what he calls an “accommodation” between mantic and sophic (p. 367).

³⁹ Something like this can be seen in the efforts to justify the obvious use by churchmen after the third century of pagan philosophical categories to set forth and defend various understandings of divine things. Subsequently the language and understanding of the resulting theology has provided the lens through which the Bible has been read by those professing the creeds. For an instructive recent example of an effort to read back into the scriptures notions fashioned in the fourth century by uninspired and apostate churchmen, see James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1998). White argues that the study of history can be useful in shedding “much light on the doctrine of the Trinity,” but only if we do not attribute any real authority to it (p. 177). He simply ignores the fact that both theological formulations and creedal statements sporting language about the nature, essence, being, or substance of God (coupled with efforts to distinguish the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by calling them “persons”) were clearly drawn from and deeply impacted by pagan philosophy. For him, those churchmen who fashioned the creeds were merely looking for a more precise language with which to support what they thought were authentic biblical teachings. White then reads back into the Bible his understanding of what was fashioned in the fourth and subsequent centuries as churchmen fought over the proper understanding of the Trinity. He seems unaware that he reads the Bible through the lens of subsequent theological developments and controversies that clearly manifest the influence of sophic pride and nothing of divine inspiration or revelation. Those churchmen who crafted the creeds and those theologians who fashioned explanations of the Trinity were anxious to deny such inspiration. See also White’s recent venture into anti-Mormonism entitled *Is the Mormon My*

In his examination of sophic and mantic, Nibley is certainly not setting forth a distinction that can somehow be transformed into a key to a metaphysics (an understanding of nature or being) that he somehow thinks stands behind true religion; it is precisely that kind of philosophical enterprise that he sees as sophistical, if not genuinely sophic. It is therefore a mistake to understand or reduce what Nibley does with sophic and mantic to the categories derived from or attributed to Greek philosophy. Nibley is not attempting to figure out an ontology or provide a metaphysics. From his perspective, to attempt to do that (and especially for religious purposes), whatever else might be said about it, would constitute a vain and fruitless exercise in sophic pride. It should be remembered that, from Nibley's perspective, genuine manifestations of prophetic religion are embedded in narratives and are essentially practical or moral, and not speculative or theoretical, as such things are understood from within the horizon of ancient Greek philosophy. What God desires from us is faithful response to his message, not clever speculation. He requests a broken heart and contrite spirit, repentance understood as a change of heart, or a turning or returning to him witnessed by our obedience. We are to flee from Babylon and make genuine efforts to build Zion.⁴⁰

In attempting to clarify certain fundamental alternatives by probing a past that was then and there, Nibley calls attention to what he sometimes describes as "the split between rationalists and believers."⁴¹ This split points to or involves a contest over the question of what constitutes the proper or highest way of life—that is, over the proper mode of "religion." In such endeavors, Nibley is not engaged in theology—either systematic, natural, or dogmatic—but in essentially historical explications of meanings and possibilities.

Brother: Discerning the Differences between Mormonism and Christianity (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1997). Mr. White, much like other earlier anti-Mormon luminaries, now sports a newly minted "doctorate" in "theology"—which actually amounts to a certification of his obvious ferocious polemical skill—from the unaccredited Columbia Evangelical Seminary, at which he is also one of the "faculty."

⁴⁰ This can be seen in some of Nibley's more recent work. See, for example, the essays assembled in his *Approaching Zion*.

⁴¹ Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 240.

Such an approach has merit. Other than direct contact with divine things, our understanding of such rests on accounts of God's mighty acts and man's halting responses that are contained in texts. That is, it is found in the written word, which is our tiny window to the past. This helps explain Nibley's concern with what is contained in and can be derived from ancient texts.

Both sophic and mantic involve various longings, hopes, and expectations; they constitute alternative approaches, styles, or stages which even some of the most disparate communities share. Neither sophic nor mantic is a single entity, and hence, when different versions confront each other, they tend to recognize the similarities and the common ground upon which their competing claims are made to rest; they also tend to become petulant toward those who seem to share a similar territory.⁴² Jewish, Islamic, and Christian believers, from Nibley's perspective, constitute in an important and obvious sense a single mantic "People of the Book," despite having sometimes different and even contradictory understandings of the book (or even different books). Whatever the confrontations and quarrels between the adherents of different strands or modes of mantic tradition, the more fundamental contest turns out to be between sophic and mantic, and not the sophistic corruption of both resulting from attempts at a synthesis or blend of the two.

The dialectic between sophic and mantic, though accessible to us through a study of the past, should not be thought of as merely a matter of antiquarian curiosity, for something like it can be seen here and now, even among the Latter-day Saints. For example, the principle behind the writing of some recent Mormon history—

⁴² Much of sectarian anti-Mormonism is grounded in what might be called the narcissism of small differences. Anti-Mormons, precisely because they are anxious to speak for and sell their product to one or another of the competing and contentious brands of nineteenth-century Protestantism, have become aware that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints offers a coherent and attractive alternative to their own ideology. Sectarian anti-Mormons presumptuously arrogate to themselves the role of authoritative gatekeepers of what they imagine has always been Christian orthodoxy. This is possible because they tend to deny that Christianity has a genuine, rich, and diverse history—in which their particular narrowly constricted heresy is but one in a long line of competing efforts to preserve some semblance of the fruit of the prophetic charisms obvious in biblical texts.

which has been described as “Revisionist” (or, more vaguely, as “New Mormon History”)—is that historians ought to strive for neutrality or scientific objectivity, or what is sometimes called balance or detachment, as they deal in “human or naturalistic terms” with the Mormon past.⁴³ What seems to be an essentially sophistic if not genuinely sophic hope is found among those who hold that history and culture can be furthered by the employment of naturalistic explanations of what they label “the Mormon myth.”⁴⁴ In that way some hope that Mormon culture and history can be “humanized” without completely disabling the traditional account of the church’s origin. Of course, those enthralled by such an essentially sophistic agenda like to picture theirs as the genuinely “scientific” attitude, or at least as detached, critical, balanced, neutral, objective, secular, and rational. They may grant that even though full objectivity is impossible, such is still a worthy ideal that can be more or less approximated, for they assume that there are degrees of neutrality or detachment. And they imply that they have these in large measure.

For some with revisionist proclivities, any sign of faith in God may be seen as a corrupting bias. In addition, some historians continue to assume that the truth about what really happened in the past makes itself known, insofar as it can be known, only to the extent that even vestigial elements of faith are shed. In that way the mantic elements of Mormon faith are managed and manipulated. As one writer concluded: “subservience to a particular

⁴³ Leonard J. Arrington, “Scholarly Studies of Mormonism in the Twentieth Century,” *Dialogue* 1/1 (1966): 28. Arrington’s language was then quoted by Moses Rischin, a non-Mormon, in a brief review of essays on the Mormon past that appeared in a popular magazine. See Rischin, “The New Mormon History,” *The American West* 6/2 (March 1969): 49. From this rather casual little review, the expression “New Mormon History” eventually became an ideological bludgeon in the hands of various revisionists and dissidents.

⁴⁴ This language was again introduced by Arrington, who expressed the desire to justify naturalistic explanations of “what may be called ‘the Mormon myth’” or “certain historic themes sacred to the memories of the Latter-day Saints,” which “may not appeal to the rational faculty of the majority as an objective picture of the world about us.” This language is found in the preface to his *Great Basin Kingdom* (1958; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), xi. Arrington reaffirmed his fondness for naturalistic explanations in a book entitled *Mormons and Their Historians* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 131–32.

religion is therefore incompatible with honest inquiry, whether by historians or by anyone else.”⁴⁵

Such approaches seem rhetorical and dogmatic. And from Nibley’s perspective they are also essentially sophistic. Such formulations, graced with the protean expressions *subservience* and *particular religion*, suggest a distinction between servile attention to the special tenets of a particular faith (or religion), presumably including that of the Saints, which is then set over against neutrality, detachment, and objectivity—a kind of presumably rational (and hence sophic) “religion in general.” From such a perspective the trappings of conventional religion are not entirely jettisoned, but properly subordinated to a currently fashionable and regnant scientism.

At the present time it is unfortunately still common for a few secularized historians to praise detachment, and, in the binary opposition thus implied, to eschew attachment to a particular faith. All of this fits rather nicely within what Nibley describes as sophic (or even the sophistic); the end result has been that some writers want to “distinguish studies which tend to be basically ‘faith-promoting’ from those done in ‘secular’ graduate schools which insist upon naturalistic or humanistic description and analysis.”⁴⁶ Given that distinction, it turns out that much of Mormon history has been routinely dismissed by some as “basically faith-promoting.” Historians like Nibley are, of course, apologists in the sense that they both defend the faith and tend to be sympathetic with the mantic tradition. But, if Nibley’s analysis is at all sound, we are all faced with a choice between competing religious faiths, and there is no neutral or higher perspective from which to judge the competing claims. In addition, it turns out that all accounts are “faith-promoting” in the sense that they all must necessarily rest upon or support either one or another of the various sophic or mantic hopes and longings. Or they may exemplify the confusion of the two that Nibley labels the “sophistic junk yard.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ James L. Clayton, “Does History Undermine Faith?” *Sunstone*, March–April 1982, 34.

⁴⁶ Arrington, “Scholarly Studies,” 18 n. 12.

