

Cosmos and Philosophy in Plato and the Bible^{*}

JACOB HOWLAND
University of Tulsa
Tulsa, Oklahoma

ANYONE WHO WISHES TO CONDUCT a philosophical investigation of the Hebrew Bible must reckon with the fact that that it does not present itself as a work of philosophy. The Bible's core—Genesis through Kings—is a narrative;¹ its overarching form is not what the Greek philosophers call *logos* (rational argument), but *muthos* (story).² But this is also true of Plato's dialogues, which indisputably qualify as philosophical writings. In fact, the Bible and the Platonic dialogues are in significant respects literary cousins. Both respond to social crises by inaugurating distinct traditions of literary education.³ Both seek to promote

^{*} I wish to acknowledge the generosity of James Murphy, who read and critiqued an earlier version of this article. The article was initially prepared as a lecture for a Shalem Center conference in 2011; I thank Yoram Hazony for inviting me to speak on Plato and the Bible.

¹ This core constitutes what David Noel Freedman calls the "Primary History"; on the literary coherence and significance of the Primary History, see Freedman, *The Unity of the Hebrew Bible* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 1–39.

² In the broadest sense, *muthos* designates a narrative of events; my use of this term—and of "myth" and "story," which I employ interchangeably in this essay—is thus consistent, for example, with Robert Alter's assertion that the literary form of the "primeval history" of Genesis 1–11 is "*historicized* prose fiction" (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 1981], 24, emphasis in original).

³ The circumstances of captivity in Babylon evidently caused the displaced Judeans to lose confidence in their ability to maintain their religious tradition in a purely oral form, and thus to begin to commit essential elements of the tradition to writing. See Eduard Nielsen, *Oral Tradition: A Modern Problem in Old*

wisdom, understood as knowledge of the whole that is also knowledge of how to live.⁴ Both present various (and sometimes incompatible) perspectives on the fundamental issues, thereby compelling readers to think through these issues for themselves.⁵ Both furthermore invite us to ponder the relationship between cosmology and anthropology. In the cosmological myths of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Statesman*, as in the story of origins with which the Bible begins,⁶ a god produces the physical universe by introducing intelligible order into a pre-existing chaos.⁷ These texts disagree about the process by which this is accomplished.⁸

Testament Introduction (Chicago: Alec R. Allenson, 1954), 33. Freedman makes a convincing case that the Babylonian exile both frames the Primary History and constitutes the center around which "the entire Hebrew Bible revolves" (*The Unity of the Hebrew Bible*, 6; cf. 8–9). On Plato's preservation and transformation of Socratic philosophizing in the face of the moral and political disintegration of Athens after the Peloponnesian War, see Jacob Howland, *Plato and the Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 55–9.

- ⁴ The subject matter of the Platonic dialogues and the Bible is, in a basic sense, *everything*: heaven and earth, gods and men, rulers and nations, what is always and what has come to be. In particular, Genesis—like the dialogues—promises to help the reader "catch a glimpse of possibly timeless and transcendent truth" about "what is first" (Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* [New York: Free Press, 2003], 10–11, 21).
- ⁵ As Kass notes, the Bible's "sparseness, lacunae, ambiguity, reticence, and lack of editorial judgment [about what it narrates] ... both permit and require the engagement of the reader." What is more, "our need to continue grappling with the abiding ambiguities of the text teaches us ... the truth of our own ignorance and the impossibility of resting comfortably with what we think we have understood" (*The Beginning of Wisdom*, 18, 19).
- ⁶ I include the Eden narrative that runs through Genesis 3 in what I am calling the biblical "story of origins." Because this story is told in two different ways in Genesis 1 through 3, I will occasionally speak of the biblical origin "stories" or "myths."
- ⁷ See, *inter alia*, Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 6 (on Genesis 1:2); William Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 40 with n. 8.
- ⁸ It is, however, notoriously difficult to specify the exact nature of this disagreement. The fact that "the verb בָּרָא . . . in the Hebrew Bible denoted the exclusive prerogative of God the Creator" (Jaroslav Pelikan, *What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? Timaeus and Genesis in Counterpoint* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997], 48) suggests a distinction between divine creation and the human fabrication of an artifact that is blurred by the Septuagint's translation of *bara* in Genesis 1 by *poiein*, "to make, produce." In particular, while the work of Plato's divine demiurge or "craftsman" is "confined to the uniting of its two elements, form and matter, but cannot extend to the bringing into being

Yet they concur that the natural or created order is ultimately insufficient for the maintenance of human life, to say nothing of human flourishing; human beings must learn not only how to protect themselves from the harshness of the natural world, but also—and most especially—how to combat social and psychological disorder. Can we acquire the knowledge that will allow us to live good and peaceful lives? This question stands at the heart of the origin myths of Plato and the Bible.

