

LEO STRAUSS AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN JUDAISM AND THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL PROBLEM

Abstract

This article explores the problem of Judaism in the oeuvre of Leo Strauss (1899-1973) and particularly in his 1962 conference at the University of Chicago delivered under the title of “Why We Remain Jews”. On one hand, Strauss presents the problem of Jewish assimilation in the light of the tension between Judaism as Revelation and philosophy as a reason-founded discipline. On the other hand, this polarity receives a new interpretation when Strauss reads Jewish history as a theologico-political problem. Strauss’s position is determined by his readings of Arabic medieval philosophy as well as by his acceptance of a post-messianic interpretation of Jewish eschatology. Finally, the text presents the hypothesis about the existence of a debate between Strauss’s view of Jewish history and Carl Schmitt’s conception of the biblical *katéchon* as the political element that gives sense to Western universal history.

Keywords: Judaism, political theology, Leo Strauss, redemption, Carl Schmitt

When we are led to consider Leo Strauss’s oeuvre, an impression arises that, regarding the so-called “Jewish question”, he has expressed himself through the precautions dictated by his eminent “art of writing”.² More often than not, his most challenging positions about Judaism are to be found by way of reading between the lines in his texts. We cannot consider, in this article, the enormous amount of texts that Strauss devoted to both Jewish thinkers and Jewish themes.³ Instead, we are going to follow a different path: we will take into consideration for our analysis a special text where Strauss tried to define the specificity of Judaism and we will proceed to place this text within a thread of other textual traditions in order to interpret the philosopher’s statements. It is our hypothesis that Strauss’s conception of Judaism accounts for an unspoken context that we will try to throw some light on.

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2 Some essential features of this art are studied by Janssens David, “Fishing for Philosophers: Strauss’s Restatement on the Art of Writing”, in: Major Rafael (ed.), *Leo Strauss’s Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading ‘What is Political Philosophy?’*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013, pp. 173- 190.

3 Cf. Smith Steven, *Reading Leo Strauss. Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006, pp. 23-86.

In fact, we believe that in the sequence of arguments and in the inflexions of what is implicitly hinted at all along the text that we are going to take into examination, we will be able to show that Leo Strauss has situated his comprehension of Judaism in the matrix of a peculiar eschatological conception that has informed, at the same time, his analyses concerning the theologico-political problem in Medieval and Modern Jewish thought. Heinrich Meier has stated "that the theologico-political problem lies at the centre of Strauss's political philosophy, the controversy shapes the confrontation with all the great themes of Strauss's oeuvre, ranging from the dialogue between the ancients and the moderns via philosophy as a way of life and the exoteric-esoteric art of writing to the critique of historicism".⁴ Our inquiry will try to demonstrate that the theologico-political problem is determined by an underlying eschatological impulse of an unique kind that is essential for Strauss's conception about Judaism and Christianity.

On February 4th, 1962, Leo Strauss delivered a lecture at the University of Chicago entitled "Why We Remain Jews"⁵ that will be the starting point and focus of our interpretation of the eschatological component in his political philosophy. This nuance in Strauss's thought is even more important if we take into account the fact that he declared, at the beginning of his conference, that his speciality as a scholar was that of social science rather than divinity. But if we read Strauss through the prism of his "art of writing", we can conclude that maybe divinity hides a mystery that reveals itself essential for the comprehension of Judaism as a social phenomenon.

The point of departure of his musings derives from Heinrich Heine who once wrote about Judaism not as a religion but as "that dark misfortune (*das dunkle Weh*)".⁶ This statement implies, according to Strauss, the following conclusion: "let's get rid of Judaism as fast as we can and as painlessly as we can".⁷ The technical word for this process is that of "assimilation". Even if it was possible during other historical times, like the Middle Ages or the Reformation, the conversion to Christianity in order to cease to be a Jew, this option was always incomplete or improper. The extreme case of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 showed that, for the *conversos* that remained in Spain, this form of assimilation was always unconvincing: "many Christians thought that these converts were not sincere believers in Christianity, but simply had preferred their earthly fortunes to their faith".⁸

The consequence of that suspicion led the authorities to make what Strauss

4 Meier Heinrich, *Leo Strauss and the theologico-political problem*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 4.

5 Strauss Leo, "Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?" in: Id. *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity. Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1997, pp. 311-356.

6 Heine Heinrich, "Das neue Israelitische Hospital zu Hamburg" in: Id. *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, vol. 2: *Neue Gedichte*, Hoffmann und Campe, Hamburg, 1983, pp. 117-118. The poem was written in 1844.

