H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Haim O. Rechnitzer. *Prophecy and the Perfect Political Order: The Political Theology of Leo Strauss.* In Hebrew. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2012. 319 pp. $30.28 (cloth), ISBN 978-965-536-074-5.

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Published on H-Judaic (September, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman

Between Political Philosophy and Political Theology

The thought of Leo Strauss, widely regarded as one of the most important political philosophers of the twentieth century, is little known in Israel. This reason alone makes Haim Rechnitzer's book on Strauss important. Together with recent Hebrew translations of some of Strauss's essential writing, it raises the hope that Strauss's thought will become part of Israeli public discussion. This dialogue includes the theological-political problem that Rechnitzer examines in his book.

The theological-political problem is at the center of Rechnitzer's interpretation of Strauss. It is, for Rechnitzer, "the foundation stone and basis of his [Strauss's] studies and thought" (p. 15).[1] In his analysis of this problem, Rechnitzer follows some of the most prominent Strauss scholars, most notably, Heinrich Meier (*Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem* [2006]). In this sense, Rechnitzer's contribution lies not so much in the identification of the problem and its importance in Strauss's thought, as in the balanced and thoughtful discussion that he presents, which fortunately lacks the ideological and sectarian tones that too often accompany Strauss scholarship.

The theological-political problem, as Rechnitzer succinctly puts it, "arises in the encounter of two radical claims: theology's claim in the name of godly revelation to give political law … and against it–the claim of philosophy to establish political law based on human reason alone." The symbol of the theological claim is Jerusalem; the symbol of the philosophical claim is Athens. These two cities are "the roots that have nurtured and built Western culture since its cradle" (p. 27). Throughout his book, Rechnitzer analyzes the way Strauss attempted to revive this tension through his innovative interpretations of various political thinkers.

In the first chapter, Rechnitzer deals with Strauss's critique of Carl Schmitt. Schmitt, as is well known, was a fierce critic of liberalism. Strauss agreed with Schmitt's criticism of the shallowness of liberalism and liberal culture: a mass culture that revolved around hedonism, the satisfaction of private material interests and indifference to basic value questions of human existence. But he criticized Schmitt for *not going far enough*, namely, for not presenting any positive content for politics, beyond his famous analysis of the friend-enemy distinction. In Strauss's view, Schmitt arrived at a nihilism that lay in his inability to step beyond liberal assumptions. Rechnitzer clarifies here Strauss's own testimony that his critique of Schmitt moved him to turn to premodern thinkers, and to reexamine the alternative to liberalism that their thought presented. What occupied Strauss from that point on, writes Rechnitzer, was the "alternative for modern liberal thought, an alternative that does not lead to tyranny on the one hand and nihilism on the other" (p. 80). Thomas Hobbes still struggled with pre-liberal and premodern ideas and assumptions, and so, in contrast to later modern liberal thought, he preserved the original urgency of the theological-political problem. This is why Strauss turned to a more thorough investigation of Hobbes's philosophy, which Rechnitzer takes up in the second chapter.

In his studies of Hobbes, Strauss pointed to the essential difference between the Hobbesian and the medieval conceptions of natural right and natural law. While medieval thought started from a natural law that was

perceived as objective, part of the order of the world, Hobbes started from a subjective natural right, which was grounded in human will. He presented a transition from the state of nature to the political community, which was artificial; namely, this political society was a *human*, *rational* creation. Modern thought from Hobbes on, in other words, took its stand on the theological-political problem by embracing a seemingly rational direction: it collapsed the tension between reason and revelation by choosing reason alone. But Strauss showed this decision to be in fact arbitrary, unjustified by any rational argument. This kind of rationalism, according to Strauss, was always, and still is, irrational rationalism. Strauss confronted this rationalism with another kind of rationalism–that of medieval philosophers, in particular Maimonides.

In the third chapter, Rechnitzer discusses the way Strauss contrasted these two kinds of rationalism and their attitude toward the theological-political problem. Strauss had no doubt as to the superiority of what he called "medieval enlightenment" over modern enlightenment, and his purpose was to recover the former position and defend it against the latter, through an interpretation of Maimonides and his model of prophecy. Prophecy, indeed, is a major theme in Rechnitzer's interpretation of Strauss. Medieval philosophy takes for granted the authority of the law, as it was given to the community by the prophet, and it acts within its limits. According to Strauss (following Maimonides), the prophet was distinguished from the philosopher by the power of his imagination. The prophet's unique imaginative capacity brought him closer to godly truth, since through it the prophet was capable of seeing the abstract godly forms in a more direct way, which was superior to the practice of the philosopher, who had to use "material" intellectual mediation. This unique ability (when the prophet–who was graced with the capacity of speaking to the masses in a way that they were able to comprehend–gave it an intellectual, material, and particular form) was what allowed him to be the founder of a political community whose end was the advancement of human perfectibility. This superiority of the prophet obliged the philosopher to obey the law he gave, while the philosopher himself, in his search for the godly truth which was abstract in nature, could, indeed must, interpret the scriptures with the parables and metaphors that they necessarily contained when they were directed to the simple minds of the masses.