To investigate the Bible philosophically is to recontextualize it within the framework of familiar philosophical concerns.⁹ In approaching the Bible's story of origins from the standpoint of what might be called the cosmological anthropology of the Platonic dialogues, I do not propose to offer a comprehensive interpretation of Genesis 1 through 3, let alone of the *Timaeus* and the *Statesman*.¹⁰ Rather, I hope to show that the biblical story of origins both amplifies and extends Plato's own reflections on the limits of philosophical politics.

of either element" (M. B. Foster, "The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science," *Mind* 43 [1934], 459), the creative activity of the God of Scripture is not so confined; thus, God calls light into being by *fiat* (Genesis 1:3). But Foster seems to go too far in maintaining that God creates with "no clear knowledge of what he is going to achieve before he has achieved it," and is thus more of a fine artist than an artisan (462); the rabbis, at any rate, compare God to a master builder, and the Torah to a blueprint or measuring-rod (*Genesis Rabbah* 1.1, 8). Nor is the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* clearly discernible in Genesis (Pelikan, pp 12, 48). Cf. Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation Out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), which argues persuasively that "the origin of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* must be understood and explained as part of the controversy of early Christianity with philosophy" (xii). Although May notes that Rabban Gamaliel "implicitly asserts *creatio ex nihilo*" in *Genesis Rabbah* 1.9, he observes that "such sayings remain isolated ... [and] a firm, unambiguously formulated doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not worked out in ancient Jewry" (23).

⁹ This constitutes a variation on the theme of the ongoing theological "recontextualization" of the Hebrew Scriptures by Jews as well as Christians. Cf. R.W.L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14–15. In some cases, recontextualization is explicitly theological and philosophical; thus, Emil Fackenheim's *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust: A Re-reading* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) follows the example of Hegel, who "enquired into what his Bible had said, then and there, only in conjunction with considering whether (and if so how) it continued to be a repository of truth, here and now" (2).

¹⁰ As Moberly remarks, it is in any case "intrinsically doubtful that any one reading can do full justice to all the features of the text [of the Eden narrative]" (*The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 75).

First, I will provide an overview of the ground I intend to cover. The *Timaeus* and *Statesman* teach that what the philosophers call *phusis*, or nature, is the product of an art of world-making exercised by a god.¹¹ Owing to its divine construction, the universe is a *kosmos*, a decorously ordered whole. Even so, the natural order is only partially consistent with human welfare. Both dialogues furthermore explain that the deficiency of nature with respect to human existence cannot be repaired by material arts alone. A philosophical politics is required in order to supplement or correct nature by means of law and custom (*nomos*), and, more broadly, by a whole formation of life that shapes the character of a people and gives them a sense of their place and purpose within the whole. According to the eponymous protagonist of the *Timaeus*, this philosophical politics is rooted in the contemplation of the cosmos. But Plato allows us to see that Timaeus's teaching—which he presents in the form of a “likely” or “fitting” story (*eikōs muthos*: 29d)—rests on a confusion between the philosophical acquisition of knowledge and the poetic fabrication of politically useful opinion. This confusion is both deliberate and instructive: the art of politics includes the production of myths that aim not to communicate knowledge, but rather to unify a community and ground it in the world, and there are multiple indications that the cosmological myth of the *Timaeus* is practical and political in just this respect.¹²

¹¹ The Bible tells a similar story. Because “creation is not through fiat alone, but also substantially through fashioning,” the “overall picture [in Genesis 1] is that of God as a craftsman”; God’s “repeated pronouncement” that what He has made is “good” should accordingly be understood as an expression of “the maker’s assessment of his handiwork” (Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 43 with n. 4; cf. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 39). Whereas the Greek concept of *phusis* properly designates “that which grows by itself” in contrast with “the artificial (*tekhnē*) and the conventional (*nomos*),” creation in the Bible “unites the “two principles [of] artifice and convention” because it is “production” that is also “the word of justice” (Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 14, 47). But the Greek philosophical distinction between the orders of nature on the one hand and art and convention on the other is blurred in the *Timaeus* and *Statesman*, in which the cosmos is revealed to be a production that partakes in goodness and beauty thanks to the demiurge who fashions it—a god who is, moreover, said to be the “father” or natural progenitor of the cosmos (*Timaeus* 28c, 29d–30b; *Statesman* 269d, 273b–c).

¹² To mention only three examples: (1) Timaeus’s myth supposedly reveals *phusis*, but Socrates calls it a *nomos*; because the latter word may mean “song” as well as “law” (29d), Socrates suggests that this myth is intended both to legislate a

Like the *Timaeus*, the great myth of the *Statesman* is a meditation on the human condition that takes the form of a story about the origins of the cosmos and of human life. The myth indicates that the wisdom that is the object of a philosophical politics is available only by means of inquiry through dialogue.¹³ Such essentially Socratic inquiry turns away from the contemplation of the cosmos and toward human beings, teasing out, through sustained and focused questioning, the relationship between law or custom and the nature and excellence of the soul.¹⁴ Yet the attempt to disentangle philosophy from poetry by inquiring into the distinction between *nomos* and *phusis* confronts serious practical limitations. It presupposes the conditions it is supposed to produce, in that philosophy *as such* cannot emerge prior to the establishment of some kind of political and psychological order through the imposition of binding laws. Socratic inquiry furthermore threatens to weaken the attachment to *nomos* that orders and unifies (however imperfectly) cities and souls alike, and thus to undermine the very goal at which it aims. Whereas the gods are said to be guided by wisdom in fashioning the cosmos and regulating its motions, these paradoxes imply that human intelligence—which always begins in the middle of things, and works back toward first principles—can never be genuinely architectonic in the sphere of ethics and politics.