⁴⁷ Nibley, “Three Shrines,” 356. A striking example of such rationalization of divine things is found in the efforts on the fringes of the Mormon intellectual community to understand Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims,

Neither the sophic nor mantic constitutes a single claim to wisdom. For example, philosophers squabble; they are divided into competing schools, brands, or varieties of philosophy. One fashion in philosophy follows and competes with another. To label something sophic, as Nibley does, is not to imply that there is a single ontology or body of knowledge or a single claim to wisdom known by that name, or anything like a single metaphysical stance. Likewise, the longing for a mantic wisdom, presumably flowing from another world, also comes in different and competing shapes and varieties. Unlike the historical arguments found in *The World and the Prophets*, which are intended to vindicate the prophets both ancient and modern, Nibley's arguments on sophic and mantic do not lead to the conclusion that every manifestation of the one or the other is sound or authentic.

Sophic and mantic are both open to excesses, corruption, and distortion. In addition, according to Nibley, even as yearnings, the presence of the one may act as a corrective for the abuses or excesses of the other. Western civilization can be seen as at least partially the product of the confrontation of these two seemingly different and competing claims to wisdom, and hence also with various efforts of the one to challenge or accommodate the claims of the other. In the end, however, instead of calling for a balance between the two or a synthesis, Nibley makes it clear that he sides with the mantic, despite all of its actual or potential abuses. From his perspective there is no genuine middle ground between sophic and mantic, and no higher ground from which it is possible to assess competing claims.

Nibley tends to avoid the designation *sophistic*, and uses, instead, the term *sophic* as his designation for the employment of unaided human reason in the quest for knowledge of highest or First Things. He also tends to skirt the word *philosophic*, though he grants that the word *sophic*, albeit present, was much less common in the ancient Greek world than either *sophistic* or *philosophic*. All three terms are versions of what was called "wisdom." A

including the Book of Mormon, as "the Mormon myth." Acting as clandestine theologians, a few revisionist historians have tried to distinguish actual history (what they assume can be proven to have really happened) from what they see as the encoding of Mormon faith in myth—that is, in so-called "sacred narratives" in which the divine is imagined to be part of the story.

philosopher, from Pythagoras to the present, is a lover (*philos*) of wisdom (*sophia*). By turning his focus on the word *sophic*, rather than on *philosophic*, Nibley avoids having to determine exactly what is going on among those known as philosophers as they attempt to deal with divine things.

He thus skirts the thorny question of whether this or that author involved in the philosophic is what he calls sophic, or whether their stances must ultimately be subsumed under that category. The reason seems to be that he wants to claim Plato, and especially Socrates, as mantic.⁴⁸ That is possible if, among other things, one ignores the host of seemingly ironic statements in Plato's dialogues, as well as their dramatic components and the quarrel Plato sets forth between philosophy and poetry, since it is the poets who are the ones most often driven by mantic longings. Nibley holds that Plato was not being ironic (and hence paraphrastic, if not esoteric) when he put into the mouth of Socrates (or one of the other figures in his philosophic dramas) what appear to be mantic longings, sentiments, and thoughts.

No doubt much evidence of the tension between sophic and mantic can be found in Plato's dialogues. And given the form and style of those dialogues, it has not been easy to determine exactly where Plato (or Socrates) comes down on various issues. Hence, Plato's writings have been open to various different and even competing interpretations, that being one of their charms. Not everyone will agree with Nibley's assessment of Plato. But little if anything is lost of his argument, if it turns out that he is wrong about where exactly Socrates or Plato (or Aristotle) ought to be placed in his mantic-sophic classification schema. What counts is not whether he managed to classify all the players correctly, but whether he managed to identify the broad outlines of a struggle between two radically different and competing claims to wisdom.

Encountering the Alternatives

For a long time, as I have shown, at least since the second century, there has been a tendency to minimize the possibility of a radical disagreement between the Bible and Greek philosophy. There are certain justifications for playing down the possibility of

⁴⁸ Though Nibley sometimes faults Plato.

such a conflict. First of all, much of what has subsequently taken place in the West involves, in one way or another, attempts to reach a synthesis between or harmonize Greek philosophy and the Bible. This is clearly the case with Christianity,⁴⁹ but a similar process can be found in certain Jewish and Islamic circles. The clearest manifestation of an attempted synthesis is to be seen in the flowering of what eventually came to be known as Christian theology. Be that as it may, the story of Christianity cannot be told without dealing with the encounter with and then the appropriation of Greek philosophy, either knowingly or unknowingly, by various zealous and clever churchmen.

But a closer look at the relationship of Greek philosophy and biblical wisdom seems to indicate that, instead of a harmonization, what has taken place is more of an attempt to reach or attain a synthesis. Is this attempt ultimately doomed to failure? Will the confrontation of the two claims to wisdom result in the one finding a home, merely being more or less accommodated, within the larger context of the other? Will one be a guest on terms set by the host? Will both be transformed by attempts to reach a harmonization? Are such attempts at harmonization merely instances of the weakening or corruption of either or both philosophy and the Bible?

While in "Paths That Stray" Nibley provides a number of insightful propositions setting forth certain of the attributes—which are coupled to the subsequent history—of the two traditions, he does not provide a systematic account of exactly what constitutes what he called the sophic (or philosophic) quest for wisdom. For this we can turn to the writings of Leo Strauss.

"Nature" and the Philosophic Quest

We must have a closer look at what Nibley calls the sophic (or what I prefer to call the philosophic) tradition in its original form. Nibley complains about the way in which the sophic attitude looks to nature (and hence to a closed natural world) for the explanation of everything. He specifically targets what the philosophers called

⁴⁹ And it is especially true within the Roman Catholic version of Christianity, elements of which are far more intellectually sophisticated than are most of the manifestations of Protestant faith.

nature (*physis*), claiming that sophics tend to look to it for a full account of reality (see, for example, pp. 338–39). He is right. Ancient philosophy involved, above all else, the attempt to close the door to genuine manifestations of prophetic charisms by fashioning naturalistic explanations intended to account for all of reality. Nibley correctly emphasizes that the first philosophers strove to discover the nature (*physis*) or essence (*ousia*) standing behind the multiplicity of finite things—they were what might be called physical investigators.

“The first philosophers,” according to Leo Strauss, “are called by Aristotle ‘those who discourse on nature’; he distinguishes them from those ‘who discourse on the gods.’ The primary theme of philosophy, then, is ‘nature.’”⁵⁰ But the quest for the *physis* or nature (or essence), or for the form, idea, or substance of a thing is not what we call nature and it is also problematic. Why? Well, for one reason, it turns out that

Nature, however understood, is not known by nature. Nature had to be discovered. The Hebrew Bible, for example, does not have a word for nature. The equivalent in biblical Hebrew of “nature” is something like “way” or “custom.” Prior to the discovery of nature [by the “physical investigators” who stand at the beginning of classical Greek philosophy], men knew that each thing or kind of thing has its “way” or its “custom”—its form of “regular behavior.”⁵¹

Among other things, what this tells us is that philosophy, understood as the inquiry into nature, has a history; it is a unique, temporally located, and hence conditioned intellectual endeavor and is not necessarily coextensive with human thought as such. And this history of the idea of an essential “nature” of things is itself significant.

With the discovery of nature, the Greek notion of the “way” or “custom” of a thing was split “into ‘nature’ (*physis*) on the one hand and ‘convention’ or ‘law’ (*nomos*) on the other.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds., introduction to *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Aristotle could therefore hold that it was natural for human beings to communicate with language,⁵³ but that it was conventional for some to speak Greek and others Egyptian and so forth. Likewise, it is natural for humans to be political, that is, to live in a city or ordered community (*polis*), but the specific laws (*nomoi*) governing any particular regime are conventional, artificial, mere opinion (*doxa*). Hence, they differ from time to time and place to place like all other human conventions. One might say that it is natural for human beings to govern themselves with conventions, for without the powerful effects of moral and legal rules, we would not be genuinely human.

So what is the essence or nature of a thing? *Physis* identified "the character of a thing, or of a kind of thing, the way in which a thing or a kind of thing looks and acts, and the thing, or the kind of thing, is taken not to have been made by gods or men."⁵⁴ So we should not be surprised to learn that "the Greek word for nature (*physis*) means primarily 'growth' and therefore also that into which a thing grows, the term of the growth, the character a thing has when its growth is completed, when it can do what only the fully grown thing of the kind in question can do or do well."⁵⁵ But it should also be obvious that "things like shoes or chairs do not 'grow' but are 'made': they are not 'by nature' but 'by art.'"⁵⁶ Included among the artificial things that it is natural for humans to make or craft by skill (i.e., artifacts) are such things as language and the communities in which we live, and hence also the opinion (*doxa*), including the laws, upon which communities necessarily rest.

But some things, and perhaps even the deepest or highest things, simply are. They do not grow and are not cultivated or cultured; out of some of these things everything else comes. Or, put

⁵³ Hence, man is "by nature" both a rational animal (one capable of communicating with words) and a political animal (living within a structured community). But each language and each regime is conventional.

⁵⁴ Strauss, introduction to *History of Philosophy*, 2. We can, of course, speak of the purpose or end or function (*telos*) of a work of art or a technical thing crafted by man. And this means that an artifact (or thing crafted by human design or skill) can be said to have a nature in the sense of that which it is intended by its artificer to be or do.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

another way, some of these things, understood as nature or natures, ultimately determine, dominate, or control all other things and hence are the First Things. Those who sought the nature of things were therefore especially eager to discover the nature of what they imagined were these highest or First Things. Such things as atoms and the void, fire, air, water, numbers, ideas, a prime mover, and the boundless or infinite have been included by different schools of philosophers among the candidates for the First Things. Other than providing us with a general label for the inquiry into First Things, philosophers have never reached anything like a consensus on these matters.