7 Strauss, Leo, *op. cit.* p. 313.

8 *Ibid.* p. 314.

considers an extralegal but not illegal choice: a distinction was then established between the “old” Christians and the “new” Christians and the converts were considered Spaniards of impure blood. The implication of this social phenomenon was that “the Jews who had converted to Christianity were forced to remain Jews, in a manner”.⁹ As we can see, Strauss thinks that the conversion processes were never successful inasmuch as the same societies that proposed those religion transformations generated very powerful mechanisms destined to isolate a remnant of the ancient identity that was never integrated. The converts, in that sense, were always considered as crypto-Jewish.

This scenario has considerably changed within the context of modern secular societies. A liberal society is an “areligious” society, that is to say, a society beyond the difference between Judaism and Christianity. According to Strauss, this means that “in the liberal society there is necessarily a private sphere with which the state’s legislation must not interfere. It is an essential element of this liberal society, with its distinction between the public and the private, that religion as a particular religion, not as a general religion, is private”.¹⁰ However, the practice of the private religion fosters what is generally known as discrimination phenomena within the liberal societies. This particular feature of secular society gives birth, according to Strauss, to the so-called “Jewish problem”.

The techniques applied by different individuals belonging to the Jewish religion to avoid discrimination consist of mixed marriages, changes of name or childless marriages. But, as in the cases of conversions of the past, the discriminations cannot be completely overthrown. It is noteworthy that Strauss stood against the legal prohibition of “discrimination” because it would mean “the abolition of the private sphere, the denial of the difference between the state and society, in a word, the destruction of liberal society”.¹¹ Strauss argues that the abolition of the private sphere would lead to the destruction of liberal society and this catastrophe, in turn, would allow the instalment of anti-Jewish regimes, as it was the case with Soviet Russia or the Nazi Germany.

If assimilation without leaving a trace is impossible and discrimination cannot (and should not) be abolished, a conclusion must be drawn: it is impossible not to remain a Jew. As Strauss puts it: “there is no solution to the Jewish problem. The expectation of such a solution is due to the premise that every problem can be solved”.¹² But, of course, this is an unsolvable problem. Notwithstanding, there is a third possible attempt: the assimilation as a nation. It was the path followed by the state of Israel and it was a result from the demand of self-determination that coincided with the demand for a Jewish state.

Political Zionism took charge of this task and, while admitting that he was

9 *Ibid.*, p. 314.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 314.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 315.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

part of a Zionist student organization in his youth, Strauss thinks that “political Zionism” is also imperfect due to two main reasons. The first one is that it is impossible, for geopolitical and territorial issues, to settle all Jews in a very small country. The second one concerns the fact that political Zionism led to cultural Zionism and this displacement implies to take a stance regarding the definition of the Jewish culture. But, for Strauss, the substance of Judaism is not culture but divine revelation: “if we look, however, at what this means in specific terms, we see that the rock bottom of any Jewish culture is the Bible, the Talmud, and the Midrash. And if you take these things with a minimum of respect or seriousness, you must say that they were not meant to be products of the Jewish mind. They were meant to be ultimately ‘from Heaven’”.¹³ In other words, if the essence of Judaism is the divine revelation, that necessarily means that Judaism cannot be understood primordially as a culture.

From this assertion derives a consequence that is not made explicit by Strauss. From the moment that Judaism must be understood as a religion established as the outcome of a divine revelation, it is a necessary corollary to consider this same religion, more exactly, as a political theology. If this is true, the eschatological perspective that, more often than not, is intertwined with the notion of political theology, cannot be left aside. As we shall see, Strauss was well aware of this situation even though he skewed the topic to arrive to a surprising conclusion regarding the very nature of Judaism. In fact, Strauss mentions the historical problem that divided Jewish from Christians: “the Christian assertion that the redeemer has come was always countered by our ancestors with the assertion that the redeemer has not come”. But this religious difference must be enunciated using the traditional name given to this dilemma (a name that Strauss is extremely cautious to pronounce): messianism.

The coming of the Messiah is a theologico-political problem and that is the reason why Strauss is able to affirm that “the justification of Judaism in its fight with Christianity was supplied by the Crusades”.¹⁴ The Hebrew records provide full evidence of the persecutions that the Jewish people suffered under the First Crusade and to substantiate his position, Strauss cites Yitzhak F. Baer’s *Galut*.¹⁵ But underlying this historical war, there was another institutional problem that was expressed by the fact that the great anti-Jewish body during the late Antiquity and the Middle Ages was the Christian republic. But, once again, the theologico-political problem omitted by Strauss on the surface of this conference (although we assume that he was surreptitiously¹⁶ pointing at this esoteric core of the mat-

13 *Ibid.*, p. 319.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 322.

15 The sources cited by Strauss correspond to Baer Yitzhak, *Galut*, translated by Robert Warshow, Schocken, New York, 1947, pp. 24-25. It is now very relevant to also refer to Baer Yitzhak, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 2 volumes, Varda Books, Skokie (Illinois), 2002.