The philosophical implications of the Bible's story of origins come sharply into focus against the backdrop of Plato's *Timaeus* and *States-*

vocation for human beings and to attune them to it. (2) The word *dēmiourgos* that Timaeus uses to designate the supreme god who constructs the cosmos literally means "one who works for the people." (3) Timaeus claims that the stars are the original home of human souls—not, however, by nature, but by "custom" and "habit" (*sunnomou, sunēthē*: 42b). Of course, Timaeus's vision is cosmopolitan; his myth aims to make a home in the cosmos not for a particular community, but for human beings as such. It is the Athenian Critias who, taking over the "men born by his [Timaeus's] speech," will assume the task of "making them citizens of this city of ours" (27a–b). In beginning with the origins of human beings as such and then focusing on one particular human community, the plan of the *Timaeus* and *Critias* resembles that of Genesis, which in chapter 12 narrows its scope from universal history to the story of Abraham and his descendants.

¹³ The philosophical difference between these texts is reflected in their literary form: the *Statesman* is a dialogue, while the *Timaeus* is (for the most part) a monologue.

¹⁴ Cf. Socrates' criticism of Anaxagoras at Plato, *Phaedo* 97b–99c with Cicero's remark that Socrates "call[ed] philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men" (*Tusculan Disputations* 5.4.10–11).

man. Most important, the *Statesman's* myth of the reversed cosmos splits human existence into two cosmic phases in order to underscore its fragmentation and incompleteness. This myth teaches that the unity of knowledge and virtuous order that characterizes wisdom in the fullest sense is unavailable to human beings. The same internal conflict in human existence is visible in the double origin story of Genesis.¹⁵ The biblical story of origins further sharpens the Platonic critique of philosophical politics by paying special attention to the distortion of the human intellect that is coincident with sexual differentiation, and to the social or "mimetic" intensification of the aspiration to divinity that underlies this distortion. It thereby prepares the ground for its unique solution to the human predicament: embracing the covenant of God.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the Bible's implicit case against the project of philosophical politics rests on what interpretation discloses to be a philosophical and psychological analysis of the problem of distinguishing between the image and the original of God. This fact is perhaps sufficient to demonstrate not only the validity, but also the necessity of a philosophical investigation of the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁷

I will start by sketching the main lines of the critique of philosophical politics that emerges in the *Timaeus* and the *Statesman*. We will then be prepared to appreciate the way in which the Bible expands and deepens

¹⁵ "For the tradents of proverbial wisdom, the [image of the] tree signifies both wisdom and prosperity or shalom (Prov. 3:17b). It evokes *hokmā* (Greek *sophia*) herself, who offers longevity in her right hand and riches and honor in her left (3:16)." In the Garden of Eden, however, the tree of life is distinguished from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad; "together, knowledge and life constitute the quintessence of wisdom" in the biblical tradition, but "life is wrenched from discerning knowledge" in the Eden narrative (Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos*, 154, 155). In what follows, I will use the phrase "life and knowledge" to refer to the humanly elusive unity to which Brown calls our attention.

¹⁶ This is, *ipso facto*, also the solution to the particular historical predicament of the Judean exiles in Babylonia. Cf. Philo's *Creation of the Cosmos*, in which he characterizes the biblical story of origins as "an educative 'prelude' to the laws of Moses, intended to 'mold beforehand the minds of those who were to use the laws'" (quoted in Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003], 7).

¹⁷ Kass justly observes that the Bible "takes a dim view of the sufficiency of human reason ... [but] presents this critical view to human reason in a most intelligible and powerful way," thereby "prepar[ing] the philosophic reader to take seriously ... the arrival of God's new way for humankind" (*The Beginning of Wisdom*, 11, 15, emphasis in original). One might add that, if the Bible's case against the project of philosophical politics is persuasive, it is for the Socratic reason that it accords more with what we know about ourselves.

Plato's reflections on the theoretical and practical limits of the philosophical pursuit of practical wisdom.

I. Philosophy and Poetry in Plato's *Timaeus*

The "likely story" of the *Timaeus* teaches that a god made the cosmos as beautiful and good as the necessity inherent in its corporeal nature will allow (30a–b). Timaeus's subject admittedly does not allow for precise speeches (29c–d), but why does he present this philosophical teaching in the literary form of myth? Two reasons come readily to mind. Because *muthos* or narrative goes beyond a mere recitation of events—because it seeks, rather, to clarify their inner *coherence*—it is the form of discourse best suited to articulating both the purposive structure of intelligent action and non-teleological relations of probability or necessity. But because the inner coherence of a myth or narrative about the mysterious beginnings of the universe can never be fully obvious, we readers are obliged to engage in interpretation, which attempts to put together the parts of a spoken or written discourse into a whole so as to grasp their internal unity. In this manner, the origin stories of Plato and the Bible reward intellectual persistence and creativity, thereby encouraging us to become active partners in our own education.¹⁸

At the midpoint of his myth of origins (48e), Timaeus begins anew.¹⁹ The myth's doubleness underscores the problem of uniting, in speech as well as in deed, intellect and necessity—the two fundamental causes or beginnings of the world.²⁰ Necessity, the "wandering cause," initially presents itself to the demiurge as the chaos of "all that was visible" (30a, 48a).²¹ It is this primordial chaos, moving "unmusically and without order" (30a), that he shapes into a cosmos in accordance with intellect that looks to the good.²² Because what is visible is originally "without

¹⁸ Cf. Moberly's description of the "Eden narrative" as a kind of "'wisdom' literature" that "provoke[s] hard reflection on the nature of life in the world with a view to moral and spiritual growth," is "open to various interpretations," and "resists simple closure" (*The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 77, 87; cf. 64).