The quest for a knowledge of the nature of the First Things, beginning with and hence grounded in the inquiry into nature, is commonly known as ontology (*on*, being, and *logos*, inquiry).⁵⁷ The quest for an ontology, that is, for an understanding of being-itself and not simply for an encounter with some existing thing that just happens to be, commencing with a knowledge of the *physis* of finite, existing things and mounting methodically up to an ultimate ground of these natures, constituted what was eventually called the "first part of philosophy." *Logos* (word, inquiry, and hence rationality),⁵⁸ or how one can come to know the nature of things, was known as the "second part of philosophy." Together these two inquiries constituted theory (*theoria*)—that is, speculation about the nature of things. Inevitably questions about the nature of divine things, and how or to what extent their nature can be known, were included within the category of theoretical inquiries by Aristotle.⁵⁹

It seems that with Socrates what was called *praxis* (the practical or moral) came to be known as the "third part of philosophy." These practical or moral inquiries into how one ought to behave and hence into what we easily recognize as ethical and political issues, though introduced by Socrates, constitute major themes in

⁵⁷ Sometimes this inquiry is known as metaphysics. Aristotle wrote a book that carried this name because it followed a book entitled *Physis*, which was an examination of what was thought to be the nature of things. Subsequently the term more or less came to identify inquiries into First Things, that is, what is now rather commonly called "metaphysics."

⁵⁸ *Ratio* (reason) in Latin.

⁵⁹ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1026a, 19–20.

several of Plato's dialogues and are dealt with in much detail by Aristotle (especially in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*). And the subsequent schools of philosophy (Stoic, Epicurean, Academic, and so forth) also focused on ethical or moral and hence political issues.

Socrates is thus said by Plato to have "turned away from the study of the divine or natural things and directed his inquiries entirely to the human things, *i.e.*, the just things, the noble things, and the things good for man."⁶⁰ And why did Socrates turn away from the inquiry into natural or divine things, and take up, in their place, questions about virtue, justice, courage, and so forth? "It seems that Socrates was induced to turn away from the study of the divine or natural things by his piety. The gods do not approve of man's trying to seek out what they do not wish to reveal."⁶¹

If this is true, a genuinely pious man will focus on human things and leave those other and perhaps dangerous matters alone. Socrates is thus known both for his piety and for asking questions that begin with "what is . . .?" These questions still dealt with the nature of things, but more precisely with human things; Socrates thus sought to grasp "the nature of the kind of thing in question, that is, the form or the character of the thing."⁶² And he also sought to relate each thing to the whole in which it is situated. Plato tells us that Socrates was especially concerned about actual human society, but even more about the nature of man, since he assumed that one cannot genuinely understand human things without seeing how individuals might become truly human. And the inquiry into this and related questions began with an examination of the opinion found in actual communities, and hence into moral and legal rules, which were seen by him not as divine or natural imperatives but as human conventions intended to cultivate the noble and just in man, or at least to control the base, degrading, and dehumanizing. This inquiry led directly to a consideration of the question of the status of the rewards and punishments that seem to support the behavior demanded by moral and legal rules and hence also led to questions of what became known as theology.

60 Strauss, "Introduction," 4.

61 *Ibid.*

62 *Ibid.*, 5.

The Situation and Function of "Theology" in the Quest for Wisdom concerning Human Things

The word *theology* (*theologia*) was first introduced into philosophic discourse in Book II of Plato's *Republic*, where it describes models of the "fine tales" that poets, broadly understood, ought to be required to tell children in a well-ordered city.⁶³ The argument goes as follows. Virtue or human excellence (*aretē*) is acquired by education; it must be learned. Virtue cannot exist outside a community, for its higher elements are cultivated or cultured. But children (or childlike adults, that is, most humans for most or at least some of the time) cannot understand the real reasons for habitually acting justly. They must therefore be told stories that link the virtues to stories of proximate and also ultimate divine rewards and punishments. Nothing short of such "fine tales" will have the power to persuade children (and hence also childlike adults) to habitually obey the legal and moral rules and hence to act justly. And a community short on the necessary virtues (or educated habits) will be filled with factions—will be disorderly, ungoverned, and ungovernable.⁶⁴

For Plato, at least, it seems that the necessary "fine tales" about divine rewards and punishments for obeying or disobeying laws are not, strictly speaking, true; they are, instead, "noble lies." The problem is that the poets have often not told the necessary "fine tales." Instead, "with one tongue they all chant that moderation and justice are fair, but hard and full of drudgery, while intemperance and injustice are sweet and easy to acquire, and shameful only by opinion and law."⁶⁵ In doing this the poets

⁶³ See Plato, *Republic* 379a, 376e–382e. For a nice translation, see *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 54–61, for the exchange in which the word *theologia* is introduced into the discussion of "noble lies."

⁶⁴ And a corollary is that a soul not focused on virtue will also be involved in what can be seen as an analogue to the civil war or factional squabbles that afflict all actual (and hence disordered) communities.

⁶⁵ Plato, *Republic* 363e–364a. That is, they are made shameful by opinion (*doxa*) and law (*nomos*). One writer notes that "there can be no doubt that Plato's arguments against the art of poetry are much more likely to sound strange to the reader of today, who is no longer familiar with the role of the poets in Greek education. It was the practice then to justify the whole of one's knowledge

produced a literature and other artifacts that undercut the crucial link between virtue and obedience to moral and legal rules. They thereby overlooked the ultimate and decisive bond between the need for just acts and the deeper pleasure or happiness that presumably attends genuine human excellence or the whole of human virtue; they dismantled the ultimate sanction for law, that is, they questioned divine rewards and punishments.⁶⁶

It is necessary "to supervise the makers of tales; and if they make a fine tale, it must be approved, but if it's not, it must be rejected."⁶⁷ The poets, including even Homer and Hesiod, have "surely composed false tales for human beings."⁶⁸ It is not that they have necessarily told lies. In fact, it might be better if they had, since even the "fine tales" that ought to be told to children (or childlike adults) are not always or necessarily simply true, "though there are true things in them too."⁶⁹ If we are to have virtuous human beings and also a well-ordered city, we will need some model for the songs to be sung, the stories told, the "embroideries woven" for the habituation in virtue that is necessary in a just city (*polis*). And this means that poets "must be compelled to make speeches" that conform to these rational models.⁷⁰ In a well-ordered polity there must be what we would recognize as censorship of the various arts (including music, sculpture, drama, literature, poetry) and hence thereby control of opinion (*doxa*). It is exactly at this point in Plato's *Republic* that the hypothetical model for the speeches that ought to be made by poets to children (and childlike adults) is given the designation "theology."

... by recourse to Homer (just as Christian writers justified their knowledge by recourse to the Bible). In addition, listening to poetry had often completely given way to fantastic allegorization and hairsplitting exegesis, and, given the dominance of the spoken word in the Greek world, a poetic formulation taken out of context as creed or maxim went from the ear to the soul without the poet's overall intention defining and limiting its application." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 47.

⁶⁶ See Plato, *Republic* 364b.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 377b; compare Plato, *Laws* 652a–674c.

⁶⁸ Plato, *Republic* 377d.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 377a.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 378d.

It appears that Plato does not have Socrates (or the Athenian Stranger in his *Laws*) inquire into the nature of divine things as such, though much is said about divine things in these and some of his other dialogues, but only into the question of what ought to be taught and believed about such matters for the sake of the best possible regime. "Theology" is thus political. It is not mantic. It is not what the Gods reveal about themselves through prophets, though it is located in and expressed by what poets say about such matters. In Plato's *Laws* the content of theology is what wise men come to understand should be believed by children (or childlike adults, that is, most people) about divine things. The truth of "theology" is thus seen as a social cement.

If we seek guidance regarding the proper contents of "theology," understood as the "fine tales" that must be told to youths, or to those unable to control their desires, appetites, or passions without the threat of divine rewards and punishments (that is, all those unqualified for the philosophic life, the quest for knowledge of First Things), then we must turn to Book X of Plato's *Laws*.⁷¹ It is there that we find the initial effort to set forth rudiments of what would eventually become the famous proofs for the existence or reality of God. Here we have, set forth for the first time, the God of the philosophers.

And it is at this point that Plato has the characters in his didactic dramas argue that atheists are the mortal enemies of a well-ordered community precisely because they sever the crucial link between the divine and the ultimate sanctions for either obedience or disobedience to the laws.⁷² It is also where prophets—once again those Nibley sees as driven by mantic longings or expectations—are seen as disruptive to the social order. Why? A well-ordered community is threatened by individuals who might suddenly claim that the actual laws governing a given community are in fact an abomination in the sight of God. *Prophētai* (prophets) also ought to be terminated, since their presence could also be disruptive to the proper order of a well-constituted community.

⁷¹ Especially Plato, *Laws* 884a–899e.

⁷² And hence we also have the proposal set forth in Book X of the *Laws*, that in a well-constituted regime some atheists ought to be put to death. Does this, perhaps, explain the fate of Socrates?

So, from the perspective of philosophy, it is useful and perhaps even necessary for wise men to set forth arguments that seem to demonstrate the reality of the divine and also assert a link between the existing laws of a community and the divine as understood by wise men. And here we have, for what appears to be the first time, the inactive, static God of the philosophers being set in place—for essentially political (or ethical) purposes.⁷³ Why? It appears, or it is at least possible, that for Plato the “proofs” for God, though they may contain some truths, are actually noble lies. They appear intended to place powerful controls on the desires of youths and others lacking the habits that constitute the virtues necessary for a well-ordered soul or community. They are designed for those incapable of a life fully controlled by reason.

For Aristotle the inquiry into divine things (that is, into the nature of God) seems to have been subsumed under the “first part of philosophy,” within the life driven by the quest for knowledge of the nature of things and mounting up to the inquiry into First Things.⁷⁴ The way was thus paved for God to become another name for whatever the philosopher considered the First Thing. And it was argued, beginning with Plato, that the essential and “by nature” most noble or highest thing for man is the use of reason in the noble quest for knowledge and wisdom. The highest manifestation of such a virtue is to be found in one genuinely engaged in the quest for virtue, beginning with questions such as “what is virtue?” It therefore should not come as a surprise that Aristotle thought that God is a kind of disembodied philosopher—that God, when properly understood, is pure thought thinking about thought. I suppose that this turns God into something like the ultimate ground of rational discourse.