When the intellectual insights to which philosophy reaches conflict with the common understanding of the law and scriptures, philosophy has to turn to an esoteric style of writing, which is aimed for the few who can understand how these insights actually fit well with the law even when they contradict the literal understanding of the scriptures. In writing esoterically, philosophy protects both itself (against persecution based on misunderstanding and the hostility of the masses to unconventional opinions) and society (which is based on the common understanding of the law and obedience to it, and might be endangered by an understanding of philosophical insights that might lead to an abandonment of the law). To these two "protective" reasons for esoteric writing, which are usually emphasized in the scholarly literature on Strauss, Rechnitzer adds an additional limit that Strauss only hinted at: the necessary nature of the exploration of matters that in principle cannot be reasoned about adequately by the human mind (for example, the nature of the universe), and which the philosopher can discuss only by parables and riddles, namely, by esoteric writing.

The fourth and fifth chapters are dedicated to Rechnitzer's main innovation in his interpretation of Strauss, and it relates directly to prophecy. As Rechnitzer convincingly argues, Strauss's analysis of the tension between Jerusalem and Athens was not aimed at the harmonization or overcoming of this tension. For Strauss, Jerusalem and Athens were "contrary elements that should be retained within a nurturing and reviving tension," and the tension Strauss sought to revive was aimed "against the attempt of modern enlightenment to evade the element of 'Jerusalem' and to stand the West on one foot" (p. 183). That is why Strauss turned to medieval rationalism, which contained both sides of the tension. But here Rechnitzer moves on to argue that Strauss "points … to a direction of coupling Maimonides's conception of prophecy … with a postmodern framework to which [Friedrich] Nietzsche's philosophy points. He prepares the ground for this direction, but does not act within it. This is the mission of the philosophers of the future" (p. 186). Later on in his book, Rechnitzer clarifies how this "mission" relates to the theological-political problem: "Strauss points at a different and higher plain from which it is possible to reflect on the antagonism between 'Jerusalem' and 'Athens.' It is not the plane of a philosopher or theologian, but rather a prophetic one, or in Nietzsche's terms–the plane of the 'superman' or the 'philosopher of the future.'… From Strauss's words about Nietzsche it can be concluded that 'the philosophers of the future' will combine the two cities–'Jerusalem' and 'Athens'–on the highest level possible" (pp. 280-281).

This is certainly a novel and surprising reading of Strauss. I am not sure I agree with Rechnitzer's conclusion, but, if he is correct, his interpretation has significant and troubling implications with regard to our understanding of Strauss.

The capacity for prophecy, we should recall, is what makes a person qualified to be a founder and ruler of a political community. If this capacity, however humanly understood, is still, or will be in the future, possible–as Rechnitzer suggests Strauss believed and prepared the way for–then we must consider Strauss not only as a strikingly elitist political thinker, as he certainly was, but also as one who tried to prepare the way for the "rule of the wise"; that is, the way from a democratic-liberal government to some kind of a trans-modern philosopher-king form of government. In other words, we must accept Shadia B. Druri's (and others') interpretation of Strauss (which Rechnitzer rejects), as esoterically professing a move away from liberal democracy; rather than understanding Strauss as an immoral Machiavellian, as Druri does, we find ourselves with a peculiar kind of a Jewish Nietzschian, who hopes for the breakup of modern liberal culture and politics, and takes part in undermining it through his intellectual interventions.[2] This, of course, is not how Rechnitzer reads Strauss, but these are the obvious implications of his interpretation. Although there seems to be some basis for reading Strauss as following this authoritarian path, as Druri and others have shown, I, for one, do not believe this is where Strauss actually stood.

In any case, however one estimates the implications of Rechtnizer's interpretation of Strauss, it is certainly an innovative and thoughtful one. In my opinion, it constitutes an important contribution to Strauss scholarship, and it should be of interest to everyone who would like to familiarize themselves with the thought of Strauss and its relevance to our contemporary world.

Note

[1]. All translations are my own.

[2]. Shadia B. Drury, "Leo Strauss's Classic Natural Right Teaching," *Political Theory* 15, no. 3 (August 1987): 299-315, 311.

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Citation: Shmuel Lederman. Review of Rechnitzer, Haim O., *Prophecy and the Perfect Political Order: The Political Theology of Leo Strauss.* H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

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