¹⁹ Pelikan, *What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?*, 33.

²⁰ Having first told the story of the cosmos from the perspective of intellect, he proceeds to tell it from the perspective of necessity. See 47d–48e.

²¹ Quotations from the *Timaeus* are drawn from *Plato's Timaeus*, trans. Peter Kalkavage (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2001).

²² Timaeus would thus concur with what Brague says of the God of the Bible: "it is not in the chaos preceding creation that he must be sought.... One must seek him in the order of the created world, in what is intelligible in that world" (*The Wisdom of the World*, 46). Yet because Timaeus's account has to do with

ratio and measure,” the demiurge first configures it by means of “forms and numbers” into the mathematically intelligible elements of fire, earth, air, and water (53a–b). Artfully compounding these elements, and uniting them with souls compounded from a mixture of the Same, the Other, and Being, he fashions the cosmos and the celestial bodies within it as living beings that revolve in orderly circuits (35a–40d). The structure and intelligibility of the heavenly spheres—whose orderly motions human beings are instructed to contemplate by means of “a kind of philosophy” and to apply to the “wander-stricken circuits” of their own intellects (47b–c)—are thus the product of a divine art or *technē*.²³

The demiurge’s mastery of disorderly motion in fashioning the cosmos both makes possible, and serves as a paradigm for, the psychological and political self-mastery of human beings. Yet there remains in Timaeus’s myth a fundamental tension between human perfection and cosmic order. This is because the necessary motions of natural bodies conflict directly with the internal order of human souls. Plato introduces this conflict by prefacing Timaeus’s cosmology with a story about Solon, who learns from an Egyptian priest that much of the human race is periodically destroyed by floods, fires, and “thousands of other means.”²⁴ According to Timaeus, the periodic floods that inundate the macrocosm are reproduced in microcosm when the human intellect is joined with the body and the non-rational parts of the soul. Tied to a “body subject

Becoming and not with Being, it can aspire only to “trust” (*pistis*) and not “truth” (*alētheia*: 29b–d); this necessary uncertainty seems to be reflected in the fact that the dialogue does not make the demiurge an object of worship (Pelikan, *What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?*, 28–9, 36–7).

²³ The demiurge’s exemplary mastery of disorderly motion is reflected in the mathematically intelligible and musical movement of the “planets” (*planēta*, from the verb *planasthai*, “to wander”) along the cosmic circle of the Other, the ecliptic. See 36c–d and 38c–40d with Kalkavage, *Plato’s Timaeus*, 65, n. 34 and Appendix B (150–54).

²⁴ While such episodes are rooted in the natural necessity that attaches to the motion of heavenly and sublunary bodies alike, the priest explains that the only traces of them in the consciousness of the Greeks—who, unlike the Egyptians, are subject to periodic flooding that wipes out all but the “illiterate and uneducated”—appear in the veiled form of myth (22b–23b). The priest refers specifically to the myth of Phaethon, who lost control of the chariot of the sun and thus burned the earth (22c–d). Astronautical engineers have recently argued that this myth was inspired by a real event—the massive asteroid, reported by a Sumerian astronomer in 3123 B.C.E., that passed “over Sodom and Gomorrah ... [and] would have broiled those below at temperatures reaching seven hundred and fifty degrees” (Tad Friend, “Vermin of the Sky,” *The New Yorker*, February 28, 2011, 24).

to inflow and outflow” as though “bound within a prodigious river,” the “circuits of the immortal soul” are assailed by a flood of sensations, emotions, and desires and “washed over” by a “food-supplying wave” together with a “stream of increase and nutriment” (42a, 43a–b, 44b). Subject as it is to these multiple affections, which cause “the most widespread and greatest [internal] commotion,” the soul “becomes unintelligent” (44a–b). But as the demiurge explains to the yet-to-be embodied intellects of human beings, this situation gives rise to nothing less than the human vocation:²⁵

If they were to master these [sensations and forceful affections], they would live in justice, but if they were mastered by them, then in injustice. And he who has lived well throughout his appropriate time would make his way back to the dwelling of his lawful star. . . . But he who had failed to live well would, in his second birth, take on woman’s nature. If in that form he still did not refrain from evil, then in whatever mode he might make himself bad, he would always take on some such bestial nature in the similitude of that mode of life that was born in him. And he would keep changing and would not cease from his labors until he had reached the following point: not before he should draw along with the circuit of the Same and Similar that was in himself the vast mob of fire and water and air and earth that had later grown over it and, having mastered by reason that roaring and irrational mob, reach the form of his first and best condition. (42b–d)

As this passage makes clear, the perfection of the cosmos depends on the inevitable *imperfection* of human beings. The only human beings fashioned by the gods are male; in order that the cosmos embrace within itself all of the various kinds of animals and thus “be sufficiently perfect,” it is therefore necessary that at least some of these human beings repeatedly fail to master the disorderly motions of their souls, and so become reincarnated as women, birds, four-footed land animals, snakes, and fish (41b–c, 90e–92c).²⁶

²⁵ The demiurge speaks after having temporarily implanted each soul in a separate star so as to display “the nature of the all” (41e). The fact that the number of souls is limited by the number of stars subtly suggests the superiority of the cosmos to human beings. See 41e–42a.