16 We use “esoterism” in the sense attributed to the notion by Strauss himself. Cf. Strauss Leo, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1952, pp. 22-37.

ter) is the messianic character of the Christian Church that was built against the Jewish conception of the eschatological times. At this point, our hypothesis is that Strauss was establishing a secret and polemical dialogue regarding some forms of the Christian political theology.

In fact, the episode of the Pentecost that is mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles* represents the end of the Hebrew as the sacred language of the Apostles and the beginning of the Christian preaching outside the Jewish world. It is precisely in this event that the Church finds its birthplace. The expansion of the New Testament required a new communitarian and administrative structure made of a different theologico-political concept that led, in the end, to the founding of the Church as a way of managing the primitive messianic charisma in early Christianity. In this scenario, however, the Church supersedes the second coming of the Messiah announced in the Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic texts and an explanation was provided by the Church Fathers to the fact that messianic Kingdom was replaced by a theologico-political institution.

The doctrine that became both historically and politically decisive was the one proposed by Paul of Tarsus in the *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians*: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for [that day shall not come,] except there come a falling away first, and that man of anomy be revealed, the son of perdition who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth (*to katéchon*) that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of anomy doth already work: only he who now letteth [will let,] until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming".¹⁷

Since the beginning of Christianity the question about the identity of the *katéchon* announced in this text was essential given that it was supposed to explain the delay in the second coming of the Messiah and the end of time. It is our hypothesis that Strauss had a radically different conception of the theologico-political problem than the one advanced by the renowned catholic jurist Carl Schmitt whose relationships with the Nazi regime are still a subject of controversial scholarly debate.¹⁸

According to Schmitt the notion of "*katéchon*" means the historical force that is capable of holding up the coming of the Antichrist and end of the present aeon. For that reason, "the Empire of the Christian Middle Ages subsisted while

17 2 *Thessalonians* 2, 3-8 (edition used: *The Holy Bible. The King James Version*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 683). The translation has been slightly modified in attention to the original Greek text. About this text and the concept of *katéchon*, cf. Rigaux Béda, *Saint Paul: les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, Duculot-Gabalda, Paris, 1956, pp. 259-280.

18 Cf. Dotti Jorge, "¿Quién mató al Leviatán? Schmitt intérprete de Hobbes en el contexto del nacionalsocialismo", *Deus Mortalis*, 1, 2002, pp. 93-192, Buenos Aires.

the idea of the *katéchon* was still alive".¹⁹ Schmitt considers the *katéchon* as a positive force that coincides with the Christian Empire and is capable of holding up the anarchical force of the *ánomos*, the Antichrist.²⁰ This interpretation is far from being idiosyncratic: in fact, it is the result of a very solid reading of Patristic sources ranging from Irenaeus of Lyon and Tertullian to Adso of Montier-en-Der.

The problems of the *katéchon* and the *ánomos*, pillars of Schmitt's political philosophy, are inscribed in a very thorough reflection about the foundations of the secular political world that, for the German jurist, have their origins in the Christian political theology. In a certain way, this was also an esoteric doctrine for Schmitt who, at a certain moment of his life, considered himself the embodiment of the *katéchon* as he believed to be the last jurist that was capable of understanding the *jus publicum europeum* as a theologico-political heritage.

We defend the hypothesis that Strauss, during his conference in 1962 (as well as in other texts) was proposing a magnificent (although esoteric) response to the Christian messianic tradition up to Carl Schmitt and, at the same time, subverting the history of Jewish political theology. In fact, Strauss considers the possibility of a completely secular society in which a Jewish man "must not dedicate himself to a life in a world which is no longer Jewish and by the same token no longer Christian".²¹ It would be a sort of post-historical world where this man could be a post-Judaeo-Christian. This extreme scenario is exemplified by Friedrich Nietzsche whose philosophical insights were of the uttermost importance for the development of Strauss's political philosophy.²²

In the Chicago conference of 1962, Strauss offers a translation and an exegesis of the aphorism 205 from Nietzsche's *Dawn of Day*.²³ From Nietzsche's point of view, the Jews had lost Egypt in olden times but in the present era, they could become the lords of Europe where they have undergone a training period of eighteen centuries.²⁴ For this reason, Nietzsche thought that the Jews had extraordinary psychic and spiritual resources. He was also aware of the fact that the Jews suffered from discrimination but he believed that their heroism in *sperrere se sperrni* (despising that one is despised) surpassed all kind of obstacles. Of course, Nietzsche was not thinking of a conquest of Europe under any form of vi-

19 Schmitt Carl, *Die Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, 1974, pp. 97-129.

20 The contemporary research on the question of the *katéchon* has showed its origin in the ancient Jewish apocalyptic texts. Cf. Carlson David, "Vengeance and Angelic Meditation in Testament of Moses 9 and 10", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 101, 1982, pp. 85-95.