So there is, at least from the perspective of classical philosophy, an inevitable collision between what every actual community and its poets or prophets happen to teach about divine things, and what ought to be taught and believed in a well-ordered community. There are, therefore, different types or levels of “theology.”

⁷³ And wise men must control the content of theology, since the very idea of genuinely active Gods revealing new things to prophets is potentially threatening to the laws and hence to the order needed in a well-constituted regime.

⁷⁴ At least Aristotle’s argument for a “prime mover” can be found in his *Physics* 6–8, and in his *Metaphysics* XII.

The vulgar or uninstructed must hold to the opinions common to the community in which they find themselves, while philosophers, those pursuing the knowledge of the nature of things, may come to somewhat different and even contradictory opinions. Philosophers also tended to be tolerant of the received opinions about divine things found in more or less stable communities. There were various reasons for this tolerance. One was the threat of persecution for heterodox opinions.

But there is a deeper reason that philosophers like Plato seem to have held that a well-ordered regime actually needs opinions that may not necessarily be simply true. Philosophers, at least in public, tended to respect the theology of the community, or what eventually came to be called political (or civic) theology. In private, however, they engaged in inquiries that at least potentially called into question the opinions that they knew grounded the moral and legal order of their communities.⁷⁵ But whatever their private opinions, their public endeavors consisted of support for notions of divine rewards and punishments, while they also engaged in presumably noble efforts to refine the “theology” of their communities for the sake of these communities.⁷⁶ And this was often done by subtly redefining divine things in an effort to bring the popular beliefs more in line with what they considered the nature of First Things. In this way they sought to provide a more noble conception of divine things by engaging in rational inquiries into the nature of God.

The so-called “proofs” for God—and in this sense a theology resting on an inquiry into the nature of things—is thus not always entirely consistent with the work of poets or even with the accepted opinions on such matters found within any actual community. Those demonstrations of God originally offered by Plato⁷⁷ were set forth as the best efforts of wise old men who were engaged in a journey (or a quest involving an ascent) moving symbolically from low to high things, from human things to di-

⁷⁵ On this matter, see especially Cicero’s famous dialogue entitled *De natura deorum*.

⁷⁶ And also to protect themselves from being forced, like Socrates (presumably for the boldness of his heresies), to drink the hemlock or undergo some similar sanction.

⁷⁷ Plato, *Laws* 885d–891e, 894e–900d.

vine. These old gents are thus pictured as busy during their symbolic ascent setting forth a model and a rational grounding for the laws necessary for a well-ordered *polis*, and also in linking divine rewards and punishments to those laws.

The Appropriation of "Theology" by Christians

Later the variations on these arguments would be identified by the famous Stoic philosopher Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 B.C.) as "natural theology" (*theologia naturalis*)—that is, what philosophers might presumably demonstrate through unaided human reason about divine things—which he then contrasted with the political (or civic) and the poetic theology common to actual human communities. Varro's classification of theology (and also his similar classification of the gods) was later appropriated by Augustine (A.D. 354–430)⁷⁸ and other Christian theologians eager to find a synthesis between the Bible and classical philosophy, or between what Tertullian and others identified as the wisdom of Jerusalem and the wisdom of Athens. How did efforts to generate this synthesis come about?

As we have seen, *theology* (a term from *theos* or god, and *logos* or word, and not found in either ancient or modern scripture) was first employed by Plato to describe the stories appropriately told by poets in a well-ordered city.⁷⁹ As such it constitutes one of the "noble lies." The word *theology* was not crafted to describe the mantic (that is, divine special revelations, or the word of God), but merely human inquiries into the nature of things. Aristotle has theologians offering mythological explanations, while philosophers look to nature for explanations. He also assigned theology, as he understood it, to the first part of philosophy (*theoria*), which looks to nature for an understanding of First Things.⁸⁰ In the Christian tradition, Origen (A.D. 185–254) seems to have been the first to describe the opinions of Christians, rather than those of the pagans, as theology. With Augustine we see the elaboration of a classification scheme in which natural theology (what philosophers, probing nature, say about God) is given

78 In Books IV and VI of Augustine's famous *City of God*.

79 See Plato, *Republic* 379a.

80 See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.1025.

priority over the stories told in the community (civil or political theology) and over what poets have made of those stories (poetic theology).⁸¹

What was understood as theology within the horizon of pagan Greek philosophy, which I have just described, was originally cautiously introduced into Christianity by Origen and more thoroughly but also cautiously by Augustine in his famous *City of God*. Theology thus understood is not biblical.

The fruit of this borrowing from pagan philosophy can be seen in the works of the councils, in the vocabulary of the ecumenical creeds, and especially in the theology that took its cue from the efforts of the three so-called Cappadocians: Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330–79), Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 332–95), and Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329–89), who struggled to devise formulas to explain how the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, though clearly separate beings from the perspective of the New Testament, could still be understood as one God. This was accomplished by invoking categories borrowed from pagan sources and hence foreign to the Bible.⁸²

Among those writing in Greek it became common to refer to God's "being" or "essence" (*ousia*), which was sometimes translated as "substance" (Latin *substantia*). But in order to protect against monarchians (*mono + arche*, literally "one-rule") and Sabellians (or modalists), who stressed that there really was only one God, Christians began to insist on there being what they called three persons (*personae* in Latin, borrowed from the Greek *prosopon*). Tertullian seems to have used this word to identify the mask worn by an actor in a play, but he also insisted, against the modalists, that a "person," at least in Roman law, was a separate, distinct entity and hence capable of owning property (*substantia*). In this way he attempted to avoid having Father, Son, and Holy Spirit simply dissolved into one Being, which is exactly what the modalists were doing.

Augustine uses the label *theology* to identify the received opinions about the gods found in Rome and also what the poets have done with those opinions. He does not, as later Christian writ-

⁸¹ See Augustine, *City of God* IV, VI.

⁸² See Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 28–29, 32–33, 84–85, 86–89, 238–39.

ers have done, connect theology with the divine revelation or with the contents of the scriptures nor does he use the word to identify knowledge gained by reflections on what is found in the scriptures, that is, on the content of faith. Instead, when Augustine borrows from Varro—whom he praises for his considerable understanding and deep learning—what he called “natural theology,” he treated this as something very much like the science (*scientia*) or wisdom (*sapientia*) available to unaided human reason. Christians eventually came to use the term *natural theology* to describe rational, as opposed to mystical, efforts to capture the divine self-understanding—the nature, being, or mind of God that can presumably be known either by analogy from the created world (the so-called teleological and cosmological arguments) or by reflection on being-itself (the ontological arguments).

But this sort of intellectual endeavor has been much more at home among Roman Catholics than among Protestants. And it is customary to find Protestants either uninterested in or actually opposed to “natural theology,” or to theology overtly drawn from a philosophical culture. What many Protestants do not seem to understand is that, whatever their insistence on a so-called dogmatic or “biblical theology” and hence on theology understood as the word of God, they also have inherited an understanding of God that is heavily influenced by the infusion of pagan philosophy into medieval Christian theology, some of which is found in the creeds, while other elements were passed on to them by Augustine.

This is the point made repeatedly by Norman Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie in a recent study, though, of course, they put the best possible face on the facts they set forth. In comparing traditional Roman Catholicism with contemporary evangelical religiosity, these two evangelical theologians advance the thesis that what they label “Augustinianism” was “the major soteriological framework that informed Western Christianity. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants are indebted to the Bishop of Hippo [Augustine].”⁸³ They claim that “both Catholics and orthodox [evangelical?] Protestants have a common creedal and

⁸³ Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995), 431.

Augustinian doctrinal background. Both groups accept the creeds and confessions and councils of the Christian church of the first five centuries. Both claim Augustine as a mentor.”⁸⁴ I certainly agree with the opinions of Geisler and MacKenzie on this matter. One major theme of their arguments is that, whether evangelicals know it or not, they are profoundly indebted to Augustine for much of their theology.

That Protestantism in its various manifestations is grounded in medieval theological speculations turns out to be true despite the common assumption by the more biblically oriented factions of recent Protestantism (that is, the most recent varieties of evangelical, as well as fundamentalist and Pentecostal, religiosity) that their dogmas are drawn only from the Bible. What they do not see is that their way of reading the Bible is heavily influenced by later philosophically grounded theology and is also dependent on the creeds, which borrow much of their crucial terminology from pagan philosophy. Proof of this is found in the obvious fact that portions of evangelical and fundamentalist dogmatic theology rest on notions about divine things that are set forth in language borrowed from a philosophical culture. For example, notions of the Trinity or even salvation “by grace alone” were originally not biblical at all. They were, instead, hammered out by people like Augustine, who were working at least in part within the categories already borrowed from various schools of philosophy.

“A Nonspeculative Religion”

Even when the business of theology is seen as essentially descriptive or apologetic, it is not entirely at home among Latter-day Saints, who have not manifested much sympathy for the notion that divine things can be discovered with the unaided resources of the human mind.⁸⁵ From the perspective of the restored gospel, what can be known about divine things has been, must be, and still can be revealed by God to seers and prophets. Though the beliefs of Latter-day Saints are rationally structured (that is, more or less coherent and ordered), the content of the faith is not the mere

⁸⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁵ Latter-day Saints have occasionally referenced arguments for the reality of God, but they draw nothing significant from them for faith.

fruit of philosophical speculation about the nature of First Things, nor has it been deduced from premises or in some way derived from philosophical or scientific inquiries into the nature of things. Instead, the beliefs of the Saints are derived from or are grounded in divine special revelations or from reflection on such revelations. Hence, portions of the faith of the Saints have been at times set forth in what are considered authoritative statements.