²⁶ Another striking feature of this passage is its use of political imagery in comparing rational self-mastery to the forceful subordination of an unruly multitude (cf. 70a–b).

In general, Timaeus's philosophical orientation is practical and productive. The philosophical contemplation of the inherent rationality and intelligibility of the cosmos is not good in and of itself; rather, it is *useful*, in that it discloses a mathematical and musical order to which we may attune, and after which we may model, the motions of our souls.²⁷ Yet this very usefulness comes to light only within the horizon of Timaeus's beautiful myth, as if to suggest that *he* is the true demiurge of the cosmos he describes—a cosmos that exists only in speech.²⁸ The fundamentally poetic character of Timaeus's "likely story" must also be taken into account in assessing his emphasis on force, manliness, and the spirited imposition of order in soul and city alike, an emphasis that springs from the tension between human life and the natural order that stands at the center of his philosophical anthropology.²⁹ The myth is meant to assure us that the ordering activity of spirit or *thumos* is capable, both in principle and in practice, of following the commands of intellect.³⁰ However, Timaeus's assertion that the human intellect is impaired when it becomes embodied means that the spirited mastery of disorderly motion in the soul is in fact a *precondition* of adequate cognition.³¹ What is worse, a soul that necessarily "becomes unintelligent" through its connection with the body (44a–b) can *never* be sure that it is capable of forming adequate judgments about the world. With respect to Timaeus's

²⁷ This is a major theme of Kalkavage's Introduction (*Plato's Timaeus*, 1–44).

²⁸ Cf. Brague's assertion that the *Timaeus* is a "thoroughly ironic" dialogue that "describes the cosmology required by a particular anthropology" (*The Wisdom of the World*, 32). Note also Critias's reference, at 27a, to "the men born by his [Timaeus's] speech," and Timaeus's mention, at *Critias* 106a, to the god "who has just now come into being in my words."

²⁹ At 90e, Timaeus remarks that it is a combination of cowardice and injustice that leads one to be reincarnated as a woman. Cf. the political imagery of 44d, where he asserts that the head "despotically rules [*despotoum*] all the parts within us." On the connection between the order of the political regime and the order of the soul, see 87a–b.

³⁰ Cf. 70a, where Timaeus compares the head to an acropolis or "citadel," from which reason issues commands to *thumos* so as to "forcibly keep down the class of desires."

³¹ The priority in human existence of spirit and force to intellect and cognition is hinted at in the order of Timaeus's exposition, which fails to follow the order of cosmogony: "as for the soul, although we are at present attempting to speak of her as though she came later [than the body], the god did not in fact contrive her younger ... but we who somehow partake largely of the accidental and random do so also when we speak" (34b–c). For further discussion, see Jacob Howland, "Partisanship and the Work of Philosophy in Plato's *Timaeus*," *Review of Politics* 69.1 (2007): 1–27.

confidence in the power of the human intellect to order the soul and the city on the model of the cosmos, the wish seems to be father to the thought. In this crucial sense, philosophy in the *Timaeus* remains indistinguishable from poetry.

II. Wisdom and Necessity in the *Statesman's Myth of the Reversed Cosmos*

In the *Statesman's* great myth, the philosophical Stranger from Elea describes a perpetual oscillation between cosmic cycles that is punctuated by transitional periods of chaos.³² During the current cycle, in which the cosmos and all its parts move independently and must care for themselves, human existence is characterized by harsh necessity and increasing disorder. During the counter-cycle, in which the cosmos is rewound by a god, human beings are cared for by a divine shepherd and human life is maximally ordered and simple. In neither cycle are the conditions optimal for philosophical inquiry: in the counter-cycle, human beings have speech, but lack memory and the spur of necessity; in the current cycle, philosophical leisure conflicts, both formally and substantively, with the material and political work that secures the indispensable conditions of life. While the current cycle reflects the tension between intellect and necessity of which *Timaeus* speaks, the two cycles together underscore the incompatibility of life and knowledge in human existence to which the Bible also directs our attention.

During the counter-cycle, a divine "helmsman" cares for the cosmos as a whole, while demigods "shepherd" human beings and all of the animals in "herds" divided by species (271d–e).³³ The human condition in this cycle, characterized as it is by childlike dependence and tranquility, is in many respects like life in Eden prior to the creation of the woman (at Genesis 2:22). Human beings are naked, but do not reproduce sexually; they live outdoors, lush grasses suffice for their bedding, and their food is the fruit of trees. There are no wars, regimes, or families, and because each divine shepherd is "all-sufficing" for the

³² The myth of the reversed cosmos is thus a cosmology but not a creation story, because it posits the temporal infinity of the universe. Like *Timaeus's* cosmology, it is presented as the inner, philosophical truth of the more familiar myths of the poetic tradition (cf. 268e–269b with *Timaeus* 22b–d). The same is true—at least to some extent—of Genesis's story of origins, which involves "a demythologizing" in relation to other ancient Near Eastern accounts" of creation (Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 52).

³³ *Kubernētēs*, "helmsman," is the root of the English words "governor" and "cybernetics."

herd under its care, no need compels human beings to develop the arts that support life in the current cycle (271d–272a).³⁴ The residents of the counter-cycle are furthermore capable of associating through speech with one another and with the beasts (272 b–c). But having no awareness of death and being defective in memory, the human herd seems to lack both the desire and the capability to pursue wisdom.³⁵ In any case, the Stranger makes it clear that philosophy would in neither cycle consist in silent theoretical contemplation. Rather, philosophy involves the essentially Socratic activity of “learning by inquiry from every nature whether each with its own kind of private capacity [is] aware of something different from all the rest for the gathering and collection of intelligence [*phronēsis*]” (272c).