21 Strauss Leo, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

22 About the importance of Nietzsche in Strauss's oeuvre, cf. Lampert Laurence, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1997, specially pp. 5-24 and pp. 166-187.

23 For the original text, cf. Nietzsche Friedrich, *Morgenröte* in: *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1971, sect. 5, volume 1, pp. 180-183.

24 Nietzsche's view on Judaism has always been controversial. For a recent reconsideration of the historical, intellectual and biographical context of Nietzsche's writings on Judaism, cf. Holub Robert, *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015.

olence but he was convinced that Europe would fall like a perfectly ripe fruit into the hands of the Jewish people. In short, they would become the new guides of a blessed Europe.

Leo Strauss, admittedly, held this passage in admiration but he also thought that Nietzsche was fundamentally wrong in this apology of extreme assimilation. According to Strauss, Nietzsche's dreams is refuted "for what the establishment of the state of Israel means, while it may be an act or a progress, in a way, of Jewish assimilation – as it surely is– is also a reassertion of the difference between Jews and non-Jews".²⁵ Therefore, the purpose of assimilation without leaving any trace becomes, once more, impossible. At this point, it is clear that Strauss wishes to emphasise the peculiar situation of the Jewish people as a chosen people within the conceptual framework of a political theology.

It is possible to think that "the Shoah, the destruction of the European Jewish world, and the later establishment of the state of Israel is a breaking point regarding messianism in its universalist form".²⁶ But when facing the catastrophes of the 20th century, even some of the most sophisticated forms of Jewish philosophy maintain that a messianic redemption is still somehow possible. It is the case, for example, of Walter Benjamin who had thought redemption as "the occult centre of the catastrophic theatre of the world".²⁷

As important as the theme of redemption was for modern Jewish thought²⁸, Leo Strauss holds a provocative stance. If on one hand, he defends the importance of theology as the true core of the Jewish identity, on the other hand, he advocates for the idea that the Jewish people are chosen, exactly, to prove the absence of redemption. This thesis is only indicated in a very aphoristic way during his conference in 1962: "the Jewish people and their fate are the living witness for the absence of redemption".²⁹ In this way, Strauss builds a paradoxical argumentation stating that while theology is the essence of Judaism, the historical avatars of the Jewish people show that redemption is absent from the scene of History.

25 Strauss, Leo, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

26 Taub Emmanuel, *Mesianismo y redención. Prolegómenos para una teología política judía*, Miño y Dávila Editores, Buenos Aires, 2013, p. 374.

27 Taub Emmanuel, *op. cit.*, p. 346. For the question of redemption in contemporary Jewish thought and in Walter Benjamin in particular, cf. Handelman Susan, *Fragments of Redemption. Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Walter Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991; Bröcker Michael, *Die Grundlosigkeit der Wahrheit. Zum Verhältnis von Sprache, Geschichte und Theologie bei Walter Benjamin*, Königshausen und Neumann, Würzburg, 1993. For the concept of "salvation" in Benjamin, cf. Haulen Heinrich, *Rettung und Destruktion. Untersuchungen zur Hermeneutik Walter Benjamins*, Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1987. In a philosophical perspective, cf. Hamacher Werner, "Das Theologisch-Politische Fragment" in: *Benjamin-Handbuch*, Burkhard Lindner (ed.), Metzler, Stuttgart: 2006, pp. 175-192 and Abadi Florencia, *Conocimiento y redención en la obra de Walter Benjamin*, Miño y Dávila Editores, Buenos Aires, 2014.

28 Cf. Bourtez Pierre, *Witnesses for the Future. Philosophy and Messianism*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2010, pp. 477-585.

29 Strauss Leo, "Why we remain Jewish?", *op. cit.*, p. 327.

This is a radical affirmation that involves both a new conception of theology and an audacious assumption for any philosophy of history. If the Judaeo-Christian theology has a universal claim, the particularity of the Jewish people on a historical scale affects this universal conception precisely to show that redemption is impossible. If so, then theology is deprived of one of its central purposes because it seems impossible to transcend the historical realm in order to find a redemption that will never come. In this perspective, the role of the Jewish people as the *katéchon* is not accidental but essential to the concept of History: the Jewish are the eternal force that will hold back any form of redemption for a Humanity that must take the full responsibility for its proper history. More precisely, the Jewish people are the witnesses not for the future but rather for the absence of any Christian *katéchon*. This force that impedes the fulfilment of redemption is nothing but a delusion created by the Christian theology. As a consequence, the Jewish community stands for the category of people in its universal form: Humanity will never reach any form of redemption in its historical development.