The test of faith for the Saints is thus not the work of a council and is not set forth in a traditional confession, nor is it linked to one or more of the ecumenical creeds. Faith should be—must be—grounded on a witness that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, and it should reflect genuine mantic longings. The presence of the Book of Mormon and other sacred texts, when coupled with the belief in continuing contact between God and his prophets, allows the beliefs of the Saints to be identified and also allows a space for corollaries to these basic beliefs to fit changing circumstances, as God sees fit to reveal his mind and will to his prophets. The Saints may draw on their scriptures and the words of their prophets to meet their spiritual needs, and also on charisms broadly available within their own prophetic community. This leaves little need or even much room for a formal theology, and even less room for systematic treatises intended to fix, order, and settle the understanding of the believers. It does, though, allow an appropriate, subordinate role for reason, broadly understood, as a powerful and necessary tool for attaining coherence and for understanding and also working out the meaning and implications found in the revelations.

It is theology, understood as the attempt to discover the nature of divine things by unaided human reason, that the Saints see as challenging, radically altering, or competing with the original understanding of biblical messages. From a Latter-day Saint perspective, attempts to provide systematic accounts of divine things on the basis of categories drawn from philosophy are seen as indications of apostasy, signs of which are detected when categories and explanations foreign to the scriptures are used to replace (or to corrupt) the revealed content of faith. The Saints look with suspicion on speculation about divine things and hence have not been particularly attracted to proofs about the nature or the reality

of God—that is, to what has been known as natural theology since Augustine borrowed that label from Varro.

Not having what has traditionally been understood as theology, Latter-day Saints instead have sacred texts that describe theophanies and special revelations and contain inspired teachings. These are accompanied by several accounts of God's establishing his covenant people, usually coupled with accounts of a dialectic of obedience and disobedience that followed such events. Such accounts may be said to contain "theology," but not in the sense that it is assumed to be a body of knowledge accessible to human ingenuity rather than the word or will of God as revealed to and through prophets.

The Book of Mormon, along with the account of its coming forth, anchors the faith of Latter-day Saints. It is, however, not theological speculation. Instead, it is a long and tragic history, providing those who now possess it with prophetic warnings about deviations from their own covenants with God. In the Book of Mormon (and other sacred texts) the doctrine of Jesus Christ provides the rock (or foundation) for all other beliefs, practices, and understandings. What the Book of Mormon calls "the doctrine of Jesus Christ" is a singular teaching, having several points, including faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah or Christ, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost.⁸⁶ Those who observe these points of doctrine, which are all set within a cosmic plan of redemption (see, for example, Alma 12:25; 34:9), and who "endure to the end" as they strive to keep the commandments will be saved in the kingdom of God by the merits and mercy of the Holy One of Israel (see 2 Nephi 25:29; 31:20; 3 Nephi 15:9). This understanding of the gospel was known to the original prophets of the Lehi colony (see, for example, 1 Nephi 15:14) and was later taught by Jesus on his visit to his faithful followers (see 3 Nephi 11:30–40; 27:1–22). As both ground and substance of the faith of the Saints, these are simply realities and not matters of conjecture.⁸⁷ It is a mistake to see the basic points of doctrine or what is

⁸⁶ See Noel B. Reynolds, "The True Points of My Doctrine," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 26–56.

⁸⁷ See Louis Midgley, "Prophetic Messages or Dogmatic Theology?" *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 92–113. For an investigation from a Latter-day Saint perspective of the differences between the prophetic

built upon them as theological speculation, just as it is inaccurate to see them as myths or to see Joseph Smith as a mystic.⁸⁸

The content of the faith of Latter-day Saints is thus rooted in events they firmly believe actually happened. Jesus was the literal Son of God, was born in Palestine, was crucified, rose the third day, and appeared to his disciples in both the Old and the New Worlds. Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith and sent his messengers to restore the fulness of his gospel and provide additional sacred texts. Hence, it is in historical work, especially that which records the crucial founding revelations, that both the explication and also the defense of the faith takes place. The Saints can scarcely be said to have much in the way of a dogmatic theology, though they sometimes informally borrow the tendency that was established by Roman Catholic writers as early as the eleventh century to designate the whole of Christian dogma by the label *theology*.

Coming as they did from mostly Protestant sectarian backgrounds, the early Saints were fond of the word *theology*, and it turns up here and there among their writings. And they seemed to desire something like an authoritative compendium of their beliefs. An example of the literature this desire seems to have generated is provided by Parley P. Pratt's *Key to the Science of Theology*, once a popular little book.⁸⁹ Such books seem to have filled a need for an orderly explication of what was believed to have been revealed through Joseph Smith, but they do not approach what is commonly understood as theology in Christian circles and have never enjoyed anything approaching the popularity of the scriptures as authoritative texts in the life of the Saints. And some Saints also seem to have felt a need for something approaching a

and theological (or philosophical) approaches to the possibility and content of faith, see the essays by Nibley in *The World and the Prophets*.

⁸⁸ See Nibley, "Prophets and Mystics," in *The World and the Prophets*, 98–107.

⁸⁹ Parley P. Pratt's *Key to the Science of Theology: A Voice of Warning*, 9th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965) was initially published in 1855. One historian has complained because he assumed that I am interested in defending the contents of this book. See Sterling M. McMurrin, "Toward Intellectual Anarchy," *Dialogue* 26/2 (1993): 210–11. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am no more interested in promoting Pratt's little book than I am in promoting any of McMurrin's own theological speculations.

creed or an orderly and authoritative setting forth of their beliefs. What they managed to produce were initially called "theological lectures," which were later known as *Lectures on Faith*.⁹⁰ Formal theological treatises found in Protestant sectarian circles such as those fashioned by Charles G. Finney (1792–1875) or Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) may have provided models for these materials.⁹¹ Even though the *Lectures on Faith* have been widely available⁹² and attempts to breathe life into them have not entirely disappeared,⁹³ these efforts to set forth LDS beliefs have had little influence on the life of the Saints.

The desire for definitive answers to a host of seemingly interesting or perhaps even vexing questions has been satisfied recently by books written by Elder Bruce R. McConkie.⁹⁴ His writings have obviously not been influenced by a philosophical culture, as is much of Christian theology, and hence represent more nearly an instance of dogmatic rather than speculative, formal, or systematic theology. Such compendia have no official standing among Latter-day Saints and offer only the opinions of their authors.⁹⁵

The desire to have "Mormon" teachings set forth in a seemingly philosophically sophisticated manner has been gratified by Sterling McMurrin, who attempted to show how traditional phi-

⁹⁰ See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Authorship Debate concerning the *Lectures on Faith*: Exhumation and Reburial," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (forthcoming 1999).

⁹¹ See *ibid.*

⁹² They were the original "doctrinal" portion of the Doctrine and Covenants. The sections containing revelations to Joseph Smith and certain other materials, which are currently known as the Doctrine and Covenants, were originally known as the Book of Covenants and Commandments or simply as the Book of Commandments.

⁹³ See, for example, the new version of the *Lectures on Faith* published by Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr., eds., *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1990).

⁹⁴ See especially Bruce R. McConkie's once-popular compendium of opinions on various topics entitled *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966). The first edition of this book became notorious because some of what it contained had to be deleted or altered in the subsequent redaction.

⁹⁵ Books like *Mormon Doctrine* have recently been more or less replaced by the much less dogmatic *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* as a primary source for information on the beliefs, practices, and history of Latter-day Saints.

osophy and Christian theology might be accommodated to what he believed was the ontology (or metaphysics) somehow necessarily inherent in LDS teachings. But his obvious failure to take into account divine special revelations seriously undermined his project, as did his misunderstanding of many LDS beliefs. He discounted the possibility of divine revelation and looked instead for signs of naturalism and humanism in the beliefs of the Saints. McMurrin thought that what he called "Mormon theology" manifests a "humanistic temper." He also liked to refer to the "naturalistic facet of Mormon thought" and the "naturalistic quality of Mormon philosophy."⁹⁶ What McMurrin rather gratuitously attributed to the Saints were some of his own naturalistic biases.

McMurrin, among other things, asserted without argument that the "Mormon religion" manifests "a naturalistic and humanistic quality uncommon in theistic religion."⁹⁷ His use of philosophical, theological, and ideological terminology, though elegant, smacks of what one might find in the glossary of an introductory textbook. Hence, his characterization of what he calls "Mormon theology" and "Mormon religion" simply doesn't make sense, since he employed terms like *naturalism* and *humanism* in their most ordinary meaning. "It is," he opined, "perhaps not entirely inaccurate to describe Mormonism as a kind of naturalistic, humanistic theism."⁹⁸ In making such assertions, he never once gave even a hint that he was engaged in shrewd terminological legerdemain by means of which he had radically redefined his terminology. Instead, he read into the faith of the Saints some of the slogans that defined his own ideology.⁹⁹ His views remain incomprehensible to most Latter-day Saints, though at times they seem to draw attention from those not familiar with Mormon

⁹⁶ Sterling M. McMurrin, foreword to *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 2–3. He did not sense that the adjective contradicts the noun when he referred to "Mormon philosophy"—and for exactly the same reason that Leo Strauss argued that there can be no such thing as a "Jewish philosophy," though there can be cultural Jews who are also philosophers.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁹ For a detailed examination of McMurrin's rather banal "naturalistic humanism," see Midgley, "A Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy," 289–305, 317–30.

things. They thereby divert attention to matters of speculative theology and to the ideological labeling that often takes the place of genuine philosophy—and hence away from historical matters and the crucial prophetic claims upon which the faith rests.¹⁰⁰

Certain elements of McMurrin's stance, not always fully understood, have been appropriated by a few cultural Mormon critics eager to show that there has been a radical "reconstruction of Mormon doctrine" as it has allegedly shifted from a pessimistic orthodoxy to a presumably more fashionably optimistic liberalism and then back toward an even more dreadful, pessimistic neo-orthodoxy. Offended by what they perceive as the pessimistic account of man found in LDS scripture, since the sacred texts obviously take sin and the need for a redemption seriously, a few "liberal" critics have striven to find grounds for denying the necessity of an atoning sacrifice by Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰¹ The literature containing such arguments is not well-known among Latter-day Saints generally and has had virtually no impact on the life of believers. Instead, the influential scholarly works among Latter-day Saints tend to be either historical or exegetical, though these too have no official standing. But these attempts to link Mormon beliefs to the vocabulary of Protestant liberalism are marginal even within the Latter-day Saint intellectual community.