The word *phronēsis* ordinarily connotes a practical wisdom that manifests itself in a life well lived. In the counter-cycle, philosophy would be an end in itself; in the current cycle, when human beings are required “to manage their way of life, and their own care for themselves, just as the cosmos as a whole” (274d), philosophy is necessary for the achievement of intelligent self-government. The urgent need for philosophy in the current cycle arises from a significant difference between the human condition and that of the cosmos. During the counter-cycle, the “demiurge and father” of the cosmos instructs it in how to care for itself; during the current cycle, the cosmos is at first guided by the memory of this instruction, but is gradually destabilized by the disorder inherent in the nature of matter (273b).³⁶ Like Timaeus, the Stranger maintains that human life properly “imitat[es] ... and follow[s] along with the cosmos” (274d–e), but in fact, human life in the current cycle *begins* in “great and resourceless perplexities [*aporiais*]” (274c).³⁷ What is worse, a cold

³⁴ The animals are similarly peaceful: they do not feed on one another, and there is no savagery or harshness among them (271d–e).

³⁵ In the counter-cycle, time flows backward, so that individuals return to life from death, springing from the earth with no memory of those who came before, growing younger in soul as well as body, and ultimately disappearing altogether (270d–271a). The Stranger nevertheless asserts that, if the inhabitants of the counter-cycle use their leisure in order to philosophize, they are happier “by a thousandfold” than human beings in the current cycle; conversely, if they use it to eat, drink, and tell myths like the ones the poets tell today about the age of Cronos, “then this, too ... is easily decided” (272c–e).

³⁶ The Stranger explains that “forgetfulness” increasingly arises in the cosmos, “perplexities” multiply, and when the cosmos is about to “sink into the sea, which is limitless, of dissimilarity,” the god “once more takes his seat at its rudder” and begins to rewind it (273c–e).

³⁷ In the Platonic dialogues, the word *aporia* regularly designates philosophical bewilderment.

logic—the outlines of which are visible in the *Timaeus*—militates against the successful acquisition of practical wisdom. The transition between cycles is punctuated by widespread chaos that destroys most human beings, and whereas the few survivors are “weak and unguarded,” the beasts whose natural harshness was suppressed in the counter-cycle now become “savage” (270c–d, 274b).³⁸ Human beings are therefore compelled to organize themselves into communities that can ward off attack; the natural distinctions according to which the demigods were accustomed to pasture (*nemein*) the animals in the counter-cycle are now replaced by the division of human communities according to *nomos*.³⁹ Under these conditions, the distinctive customs and practices of a community—maintained and transmitted from generation to generation not by rational argument, but by the forceful inducements of honor, shame, and punishment—are justified by, and derive ever-increasing authority from, the simple fact that the community endures.⁴⁰ But the spirited inculcation of unanimity, without which a community would be unable to ward off external threats and would likely fall prey to civil strife, stands in tension with the rational activity of philosophical inquiry; because radical philosophical questioning threatens to undermine the indispensable authority of law and custom, Socratic inquiry must be sharply curtailed in the name of *phronēsis* itself. The Stranger therefore implicitly endorses the public prosecution of Socrates that is initiated concurrently, in dramatic time, with the conversation that unfolds in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*.⁴¹

³⁸ These “beasts” certainly include human beings.

³⁹ The words *nomos* and *nemein* are etymologically related. Cain’s worry that, as a wanderer, he will be killed (presumably by murderous men like himself) also points in the direction of the need for human beings to band together for self-defense, except that God protects him by promising to avenge him if he is killed (Genesis 4:13–15).

⁴⁰ Cf. the following remark in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (9.262): “Manifold experience teaches [the citizens of the *polis*] to which qualities above all they owe the fact that, despite all gods and men, they are still there, that they have always triumphed: these qualities they call virtues, these virtues alone they cultivate. They do this with hardness, indeed they want hardness; every aristocratic morality is intolerant—in the education of youth, in the arrangements for women, in their marriage customs, in the relations of old and young, in their penal laws . . . they consider intolerance itself a virtue, calling it ‘justice.’” I have slightly modified the translation of Walter Kaufmann, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Random House, 1966).

⁴¹ See esp. *Statesman* 299b–d. For a discussion of this passage, see Jacob Howland, *The Paradox of Political Philosophy: Socrates’ Philosophic Trial* (Lanham, MD:

III. Knowledge and Human Existence in Genesis 1–3

While the *Timaeus* explores the possibility of deriving a philosophical politics from cosmological inquiry, the *Statesman* uses cosmology primarily as a vehicle for illuminating the tension between the natural circumstances of human existence and the achievement of knowledge and virtuous order. In both dialogues, the demiurge's care focuses on the cosmos, which is a living and divine being;⁴² in both, the demiurge is referred to as the "father" of the cosmos, but in neither is he said to be the father of human beings. In the Bible, however, the cosmos and the heavenly spheres within it are neither living nor divine; it is human beings who are the special object of God's care, and who alone are said to be created in His image.⁴³ Nor is the cosmos a fitting model for human behavior. Nevertheless, the Bible recapitulates some of the central intellectual and existential problems and terms of analysis of the *Timaeus* and the *Statesman*.