This theory may seem rather pessimistic but, on the contrary, it must be understood against the backdrop of Strauss's conception about the tension between theology and philosophy or, in other words, the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem. In fact, we dispose now of a correspondence that is essential to clarify this problem with a new light. We refer to the epistolary exchange between Gershom Scholem and Leo Strauss that spans all along four decades between 1933 and 1973. Towards the end of Strauss's life, the opinions of the correspondents reach a point of great intensity around the question of messianism and revelation. At a certain moment, Scholem asks himself what would happen if monotheism disappeared and, in consequence, atheism could not hold up anymore as a moral doctrine.

In that case, Scholem thinks, paganism would have very good chances of coming back as a religious form. But, in his personal case, the great historian considers that he "would remain in the Jewish side".³⁰ In contrast to Scholem's position that underestimated the value of the ancient Greek philosophers, Strauss answers: "it is not necessary for us to agree in everything; my maxim was and continues to be that of Ibn Ruschd: *moriatur anima mea mortem philosophorum*".³¹

At the end of his life, Strauss unfolds that his esoteric strategies were profoundly rooted in the tradition of Greek philosophy. It is precisely at the moment of death that a life acquires all its consistency as a figure that gives sense

30 Letter from Gershom Scholem to Leo Strauss, March 13th, 1973, in: Strauss Leo, *Gesammelte Schriften*, J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart, 2001, Band 3, p. 770.

31 Letter from Leo Strauss to Gershom Scholem, March 19th, 1973, in: Strauss Leo, *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op. cit.*, Band 3, p. 771. This statement, attributed to Ibn Ruschd (Averroes) can be translated as "may my soul die from the death of the philosophers". The tradition holds that this phrase would have been pronounced by Averroes during excruciating times of persecutions and accusations of heresy. It is not the first time that Leo Strauss quotes this statement from Averroes in his letters to Scholem. He had already done so when he wrote Scholem on November 22nd 1960. Cf. Strauss Leo, *Gesammelte Schriften*, *op. cit.* Band 3, p. 742.

to all the experiences and actions accomplished by the philosopher throughout his public and private existence.³² This conviction had very deep consequences for Strauss's coming to terms with his own attitude towards Judaism³³ because, with an acute historical sense, his conviction as a philosopher takes the path of the adoption of the "enlightenment" proper to the Arabic Medieval philosophy.³⁴ For Strauss, it is conceptually and historically impossible to understand Jewish Medieval "enlightenment" in general and the figure of Maimonides in particular without their Arabic background.³⁵

Thus, it is possible to surmise that Strauss had in mind a very specific text of the Arabic juridical and political tradition, the *Fasl-al-Maqâl* (*Decisive Treatise*) where Averroes explores the relationship between philosophy and theology understood as the result of Revelation.³⁶

The *Decisive Treatise* is a form of *fatwâ*³⁷, equivalent to what in the Jewish world would be a *teshuvá*, a juridical opinion that is expressed within the framework of the religious Law. In this sense, it is a text that establishes the juridical structure necessary to the exercise of philosophy in a religious and legal context. In this text, Averroes argues that the Holy Scriptures make the study of philosophy a mandatory cause even if it must be restricted to an élite that is capable of mastering the art of producing syllogisms while it must be forbidden for the rest of society. Averroes also pleads for the rational examination of the sources of Revelation³⁸ and, in this horizon, the philosopher becomes the most authori-

32 In this particular sense, it is possible to consider Strauss as a follower of the platonic *dictum* that we find in Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, I, 30: "*tota philosophorum vita commentatio mortis est*" (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1950, p. 50).

33 Cf. Sheppard Eugene, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile. The Making of a Political Philosopher*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, 2006, pp. 110-117.

34 Cf. Butterworth Charles (ed.), *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy. Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1992. About averroism, cf. Niewöhner Friedrich and Sturlese Loris (Hrsg.) *Averroismus im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, Spur Verlag, Zürich, 1994.

35 About the importance of Arabic Mediaeval "enlightenment" in Leo Strauss's oeuvre, cf. Kramer Joel, "The Medieval Arabic Enlightenment" in: Smith Steven, *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 137-170.

36 About this question, modern historiography (although highly criticized by contemporary scholars) begins with Renan Ernst, *Averroès et l'averroïsme. Essai historique*, Calmann Lévy, Paris, 1882, pp. 162-172. We must also mention the important works of Mandonnet Pierre, *Siger de Brabant et l'averroïsme latin au XIII^{me} siècle. Étude critique et documents inédits*, Institut Supérieur de Philosophie de l'Université, Louvain, 1908 and Gauthier Léon, *La Théorie d'Ibn Rochd (Averroès) sur les rapports de la religion et de la philosophie*, Leroux, Paris, 1909. More recently, cf. Campanini Massimo, *L'intelligenza della fede. Filosofia e religione in Averroè e l'averroïsimo*, Pierluigi Lubrina, Bergamo, 1989. However, these works underestimate the juridical implications of the Averroist philosophy in general and of the *Decisive Treatise* in particular. On the contrary, these aspects are fully developed in Coccia Emanuele, *La trasparenza delle immagini. Averroè e l'averroïsimo*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 2005.