Is an Accommodation Possible between Jerusalem and Athens?

According to Strauss, some hold that what he considered the two crucial "roots of the Western world," which he symbolized

¹⁰⁰ McMurrin's attention to the actual faith of Latter-day Saints was marginal and hence flawed. He actually boasted that he had never read the entire Book of Mormon. See Sterling M. McMurrin and L. Jackson Newell, *Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 114.

¹⁰¹ For the single most outlandish example of such an attempt to argue that "traditional Mormonism," understood through the lens provided by Sterling McMurrin, had no need for an atonement or redemption from sin by Jesus Christ, since it advanced a "liberal" view of man, see O. Kendall White Jr., *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987). For a detailed criticism of White's argument and an account of his dependence on his own understanding of McMurrin's religious sympathies and ideology, see Midgley, "A Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy," 285–87, 289–316, 321–34.

by Jerusalem and Athens, are incompatible. They contend that a harmonization of the Bible and Greek philosophy is ultimately simply impossible, precisely because

each of these two roots of the Western world sets forth one thing as the one thing needful, and the one thing needful proclaimed by the Bible is incompatible, as it is understood by the Bible, with the one thing needful proclaimed by Greek philosophy, as it is understood by Greek philosophy.¹⁰²

Strauss argued that "the one thing needful according to Greek philosophy," from within the horizon of that cultural perspective, "is the life of autonomous understanding,"¹⁰³ or the quest for a knowledge of First Things accessible by reason alone. Philosophy thus understood was not a set of dogmas, but a way of life. On the other hand, from the perspective of the Bible, the one thing needful is "the life of obedient love."¹⁰⁴ Hence, the tension between what is symbolized by Jerusalem and Athens turns out to be a radical quarrel between two contrasting and competing ways of life.

Strauss argued that this apparent "radical disagreement" between the Bible and Greek philosophy

today is frequently played down, and this playing down has a certain superficial justification, for the whole history of the West presents itself at first glance as an attempt to harmonize, or to synthesize, the Bible and Greek philosophy.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² The language is from Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?" which can be found in both *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss: Essays and Lectures by Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 246; and *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 104. Subsequent citations of Strauss, "Progress or Return?" will list the page number from *Rebirth* first and that of *Jewish Philosophy* second.

¹⁰³ Strauss, "Progress or Return?" 246; 104.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 245; 104.

Strauss also argued that all efforts to reach a synthesis or harmonization of the Bible and Greek philosophy are necessarily "doomed to failure. . . . [For] a closer study shows that what happened and has been happening in the West for many centuries is not a harmonization but an attempt at harmonization."¹⁰⁶ At this point in his study, we see Strauss offering an argument that supports the general thesis advanced by Nibley for distinguishing between sophic and mantic traditions.

Even if we admit that in the final analysis it is impossible to harmonize the Bible and Greek philosophy, one need not necessarily argue that it is impossible to find a way of accommodating either the Bible to philosophy or philosophy to the Bible. Perhaps a place within the one, a lodging or home—an accommodation in that sense—can be found for the other, even if no real synthesis or harmonization is possible. Accommodations between philosophy and the Bible might be possible, even when a harmonization is not, precisely because, according to Strauss, "Greek philosophy can *use* obedient love in a subservient function, and the Bible can *use* philosophy as a handmaid; but what is so used in each case rebels against such use, and therefore the conflict is really a radical one."¹⁰⁷ In other words, reason may and even must be placed in the service of divine special revelations. In that case, reason would no longer stand alone or be strictly unaided. Instead, reason would then be aided or directed by faith, and hence controlled by its presuppositions. And faith, from the biblical perspective, is not dependent on unaided human reason but on something transcendent—the mighty acts of God in human affairs. That much at least can be seen, if not in the Apostle Paul, at least in Tertullian, who clearly drew on the forms and some of the content of pagan culture to support the faith as he understood it.

But is there still not a tension between the two even when the one has been made subordinate or subservient to the other? Does not every attempt at finding an accommodation between philosophy and the Bible open the possibility of the underground resis-

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 246; 104. One wonders why Strauss describes such an attempt at a subordination of the one element to the other as a synthesis (or harmonization), rather than as an accommodation in which a place is found within the one or the other according to either explicit or implicit rules of subordination.

tance and rebellion of the one against the claims of the other? Would not an accommodation open the possibility of subtle transformations in one or both of the parties? If we grant that there is a real or at least a potential tension between the claims of Greek philosophy and the Bible and if the two ways of life are ultimately incompatible when radicalized, then is an attempt at an accommodation either necessary or desirable?

Put another way: are there areas of agreement between the Bible and Greek philosophy that make possible (or even necessary) some effort at reaching a kind of accommodation between the two, or that encourage efforts at accommodation from within the horizon of either of the two claims to wisdom? What exactly might be an area of agreement between Greek philosophy and the Bible, other than their opposition to certain elements of what is now commonly called modernity?¹⁰⁸ This seemed to Strauss (and also to Nibley) to be a rather fruitful avenue to explore.

The Third Part of Philosophy and Biblical Morality

It may not be entirely misleading to say that the Bible and Greek philosophy agree on morality on many, if not all practical matters (if not on theoretical ones). But this statement is vague. More specifically, they appear to agree on several matters, including the importance of morality and even concerning some of the formal "content of morality, and regarding its ultimate insufficiency."¹⁰⁹ But are such areas of agreement sufficient to allow either Greek philosophy or the Bible to subordinate the one to the other? They seem, for instance, to differ concerning what "supplements or completes morality."¹¹⁰ In order to begin to answer that question, we must take notice of the disagreements between the two that have made Strauss and Nibley, each coming from a different perspective, see them in radical disharmony, whatever the obvious areas of agreement.

Though both Greek philosophy and the Bible appear implicitly to reject the leading assumptions behind the understanding of divine things common to various stands of modernity, they also

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 246; 105.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

disagree on at least the following: (1) the place of theoretical (or speculative) matters and (2) practical (or moral) matters, specifically concerning the basis or grounds of morality.

Some, of course, may wish to claim that Greek philosophy and the Bible disagree entirely on morality.¹¹¹ Whatever else might be said about such a stance, it is certainly an exaggeration. Moving further from the surface, some may wish to assert that there is a radical opposition between biblical and philosophic morality because they find passages here and there that seem to manifest plain differences. They may find evidence for the radical opposition of biblical morality to that found in Greek philosophy because of what they see as advocacy or permissiveness concerning homosexuality or pederasty among the Greeks. But some statements in Plato's dialogues seem to support the Mosaic teaching on those matters.¹¹² And it appears to have been "as obvious to Aristotle as it was to Moses that murder, theft, adultery, etc., are unqualifiedly bad."¹¹³ And both seem to agree, according to Strauss, that the framework of morality is the family, since both see the family as the cell of society.¹¹⁴

The Bible and Greek philosophy can be seen as agreeing in assigning a very high place to what might be called justice, rather than to courage. At least, both turn away somewhat from courage toward justice as the higher or controlling virtue or moral requirement. And both seem to mean by justice something occasioned by obedience to law.¹¹⁵ They both see law as consisting of rules—both moral and civil, both religious and secular—to invoke the modern terminology on such matters. Both see that, for the community to prosper, full obedience to the law is required. Strauss points out that in the language of the Old Testament it is the Torah that provides the guidance for the whole of life, for it is the "tree of life for those who cling to it to them that lay hold upon her" (Proverbs 3:18, as cited by Strauss), while in Plato we find language indicating that "the law effects the blessedness of

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² In this regard, Strauss cites Plato's *Laws* 835c, at *ibid.*, 246–47; 105.

¹¹³ Strauss, "Progress or Return?" 247; 105.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ See *ibid.* 247; 106.

those who obey it.”¹¹⁶ Law is also seen as comprehensive both for the Greek philosophers and in the Bible. Only within a community regulated by law is it possible to be human, according to Aristotle. Similarly, for the Jew, what Moses delivered from God—the Torah—is light and life, and for the Christian, the one who descended from the Father as the Christ is the new Moses, and hence the new lawgiver. Put another way, the gospel or doctrine of Jesus Christ is the way, truth, light, and life.