We noted earlier that the task of interpretation consists in putting together the parts of a discourse into a whole. The first things we must put together in reading the Bible are the two distinct origin myths with which it begins, the story of seven days (Genesis 1:1–2:4) and the Eden narrative (2:5–3:24). We must put them together, because the text does not; the first myth is a sealed literary whole with no narrative connection to what follows. Why must the story of origins be told twice? The simplest answer is that the Bible wishes to call attention to the internal duality of human existence, a duality that is evident in the essential differences between the two myths. We are told in Genesis 1:27 that "God created the human [*ha'adam*] in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them"; in other words, God initially creates one human body in which sexual differentiation is potential but not yet actual.⁴⁴ Being nothing more or less than the image

Roman & Littlefield, 1998), 272–79. Socrates meets the preliminary indictment of Meletus on the day before the *Sophist* and *Statesman* (cf. *Theaetetus* 210d).

⁴² The cosmos is "a happy god" (*Timaeus* 34b) and is "deathless and ageless" (*Statesman* 273e).

⁴³ As Brague notes, "the devaluing of celestial bodies [in the Bible] was intended to extirpate the worship of the stars" (*The Wisdom of the World*, 49). Cf. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and The God of Abraham*, 48–49 with Kass's observation that "the cosmos [in the Bible] is neither divine nor a source of ... moral-political teaching" (*The Beginning of Wisdom*, 57; on the "demotion of the sun," which is created on day four although light is created on day one, see 40).

⁴⁴ In quoting the Bible, I draw from the translation of Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1996) as well

of God, the human would seem to be ontologically simple as well. In the second origin story, human being is ontologically and physiologically twofold; *ha'adam* is formed from the dust of the earth and the breath of God, and is later split into *isha* and *ish*, “woman” and “man” (2:7, 21–22). A similar distinction is evident with respect to speech and desire. In the second story, human speech arises in the context of the attempt to repair a deficiency, the absence of a fitting helper for the human; in the first, *ha'adam* does not speak, presumably because he feels no lack. The first story is complete in and of itself, because there is no internal dynamic to drive the narrative forward; in the second story, human desire results in divine curses and the expulsion from Eden. In sum, human existence in the first origin myth is characterized by internal simplicity and wholeness, silent fulfillment, and harmony with God and the created order; in the second, by internal complexity and fragmentation, articulate desire, and alienation from God and world alike.

This is not all, for duality *as such* has an intellectual significance in the Bible's double story of origins. Like Plato's Eleatic Stranger, the Bible regards analytical discrimination and synthetic integration—the distinction of this from that, and the collection of multiple elements into a unified whole—as the most fundamental operations of intellect.⁴⁵ In the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, the Stranger employs a way of inquiry known as *diaeresis* or “division,” which arrives at definitions through a ramifying process of bifurcation into kinds and sub-kinds.⁴⁶ God's creative and intellectually paradigmatic speech at the beginning of the Bible assumes a similar form. God introduces intelligible structure into a preexisting watery chaos by means of a series of distinctions that open up a physical and temporal space in which life becomes possible.⁴⁷ The internal logic

as the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999). All chapter and verse citations refer to Genesis.

⁴⁵ According to the Stranger, analytical discrimination itself has two forms; at *Sophist* 226d, he divides the diacritical art into the separation of worse from better and of like from like.

⁴⁶ Diaeresis starts with a general category and ends with the specific thing sought. The resulting analyses take the form of logical trees, in which the right-hand branch of each division is itself further divided until the process is complete. The final diaeresis of the *Sophist*, for example, begins with art (*techné* τεχνή, which is then divided into acquisition and production, and concludes with the sophist (235c–236c, 265a–268d).

⁴⁷ It has been observed that the business of Israelite priests also essentially involves division and separation of clean and unclean (see Leviticus 10:10 and 11:46–47 with the remarks of Goldingay and Levenson quoted in Moberly, *The Theology*

of creation may furthermore be represented as a sequence of six bifurcations, beginning with the separation of all creatures into those that lack place (i.e., light) and those that have place, and ending with man—the only being that is created in God’s image.⁴⁸ One final bifurcation could be said to be left to the reader, who must think through a distinction that the first human beings fail to comprehend. This is the distinction between the image of God and the original of which it is an image.

Maimonides grasps the essence of the first story of origins in observing that “it is on account of . . . intellectual apprehension that it is said of man: *In the image of God created He him.*”⁴⁹ God’s intellect is genuinely productive in a way that man’s is not; in the act of divine creation, being follows speech, whereas for man, discriminating *logos* follows the structure of being.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, human beings *are*—at their best—godlike in their capacity to comprehend the order that God has established. For God, the creative distinctions of Genesis 1 are followed by a contemplative synthesis: “God saw all the He had done, and, look, it was very good” (1:31). The human intellect, too, is capable of just such a contemplative appreciation of creation as an articulated whole, and it is precisely in this kind of purely theoretical activity that Maimonides locates the goodness of the human condition prior to the expulsion from Eden. “Through the intellect,” he writes, “one distinguishes between truth and

of the Book of Genesis, 43, n. 6 and 57). From the perspective of the present analysis, this priestly activity both presupposes and reiterates the primordial divisions of God in Genesis 1.

