CHAPTER 13B

Divine Justice in Strauss’ *Anabasis*

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This is a brief attempt to address the question of the gods in Strauss’ interpretation of *The Anabasis*.¹ The question of god or gods is of course central to all of Strauss’ mature work, and the theme “gods and men” is, Strauss tells us, “the . . . in a sense comprehensive theme” of the *Anabasis*, and hence of Strauss’ interpretation of it. This should come as no surprise to readers of the *Anabasis*, a work that appears to present Xenophon, a Socratic, in an extraordinarily pious light—consulting soothsayers, reading the entrails of sacrificial victims, offering libations, and so on. Xenophon the Greek general sometimes seems to surpass all others in his observances of sacrificial law. Now, the truth about the gods whom Xenophon appears to have worshipped was of more than historical concern to Strauss. And the reason is suggested by *The Anabasis’* account of the story of Marsayas, who is said to have been severely punished by Apollo after first challenging and then failing to defeat Apollo in a contest in wisdom (107–08). The story highlights the gravity of the question of how we should lead our lives. Do we do so by the wisdom given through allegedly divine revelation, or by our own reason, however limited its power? As Strauss argues elsewhere, no question is more important than this one.² Moreover, despite what we would today call “cultural differences” (some people, as Xenophon points out, worship fish), there was an important respect in which peoples as different as the Greeks and their barbarian enemies shared the same understanding of god or gods, namely, as beings who rule over human beings in accord with justice.

Yet if the theme “gods and men” is both comprehensive and grave, the initial impression one is likely to receive from Strauss’ examination of this theme in *The Anabasis* does not suggest gravity. In fact, Strauss goes to some lengths

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¹ Strauss (1983). All parenthetical page references in the body of this essay are to this work. I wish to thank Thomas and Lorraine Pangle, with whom I joined in a reading group on Strauss’ study of the *Anabasis*. I also wish to thank Wayne Ambler and Dustin Gish for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. Remaining errors are of course my own.

² Strauss (1953) 74–5; Strauss (1965) 1, 15; Strauss (1957), 22; Strauss (1989) 269–70, Strauss (1959) 86.
to show us that Xenophon’s piety is not what it might first seem to our contemporaries, or that it resembles the piety of a Boccaccio. He even appears to suggest that the question of the gods’ existence and their justice is easily settled, or rather easily dismissed. After explaining some of Xenophon’s logographic devices, the first example Strauss gives that brings all of these devices together is of Menon, the “unbelievably wicked” Thessalian general. Menon is not punished for his perjury by any god, and the story that he was not put to death immediately, as were the other Greek generals, but tortured for a year by the Persian King, whom he had benefited by his treachery, is, Strauss shows Xenophon indicating, a fairy tale. It represents a magnification and adornment of the truth; it satisfies readers’ sense of justice, or attracts a reader who wishes to believe such tales, but is not in itself credible.

Similarly, Strauss points out that after Xenophon claims to have had a dream sent from Zeus, a dream that might suggest divine punishment for the Greeks who had come against the Persian king, Xenophon nonetheless delivers a speech that lifts the Greeks’ hopes for divine aid by declaring the Persians to be in violation of their solemnly sworn treaty. And while Xenophon stresses in that speech that the gods will judge the contest and be on the side of the Greeks, he all but drops that argument in his second speech, which is addressed to the Greek commanders, emphasizing instead that “everything in war depends” not on any god but on something strictly human: “good order and discipline” (113). Xenophon’s prudence is often hidden and made publicly defensible by a belief in divine justice to which he himself does not subscribe but which he freely exploits. The prudent use of his listeners’ piety likewise characterizes, Strauss suggests, Xenophon’s later speeches rejecting sole command of the Greek forces. Again, that Zeus terrified the inhabitants of a Median city by causing thunder is merely “said” but not “known” (116). And Xenophon repeatedly leads the Greeks to victory “by drawing on his knowledge of things military” (115; cf. 118 bottom, 126), or on his good counsel and guesswork (131–32). Xenophon tells the Greeks at Kalpe harbor that “perhaps the god wishes to arrange things . . . so that those who talked big are humbled;” Strauss observes that Xenophon himself “made of course all the necessary arrangements.” Again, when the Greeks are at a loss as to how to cross a well-guarded river into Armenia, Xenophon allegedly has another dream of good omen, and the sacrifices he offers the next day are favorable, but Strauss highlights Xenophon’s hints that he was approached in the night by two soldiers with information about a hidden ford in the river, soldiers whom Xenophon had re-approach him in the morning, after he had told the commanders of his “dream” and had offered the sacrifices. Or at the very least, he highlights the fact that Xenophon, unlike the Spartan Cheirosophos, made himself available to any who might have useful