When we look deeper into either the content or the ground of morality, we begin to see differences—some of which are radical—between Greek philosophy and the Bible. Some language in Plato’s *Laws* (Book X) about divine retribution reminds one of similar language in the Bible, where it is clear that disobedience to divine commandments provokes divine retribution. For the Bible, the rule of law is at the same time the rule of God, since it is commanded by God. So it appears, at least on the surface, that the Bible and Greek philosophy agree on certain practical (or moral) matters, specifically on the place each assigns to notions of justice and the connection between justice and obedience to laws, and even in part on the character of law. They even agree on the importance of belief in divine retribution, if not entirely on the fact of divine retribution. They also seem to agree, to some extent at least, concerning the problem posed by the misery of the just and the prospering of the wicked. Plato, it will be recalled, mentions in the second book of the *Republic* the problem of the just man who suffers the fate of the unjust, and the unjust man who seems to prosper. Such observations remind one of certain biblical language (for example, the book of Job or Isaiah 53:7).¹¹⁷ And the *Republic* ends with what seems like a restoration of prosperity to the just, as the book of Job ends with a restoration of what he had temporarily lost.¹¹⁸

If we assume that justice, from the perspective of Greek philosophy, has something to do with obedience to laws that are

¹¹⁶ Plato, *Laws* 718b. See Strauss, “Progress or Return?” 247; 106.

¹¹⁷ Compare Strauss, “Progress or Return?” 248; 106.

¹¹⁸ Incidentally, this problem was of such proportions that it led Immanuel Kant to argue for immortality, freedom, and God (and also for progress in human history) as necessary postulates of the practical reason, even though he held that pure reason offered no grounds to support such notions.

believed to be divine commands or to have been derived from divine law, we find what appears to be a common ground between the Bible and Greek philosophy. But this common ground, upon closer inspection, seems problematic. Each seems to solve the problem of the status of what is commonly believed to be divine law in a different way.

I have mentioned the place of justice in the Bible and Greek philosophy. If we are interested in getting clear on the root of the difference between the two truth claims, this may be a good place to focus attention. If we assume that Aristotle's *Ethics* is "the most perfect, or certainly the most accessible, presentation of philosophic ethics," then we will immediately notice that Aristotle not only insists on justice and obedience to law, but that he also has a large place for noble pride or magnanimity.¹¹⁹ It appears that, for Aristotle, in some crucial ways justice and magnanimity comprise all other virtues. Justice "comprises all other virtues" because it relates to actions between human beings and thus forms the summit of civic virtue.¹²⁰ But then magnanimity or pride comprises the intellectual virtues because Aristotle seems to believe that it is proper for a genuinely wise man to claim great honors because he justly deserves those honors. Such a notion is totally alien to the Bible.¹²¹ Why? From the perspective of the Bible, obedience to God's will involves lowering oneself in fear and trembling in an act of humility, without which obedience to the law is of no avail. Finally, the biblical insistence on humility, coupled to an intense opposition to pride or arrogance, "excludes magnanimity in the Greek sense."¹²²

Language in the Bible seems to insist on man's duties to the poor, a point Nibley is noted for emphasizing,¹²³ which seems to be a rejection of the Greek idea of a gentleman, even though it is true that philosophers were not vulgar worshipers of wealth. Socrates is pictured as living in something approaching poverty, and Aristotle's *Ethics* contains some interesting things about

¹¹⁹ See Strauss, "Progress or Return?" 248; 107.

¹²⁰ See *ibid.*

¹²¹ See *ibid.* 248-49; 107.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 249; 107.

¹²³ See, for example, Hugh W. Nibley, *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989).

greed. Strauss notes that Socrates is said to have wondered why we can say that a horse is good without having money, but a man cannot be called good without wealth.¹²⁴ On the other hand, Plato suggests that health, beauty, and wealth form the foundation for human if not divine goods.¹²⁵

According to Strauss, "the Bible . . . uses poor and pious or just as synonymous terms."¹²⁶ And those who do not care for the poor are warned that they will lift up their eyes from hell. Hence, "compared with the Bible, Greek philosophy is heartless in this as well as in other respects."¹²⁷ Why? Strauss argued that the reason is that "magnanimity presupposes a man's conviction of his own worth. It presupposes that man is capable of being virtuous, thanks to his own efforts."¹²⁸ Such noble pride was thought to be derived from the recognition of one's own superiority in reason and hence in human wisdom. But the Bible will have nothing of that, for merit is always made dependent on divine mercy.

Shame, from the perspective of Greek philosophy, appears to be appropriate only to youths who have not genuinely attained virtue or who lack a genuine love of noble things, but not for old men who have attained ethical maturity. A consciousness of human failings is inappropriate in those who have been habituated to avoid wrong in the first place. But, of course, Greek philosophers differed over whether any human being can ever really become fully virtuous or fully wise. If some deny the possibility (for example, Plato in his account of Socrates), they replace the self-satisfaction or self-admiration—the magnanimity or pride—of the virtuous man with the subtle self-congratulation of the one moving toward virtue or deeply concerned with the whole of virtue, which is seen as itself the highest possible virtue.¹²⁹

The Bible and Greek philosophy thus also seem to differ over the question of guilt. Guilt seems to be the guiding theme of tragedy. And Plato seems to expel tragedy from the best city. The philosopher, the best of men, is a comic and not a tragic figure.

124 See Strauss, "Progress or Return?" 249; 107.

125 See Plato, *Laws* 661a–662c.

126 Strauss, "Progress or Return?" 249; 107.

127 *Ibid.*

128 *Ibid.*

129 See *ibid.*, 249–50; 107.

Tragedy is thus replaced by choruses praising the virtues and hence those genuinely virtuous. The reason for this is that tragedy is for the multitude and its purpose is to purge both pity and fear from the city.¹³⁰

But fear and pity both seem to be passions associated with guilt. If I genuinely feel guilty, I may perhaps have some pity for those I have harmed as I failed to obey the laws. And then I may also even begin to fear divine retribution. God, king, and judge are thus objects of fear. God, the father of all, makes men brothers and thus hallows pity. But Greek philosophy seems to want to avoid such a thing, viewing it as excessively and even unnecessarily morbid. Greek philosophy does not seem especially interested in the ruthless examination of intentions. That sort of thing is stressed, on the other hand, in the biblical demand for purity of heart. "Know thyself" means, for the philosopher, to know one's nature, what it means to be human, to know one's place in the larger pattern of nature, to examine one's prejudices—*not* to search one's heart and come away guilty and hence humiliated and with a crushed or broken heart. All of that is biblical language and quite unlike what is found in Greek philosophy. Such a stance as that held by Greek philosophy can be maintained only if one assumes that God is not really concerned with man's goodness or if man's goodness is assumed to be entirely man's own affair.¹³¹

What all this means is that "the Bible and Greek philosophy agree . . . as to the importance of morality or justice" and the resulting order they generate. They even concur, to an extent, on the formal content of morality, on the place of law in ordering the community and individual souls, "and as to the insufficiency of morality."¹³² "But they disagree as to what completes morality,"¹³³ and also on the grounds of morality.

For Greek philosophy it is understanding or contemplation—rationality or the fruit of reason—that completes morality. Strauss conceded that this obviously tends "to weaken the majesty of the moral demands, whereas humility, a sense of guilt, repentance, and faith in divine mercy, which complete morality ac-

¹³⁰ See *ibid.*, 250; 108.

¹³¹ See *ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

ording to the Bible, necessarily strengthen the majesty of the moral demands."¹³⁴ What this means is that, according to Strauss, the life of philosophy, from the perspective of the Greeks, "is essentially a transsocial or asocial possibility, whereas obedience and faith are essentially related to the community of the faithful."¹³⁵ Biblically, by contrast, there can be no genuine obedience and faith without a community guided by divine law and living in the hope of divine mercy.¹³⁶

Finally, Plato can be read as holding that "evil will never cease on earth, whereas according to the Bible the end of days will bring perfect redemption."¹³⁷ The force of the moral demand is thus weakened in philosophy because it is not backed up with divine promises. This is one reason why hope is enshrined as a Christian virtue by Paul and others and is associated with faith and love. These three stand outside the philosophic catalogue of the virtues. According to Strauss, "the philosopher lives in a state above fear and trembling as well as above hope."¹³⁸ The ultimate goal of a life lived with an understanding of the nature of things is tranquility and apathy. But nothing like that is possible from the perspective of the Bible.

Likewise the philosopher finds the beginning of wisdom in wonder—in a sense of wonder specifically concerning the nature of the First Things. On the other hand, "Biblical man lives in fear and trembling as well as in hope" grounded on the promises of a merciful and just God. Philosophers thus seem to have a sense of serenity. Notice how Xenophon (in *On Tyranny*) tries playfully to convince a tyrant who had committed many "murders and other crimes that he would have derived greater pleasure if he had been more reasonable" and moderate.¹³⁹ Strauss contrasts this story

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 250–51; 109.

¹³⁶ As Strauss notes, Yehuda Halevi, expressing the verdict of medieval Judaism, asserted that "the wisdom of the Greeks has most beautiful blossoms, but no fruits." For Halevi, the term *fruits* refers to actions and deeds, and not mere words. See *ibid.* 251; 109.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 251; 109.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 251; 109–10.

with the account of Nathan's rebuke of King David "for having committed one act of murder and one act of adultery."¹⁴⁰

Now it is true that there is much talk of divine things in Greek philosophy. And it is sometimes said that the gods can do anything. But why? Because they are thought to know the nature of things? What this implies is that they are subordinate to something exterior or that they are somehow models of the philosophic life cast in mythological form—and that something exterior is also approachable by man through his reason. Hence the philosopher is a kind of divine man or one worthy of being called a god. In Greek thought we seem to find in one form or another an impersonal or natural necessity higher than any personal being. I must apologize for such language, for it obviously caters to the current sense of what constitutes a person, which is somewhat confused if not misleading. In the Bible the one who rules in the heavens is what we would now call a "person." Why is this so? Part of the reason is that one of the things that distinguishes Greek philosophy from the Bible is that ancient Greek philosophy is possible precisely because of the discovery or invention of the idea of nature, an idea for which there is no Hebrew equivalent. Instead, there is the notion of the way (*derekh* in Hebrew).¹⁴¹ Philosophy is thus rooted in the quest for knowledge of First Things as that can be found by investigating (with unaided human reason) what the Greeks and those who follow in their footsteps knew as nature, or as the natures of things. From the biblical perspective there is only the way or custom of a people—the statutes and the law which is binding on them because of the covenant that God has made with them. That covenant proffers to them both blessings for their faithfulness and cursings when they falter. Accordingly, they live with an awareness of the threat of divine retribution.

