The Theological-Political Problem in Leo Strauss’s Writings on Moses Mendelssohn

Jeffrey A. Bernstein
College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA
jbernste@holycross.edu

Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn

It is impossible to do justice to Martin Yaffe’s edition of Leo Strauss’s writings on Moses Mendelssohn in the present context. It amounts to a philosophical optic that allows readers to glimpse, as if for the first time, the fundamentally theological-political character of Strauss’s thinking. This character is so stark that it can be said to function as the horizon on which all of Strauss’s other distinctions (ancients/moderns, philosophy/polis, philosophy/poetry, esoteric/exoteric) come into view. In translating all of Strauss’s introductions and annotations contained in the Moses Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe—the Jubilee Edition of Mendelssohn’s collected writings (with additional correspondence between Strauss and Alexander Altmann and relevant primary source material by Lessing and Mendelssohn), Yaffe has not only succeeded magisterially in presenting readers with a “whole picture”...
of Strauss’s relation to Mendelssohn, he has also allowed readers to perceive the depth of this relationship as it opens onto Strauss’s overall work.

This quality of Yaffe’s achievement can be pictorialized in the following way: If one were to imagine this project as a sheet of paper, it would contain (1) a central column of text dealing with Mendelssohn’s philosophical, theological, and political relationship with Jacobi and Lessing; (2) a slightly thinner column on the left dealing with Mendelssohn’s and Jacobi’s respective relations to Lessing and Spinoza; (3) a narrow band of text on the top dealing with Mendelssohn’s relation to Leibniz and Plato; and (4) a narrow band at the bottom dealing with Strauss’s relation to Lessing. If one now turns the paper sideways, one notices (5) the almost imperceptible traces of a narrative about the theological-political situation of Weimar Germany. Finally, if one rotates the paper 180 degrees, one detects (6) some microscopic notes and fragments dealing with Maimonides as the premodern alternative to Mendelssohn. The whole picture presented therein allows readers to see what Strauss would later come to formulate as the obscuring of the relation between Jerusalem and Athens.

Why should the narrative about Weimar Germany occupy such an idiosyncratic place in this work? First, Strauss is writing these introductions at the behest of the editors of the Mendelssohn Jubilee Edition. Second, he is composing them (primarily) in the 1930s in Germany, when open critique of the current situation would have been difficult at best. As will see, however, Strauss does manage to address the political situation (albeit in a guarded manner). Most importantly, he is not primarily concerned with the historical moment, but with providing a historical analysis—under the aegis of philosophy—regarding how this moment was able to occur. I believe that the properly philosophical moment of this project emerges when Strauss’s construal of the theological-political problem is seen, with a view to the whole of Strauss’s work, from its point of greatest intensity: namely, the tension between “Jerusalem and Athens”—i.e., forms of life dedicated respectively to the unproblematic obedience to (divine) law and to a philosophical adherence to such law that simultaneously allows for freedom of thought. Although Strauss’s writings on Mendelssohn were undertaken largely prior to his first mention of

---

2 Indeed, so inhospitable was the climate in general to the kind of project in which Strauss was participating that, as Yaffe notes, the Gestapo “seized and eventually destroyed most of the [then published] copies” of Mendelssohn’s Jubiläumsausgabe (222).