37 For this notion, cf. Skovgaard-Petersen Jakob, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State. Muftis and Fatwas of the Dar al-Ifta*, Brill, Leiden, 1997.

38 This problem rises many controversies amongst scholars about how to understand the primacy of philosophy over religion in Averroes's thought. For different opinions on this matter, cf. Tornero Emilio, "La función sociopolítica de la religión según Averroes", *Annals del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía*, 4, 1984, pp. 75-82 and Bello Ilya *The Medieval Islamic Controversy between Philosophy and Orthodoxy. Ijmā and Tawil in the Conflict between Al-Ghazālī and*

tative interpreter of the Scriptures.³⁹ Besides, it becomes possible to obtain the freedom necessary for the exercise of philosophy without breaking the Law and, at the same time, to encourage the existence of theology.⁴⁰

Averroes defends this position when he states that: "the study of the writings of the Ancients is mandatory according to the Law because the intention, the design [that they search] in their texts is the same one that Revelation proposes. From the precise moment when someone forbids another this kind of study [...] closes for all men the access to the door through which Revelation is offered to all men in order to know God, that is to say, the rational examination that leads to really know God"⁴¹

Even if Averroes's theory gives a preeminent place to the rational analyses of Revelation, theology is not meant to lose its social and political status. It is Strauss himself who echoes this distinction when in one of his last letters to Scholem, after remembering, once again, Averroes's *dictum*, he declares that "I have for myself that the Boss⁴² will not condemn me because He is a merciful God and knows better than we do what kind of beings are necessary to make of the world a world"⁴³

Through these historical influences and theoretical reflexions, Strauss has showed in his private letters his ultimate convictions regarding one of the subtlest tensions that have determined Western thought. His decision was in favour of philosophy even if he has always affirmed the necessity of Revelation.⁴⁴ However, Strauss preferred for himself the role of the philosopher. In this sense, his case is one of the most compelling in the 20th century Jewish intellectual milieu regarding the tension between the Jewish identity and the assimilation process derived from Modern Enlightenment.

Ibn Rushd, Brill, Leiden, 1989, pp. 139-140. It is also very important Hyman Arthur, "Les types d'arguments dans les écrits théologico-politiques et polémiques d'Averroes", in: Sinaceur, Mohammed Allal (ed.), *Penser avec Aristote*, Erès, Toulouse, 1991, pp. 653-665.

39 About the censorship suffered by the averroist thesis on the initiative of the bishop Étienne de Tempier, cf. Hissette Roland, *Enquête sur les 219 articles condamnés à Paris le 7 mars 1277*, Paris-Louvain, Publications universitaires-Vander Oyez, 1977 and Bianchi Luca, *Il Vesovo e i Filosofi. La condanna parigina del 1277 e l'evoluzione dell'aristolismo scolastico*, Bergamo, Pierluigi Lubrina, 1990.

40 For the relationships between the theological "beatitude" and averroist metaphysics, cf. Averroes, *La béatitude de l'âme*, edition by Marc Geoffroy and Carlos Steel, Vrin, Paris, 2001, pp. 34-35.

41 Averroes, *Discours décisif*, edition by Marc Geoffroy, Flammarion, Paris, 1996, p. 115. For the problem evoked in this passage, cf., El Ghannouchi Abdelmajid, "Distinction et relation des discours philosophique et religieux chez Ibn Rushd: Fasl al maqal our la doublé vérité", in: Khoury Raif (Ed.), *Averroes (1126-1198) oder der Triumph des Rationalismus: Internationales Symposium anlässlich des 800. Todestages des islamischen Philosophen*, Universitätsverlag Winter, Heidelberg, 2002, pp. 139-145.

42 In English in the original German text.

43 Letter form Leo Strauss to Gershom Scholem, September 30th, 1973 in: Strauss Leo, *Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit., Band 3, p. 771. It must be observed that the expressions "because He is a merciful God" and "world" are written in Hebrew by Strauss.

44 An interpretation that is compatible with the one proposed here is that of Hilb Claudia, *Leo Strauss: el arte de leer. Una lectura de la interpretación straussiana de Maquiavelo, Hobbes, Locke y Spinoza*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 2005, pp. 259-314.

Although Strauss made this opposition even more complex when he enounced it again in terms of a polarity between Athens (philosophy) and Jerusalem (theology), he also estimated that these were the most genuine political questions for the Jewish people. His personal answer, notwithstanding, needed the mediation of the Arabic Medieval philosophy as a way of embracing Athens without losing Jerusalem.