Some Tentative Conclusions

Nibley, of course, is not the first or the only one to notice something like the quarrel between sophic and mantic dispositions. His general theme, as I believe I have demonstrated, has drawn considerable attention from Leo Strauss and others influ-

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 253; 111.

enced by him. Sophic and mantic dispositions, from his perspective, ground what others have described in metaphorical language as a confrontation between Jerusalem and Athens. But we have also noted that this confrontation was alive even within Greek culture and was identified in Plato's dialogues as a quarrel between philosophy and poetry. In addition, these Straussians tend to see the atheism in ancient philosophy as much less blatant than in modernity. Ancient atheists were not, as are modern atheists, bold and adventuresome. Why? They believed that the discussion of divine things is an important beginning element in the quest for knowledge of First Things. And they also believed that those incapable of knowledge must live by opinion, hence they respected the beliefs of the communities in which they found themselves. What may tempt us now to conclude that certain ancient philosophers were partial to or even toyed with mantic things is that they were shy and retiring in their atheism.

Some have seen in the pantheism of Stoic thought a ringing affirmation of the divine, though hardly one congenial with or resting upon mantic notions or otherwise touching the passions of believers. But Stoic pantheism is more nearly a form of sentimental atheism couched in language congenial to the uninstructed. The closest thing to a conspicuous atheism among ancient philosophers is found in Epicurean thought, and even there some provision, at least nominally, was made for the gods.¹⁴² One of the reasons for a lack of candor by ancient philosophers about divine things may have been the threat of persecution from believers. But the deeper and hence real reason for the cautious treatment of divine things by Greek philosophers, when compared with the moderns, would seem to be that the ancients did not discount the political utility or social significance of faith. Therefore they made room for the mantic in some entirely subordinate role. In Plato's case, it was in providing edifying tales of divine retribution to support the laws of a city. But, from the perspective of the believer, attempts to reduce God to a useful social convention

¹⁴² See especially the didactic poem by Lucretius entitled *De rerum natura*, where the gods are placed in the empty space between the worlds and where reality is reduced entirely to atoms and the void. Whatever their status, the Epicurean gods seem totally uninterested in human matters and, for that matter, incapable of rewarding or punishing human actions.

must be considered as blasphemous as attempts to deny the reality of divine things.

When confronted with complex and subtle argumentation about divine things by ancient philosophers, it would seem worthwhile to be at least a little skeptical of what is being said. After all, it is those same writers who fasten upon us what we know as natural theology—that is, what some philosophers think they can discover by unaided human reason about God. Such an enterprise may appropriately be symbolized as the wisdom of Athens in contrast to that of Jerusalem, or as distinct from what Nibley sees as authentic mantic longings.

Leo Strauss, a secularized Jew whose own way of life seems to have involved the quest for knowledge of First Things by unaided human reason, argued that philosophy, which term once described such a radical and uncompromising quest for demonstrable knowledge, had a powerful competitor in the claim to wisdom that was believed to have been revealed by God to prophets. Their wisdom was not merely the product of unaided human reason,¹⁴³ and hence was ultimately not believed to have been a human manufacture or merely a human discovery.¹⁴⁴

Of course, even among philosophers there were and still are vast differences over the question of what exactly constitutes the wisdom available to unaided human reason. The philosophic way of life, for which the metaphor Athens seems appropriate, is characterized by the assumption that knowledge of First Things or of the highest things can be attained, or is available to the extent that such things are possible, solely through human reason. Athens thus symbolizes a quest for knowledge of First Things and not necessarily the possession of such knowledge; it is a way of life that is thought to be the highest, most excellent, or virtuous. On the other hand, the wisdom of Jerusalem is believed to have its origin with God and is known only because and to the extent that it has been revealed to and through prophets.

As useful as the Jerusalem-Athens distinction may be, that way of setting the matter out also has the tendency to lead to the con-

¹⁴³ See Leo Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," *L'Homme* 21/1 (January–March 1981): 5–20; reprinted in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 359–76.

¹⁴⁴ See Strauss, "Progress or Return?" 227–70, 281.

clusion that the actual Athens of antiquity housed only those who sought for knowledge of First Things solely through the resources of the human mind, and that Jerusalem only made a place for those who followed the prophets and divine revelation. Nibley strives to show that in antiquity something like those two competing claims to wisdom were found among the Greeks, and not just among those peoples with biblical roots. And the actual Jerusalem was, according to Jesus, worthy of divine cursing.

And, we might add, something like that ancient religious struggle can also be seen taking place wherever secular views are being pushed by dissidents on the fringes of the church. It occurs, for example, here and there in the pages of *Sunstone* and *Dialogue*, or in the secular ideology at work in much of what gets published by Signature Press, or when the claims of the restored gospel are reduced to mere sentimentalities or to the slogans of advertising copy.

In the prophetic tradition, the giving of reasons is necessarily subordinated to explicating and defending a wisdom that the believers trust comes from deity. By contrast, in its more radical or purer and original articulations, the philosophic quest looked only to the resources of the human mind. The *sophistic* is Nibley's name for the clumsy effort to harmonize the two. And *modernity* is the label Strauss used to identify the profound transformation of the philosophical quest into a system or even an ideology that presumably makes irrelevant the longing for genuine answers to what Nibley calls the "Terrible Questions."

Contrary to what some critics have claimed,¹⁴⁵ Nibley has not been busy providing proofs for the prophetic—he has always been within the mantic tradition. His has always been a modest effort fully within the province of the historian. On the other hand, those anxious to advance a knowledge set within the sophistic tradition would have us believe that science, or at least competent scholarship, as such matters are currently understood, is entirely their business, and that they have all the answers. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nibley has striven to show that, by providing the plot, the prophetic yields a plausible alternative to

¹⁴⁵ For example, see the remarks about Nibley (and others) by Marvin S. Hill in his "The 'New Mormon History' Reassessed in Light of Recent Books on Joseph Smith and Mormon Origins," *Dialogue* 21/3 (1988): 118–19.

secular, naturalistic explanations. He has done this with historical arguments, even though secularized historians may not recognize them as such or appreciate them when they begin to see what he is doing. From the point of view of the prophetic, plausibility is about as much as is possible. But it is all that is really necessary for faith. Proofs turn out to be a chimera that those enthralled with sophic pride assume is both necessary and possible.

There is still a possibility for what can be called an accommodation, though not a harmonization, of at least some of the fruit of human reason with divine special revelations as set out in the scriptures. But this kind of accommodation can only flourish on terms laid out from the perspective of faith. It will be corrupting of faith if some specific school or brand of philosophy begins to call the tune.

The problem for many of those who believe that they possess a wisdom found in the Bible has been that there really are many interpretations and hence many ways of understanding divine things as they are disclosed in that text. What this means is that any particular faith, if it is in any way grounded in the scriptures, will find itself confronted by other competing brands of faith also claiming roots in mantic longings, which also make similar appeals to the Bible. And every manifestation of mantic longing will also face sophic skepticism concerning prophetic truth claims.

How can one account for the diversity of religious claims presumably resting on an original mantic foundation? From the perspective of ancient Greek philosophy, it was precisely the existence of many laws (and lawgivers) and also many different gods that made the quest for knowledge by unaided human reason a search for that which stands beneath (or beyond) the opinions, customs, laws, and ways of any actual people.

There is neither a higher ground from which one can adjudicate the conflicting affirmations of philosophy, nor a presuppositionless way to assess the different claims made by those with differing understandings of the Bible. One obvious problem for those who focus their mantic longings exclusively on the Bible is that they deny to themselves (and hence also to others) even the possibility that what they presumably admire in the Bible can be a possibility in their own lives. This is especially true of certain recent evangelical or fundamentalist factions of Protestants who in-

sist on the Bible alone. In place of divine special revelations, which they flatly deny are possible outside the Bible, they tend to stress the necessity of an emotional experience of regeneration and in some instances encourage highly emotional expressions of piety. And they also read the Bible through a lens provided for them by theologians dependent upon sophic categories and explanations.

Whether one embraces one of the fashions of recent philosophy or some version of faith in God will ultimately rest on a moral choice and therefore on an act of faith. Why? As Strauss has shown, neither claim can be made entirely evident.¹⁴⁶ Since we all must begin to act before we can begin to know in any full sense, we necessarily all live by some faith, even when we dogmatically deny that this is what we are doing. We should not be ashamed of our faith. Nor should we hide from ourselves and others that our choices are ultimately a way of life and hence are moral and not ever entirely or genuinely theoretical. I prefer what is symbolized by Jerusalem, with its mantic mood and tradition, and with its prophetic faith. I strive to put my trust in God. I seek to learn from what I believe are divine revelations precisely because these offer hope, while the philosophic quest for wisdom—unless its useful moral elements are strictly subordinated to faith in another world and hence to a wisdom from the heavens that is not merely a human invention—ends with the grave.

¹⁴⁶ See Leo Strauss, "Preface to Spinoza's *Critique of Religion*," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 170–73. A slightly different version of this essay can be found in Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, 254–57; the original version was also published under the title "Preface to the English xTranslation," in Strauss's *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 28–31. For my use of this enigmatic but insightful essay, see Midgley, "The City and Philosophy," 42–46.