However, it is important to underline the fact that the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem would have been conceptually impossible without the intervention of Christianity. The historical irruption of Christianity made the confrontation between the worlds of Hellenism and Judaism possible when the doctrine of the *katéchon* enabled the early Church to build a universal eschatology to defy the Jewish messianism. That is why it is essential to point out that this opposition found its more audacious formulation in a theologian with a juridical formation. In fact, it was Tertullian who coined the formula: "then, what do Athens and Jerusalem have in common?"⁴⁵ That is also the reason why Origen, in his polemics against Celsus, was able to write: "who else can save and guide the soul of man to supreme God but the God *Logos*?"⁴⁶ As we can see, in this extreme form, Origen transformed the ancient philosophical logos into an individual God capable of embodying the Revelation through the Holy Scriptures.

Even if Strauss does not always emphasize the weight of Christianity in this polemics, he is well aware of its importance for the comprehension of the conflict between Jewish Revelation and ancient philosophy. In both cases, in Judaism and in Christianity, religion takes a particular political dimension through an alliance with theology. This point is fundamental for an appropriate interpretation of Strauss's political eschatology because "for Strauss, the quarrel has its ultimate source in the different stance of the ancients and the moderns towards the theologico-political problem, a stance that in each case rests on different historical situations, is reflected in different political strategies, and, finally, is given expression in different philosophical assessments of the problem."⁴⁷

But it is also decisive that, according to Strauss, philosophy found a defy to any form of aspiration to full knowledge about the world once it was confronted to the experience of Revelation: "only through the Bible is philosophy, or the quest for knowledge, challenged by knowledge revealed by the omniscient God, or by knowledge identical with the self-communication of God".⁴⁸ This also means that, faced with the theologico-political problem, philosophy has chosen

45 Tertullian, *De praescriptionibus aduersus haereses omnes*, VII, 9 in: *Patrologia Latina*, Excudebat Migne, Paris, 1844-1855, vol. 002, col. 20: "Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis? quid Academiae et Ecclesiae?". About this problem, cf. Weltin E. G. "Quid Athenae et Hierosolymis?", *Classical Journal*, 5 (1956), pp. 153-161. Jerome will propose an opposition of three terms: Athens-Rome-Jerusalem: cf. Weltin E. G., *Athens and Jerusalem. An Interpretative Essay on Christianity and Classical Culture*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1987.

46 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VI, 68 in: Id. *Contre Celse*, Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 2008, tomo III, p. 349.

47 Meier Henrich, *Leo Strauss and the theologico-political problem*, op. cit., p. 5.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

to give a philosophical justification of Law without any place for a supernatural communication of knowledge by God. That is the reason why “for the Platonic political philosophers of the Middle Ages, justifying the law philosophically becomes the grounding of philosophy. In the guise of a historical recovery [Strauss] makes the theologico-political problem the object of a philosophical reflection that is focused completely on the matter at issue and this tests the chances for knowledge that the turn away from the premise, sanctioned by powerful prejudice, that a return to premodern philosophy is impossible”.⁴⁹

This possibility shapes profoundly Leo Strauss’s opinion about philosophy. In contesting the modern notion of progress when applied to the history of philosophy, he claims that the ancients may well have reason over de moderns concerning the theoretical truth of political propositions. This path was sorted out to him by the Arabic medieval philosophy: “the discovery of [Avicena] had opened a door for Strauss that was still firmly closed to him as he wrote his Spinoza book in 1925-28. It showed him a possibility of achieving a genuinely philosophical response to the challenge of historicism by returning to the history of philosophy”.⁵⁰

With these premises, the philosopher becomes the antagonist of the theologian as long as the ancient schools are not built upon the principle of the revealed authority of the Law. It is true that this problem was not particularly urgent in Antiquity due to the fact that in a polytheistic milieu, the philosophers had established a more or less convivial relationship with the diverse religions of the Mediterranean and the Near East. But with the historical outburst of Christianity, the problem of Jewish Revelation and the Law suddenly became the cornerstone of a new battlefield in order to understand politics, history and eschatology.

With persecution of the Jews during the Middle Ages the problem turned out to be even more dramatic because the doctrine of the *katéchon* made the historical existence of the Christian Church a consequence of the social persistence of Judaism.⁵¹ In that perspective, in denying to convert themselves into Christianity, the Jewish people were conceived as a sort of a political remnant that prevented the historical arch of Christian history to come to an end in order to fulfil the eschatological promises of the New Testament (which, in turn, was considered a new form of revealed juridical corpus destined to replace the Jewish Tanakh).

However, even more so in this context, the medieval philosophers were confronted with the ancient dilemma of a divine Law. From Strauss’s point of view, the philosophers had still a historical presence despite the severe control exerted by the theologians at the medieval University. Besides, Strauss insists upon

49 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

50 *Ibidem.*

51 Cf. Peterson Erik, *Theologische Traktate*, Echter Verlag, Würzburg, 1994.

not confusing the figure of the philosopher with that of the theologian during the Middle Ages. In this respect, terminology is a fundamental matter: "in their usage, philosopher designates normally a man whose beliefs are fundamentally different from those of the adherents of any of the three monotheist religions, whether he belongs nominally to one of these religions or not. The philosophers as such are supposed to form a group, a sect, fundamentally distinguished from the group of the Jews, that of the Muslims and that of the Christians."⁵²

At the same time, Strauss is extremely aware of the fact that medieval philosophy could be understood, in our modern world, as a form of thought that has nothing to say to the contemporary man. The result of that stance leads to consider ancient and medieval philosophies as forms of a definitively surpassed way of conceiving politics and theory. But, if the modern view is so manifestly superior to the medieval view, Strauss asks provocatively, "why should we hesitate for a moment to refer the medieval philosopher's remarks on poetry to our centre of reference, and hence to describe them as belonging to aesthetics?"⁵³

In other words, according to Strauss, this conception or mental habit that makes of medieval philosophy a relic from the past is the stumbling block that prevents us from reaching a valuable comprehension of that discipline: "if we know from the onset that the medieval view of the matter is wrong or poor, we should not waste our time in studying it, or if someone does not mind wasting his time, he simply will not command the intellectual energy required for truly understanding a view for which he cannot have any real sympathy."⁵⁴

This dictum means that embracing the deep meaning of medieval philosophy has an implication: the theologico-political problem of Jewish (or Judaeo-Christian) eschatology becomes a way of grasping the historical process of modern times. And, as a consequence, the tension between philosophy and Revelation must be tackled once again and even more so in the contemporary world where, as Strauss never ceased to underline it, all the delusions of assimilation have proved themselves ultimately impossible.

As we have seen, Strauss decided in favour of philosophy (through the example of Averroes and the "Arabic enlightenment" of the Middle Ages) while maintaining the necessity of the postulate of Revelation. But his conception of Revelation was entirely permeated by a very peculiar form of a theologico-political eschatology. Thus, Strauss's understanding of politics was informed by the paradoxical role he assigned to the Jewish people in the development of history. On one hand, the Jewish people move along the process of an eschatological

52 Strauss Leo, "How To Study Medieval Philosophy" in: Id. *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism. Essays and Lectures by Leo Strauss Selected and Introduced by Thomas L. Pangle*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1989, p. 334.

53 Strauss, *ibid.*, p. 332.

54 *Ibidem*. In a similar perspective, we could consider the critics addressed by Strauss to Max Weber regarding the role of social sciences. Cf. Nosetto Luciano, "Lo superficial y lo profundo. Max Weber, Leo Strauss y la índole práctica de la filosofía política", *Las Torres de Lucca*, 7 (2015), pp. 133-170, Madrid.

history where there is not any Messiah to come but, still, it is possible to speak of a “messianic age”.

But, on the other hand, the messianic component of history consists, precisely, in the absence of redemption and the Jewish people are called to become the witnesses –in the name of the whole mankind as a universal concept– of this eschatological trace. And, consequently, Schmitt’s reactualization of the doctrine of the *katéchon* becomes inoperative because the end of time that this apocalyptic figure is supposed to hold up will never take place. In this way, the philosopher that Strauss chose to be has the task of recognizing the non-redeeming character of the messianic age defined by the non-advent of a Messiah to save the peoples of the Earth from their own responsibility in the politics of the future.

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ЛЕО ШТРАУС НА РАСКРШЋУ ИЗМЕЂУ ЈЕВРЕЈСТВА И ТЕОЛОШКО-ПОЛИТИЧКОГ ПРОБЛЕМА

Сажетак

Овај рад истражује проблем јудаизма у делу Леа Штрауса (1899-1973) а нарочито у његовом излагању „Зашто ми остајемо Јевреји“ на конференцији на Универзитету Чикаго 1962. године. Са једне стране, Штраус приказује проблем јеврејске асимилације у светлу тензије између јеврејства као предсказања и философије као дисциплине засноване на разуму. Пак, са друге стране, ова поларност добија нови интерпретацију када Штраус чита јеврејску историју као теолошко-политички проблем. Његова позиција је одређена читањем арапских средњовековних философа као и његовим прихватањем пост-месијанске интерпретације јеврејске есхатологије. На крају, аутор хипотетише о постојању дебате између Штраусовог погледа на јеврејску историју и концепције Карла Шмита о библијском катехону као политичком елементу који даје смисао западњачкој универзалној историји.

Кључне речи: јудаизам, политичка теологија, Лео Штраус, спасење, Карл Шмит

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