⁴⁸ Leo Strauss therefore remarks that the intelligible order of creation is “based on . . . what Plato called *diairesis*” (“On the Interpretation of Genesis,” in Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997], 367). Strauss’s analysis is diagrammed in Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 34; cf. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, 50–51. Brown notes that creation in the story of seven days has two main phases. The first phase corresponds to the statement in Genesis 1:2 that the earth was “formless” (*tohu*) and the second corresponds to the statement that the earth was “empty” (*vabohu*); thus, the domains that are established in the first three days—domains that are themselves structured by a series of oppositions (day and night, the water above and the water below, earth and seas)—are in turn filled with living beings in the next three days (*The Ethos of the Cosmos*, 37–39). Cf. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 47.

⁴⁹ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, vol. 1, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1.1 (22).

⁵⁰ In general, one might say that the human intellect is a mere image of God’s because it can reflect (and reflect *on*) ontological reality, but cannot call it into being.

falsehood, and this was found in [Adam] in its perfection and integrity.” His illustration of this distinction is apposite: one says that it is true that the heaven is spherical and false that the earth is flat.⁵¹

Maimonides is not alone in connecting the two origin myths of Genesis in a way that suggests the wholeness and perfection of the original human condition. An aggadic midrash interprets “male and female He created them” to mean that male and female were originally fused in a two-faced body of dual form, from which God later split off the female form (2:21–22).⁵² This midrash recalls the myth of Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*, in which Zeus cuts the original dual-formed human beings in half so as to make them too weak to try to supplant the gods.⁵³ In the Bible, however, man’s rivalrous and transgressive aspiration to divinity arises only *after* man and woman are physically distinguished.⁵⁴ But if the original condition of human beings was characterized by the peacefulness and tranquility of life in God’s garden and the goodness of theoretical cognition, why did this aspiration arise in the first place? What is it about the tree of knowledge of good and bad that would appeal to beings who *already* enjoy intellectual perfection along with all the blessings of an Edenic existence?

It turns out that we are asking the wrong question, because the perfection of the theoretical intellect is radically inconsistent with the self-consciousness that is minimally required in order to deem oneself happy. Let

⁵¹ *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.2 (24–25).

⁵² *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:1. Rashi follows this interpretation; see his remarks on 1:27 and 2:21.

⁵³ *Symposium* 190c–d. Like the man and the woman after they are split apart, the separated halves seek to “become one flesh” (2:24) and thereby, as Alter observes, to recapture their “impossible primal unity” (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 31).

⁵⁴ Rashi nonetheless hints at the restriction of man’s spirited nature in his comment on the spelling of וּבְשָׁה at 1:28: “Furthermore, [the word is spelled this way] to teach you that the man, whose practice it is to conquer, is commanded regarding being fruitful and multiplying, but not the woman” (*The Torah: With Rashi’s Commentary*, trans. Rabbi Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg [New York: Mesorah Publications, 1995], 18). As Pangle observes, God’s later destruction of the tower of Babel, whereby He “primarily ensures not that humanity will be any purer, but that it will be decisively weakened,” does bear a close resemblance to the strategy of Zeus (*Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, 124). An echo of this strategy may also be heard in God’s decision perpetually to remind human beings of their sin by means of the pain of childbirth and the strenuousness of labor; cf. 3:16–18 with *Symposium* 190e–191a, where Apollo fashions the navel as a lasting memorial of Zeus’s punishment and of the dependent nature of human beings.

us pick up the text just prior to God's introduction of sexual differentiation. In naming the newly-created animals (2:20), *ha'adam* distinguishes and designates their various kinds or species. He thus demonstrates both the analytical and the synthetic powers of his theoretical intellect, and therewith his affinity to God.⁵⁵ Yet his intellectual perfection seems to be accompanied by a lack of subjectivity and self-consciousness: he names every animal but *himself*, and we are never told what he is thinking or feeling.⁵⁶ Everything changes when God forms the woman and presents her to her partner. In his excitement, the man resorts to poetry:

And the human (*ha'adam*) said:
 This one at last,
 bone of my bones,
 And flesh of my flesh,
 This one shall be called woman (*isha*)
 For from man (*ish*) was this one taken. (2:23)

The first thing to notice about this passage is that it is actually the man (*ha'ish*) who speaks, *not* the primordial human (*ha'adam*); in blurring the distinction between these two, the text implicitly asks the reader to think about their difference. We may begin by observing that the man's speech resembles, but does not reduplicate, the speech of the human when he names the animals. Like the names of the animals, *ish* and *isha* do not identify particular individuals; they designate two newly-created kinds, the male human being and the female human being.⁵⁷ The words *ish* and *isha* furthermore resemble the kinds they name in being somewhat different, yet fundamentally alike. Up to this point, the theoretical intelligence of the *ish* seems to be on a par with that of *ha'adam*. Unlike the human, however, the man *does* name himself; the introduction of sexual differentiation seems to coincide with the birth of self-consciousness. But this excited and expressive self-consciousness falls short of self-knowledge. In

⁵⁵ Cf. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 74: the act of naming, reason's "primordial activity," involves a combination of "separating" and "combining." The Koran indirectly recognizes the divine character of the intellectual activity of naming in attributing this activity to Allah (2.31).

⁵⁶ Thus it is *God* who determines that it is "not good" for *ha'adam* to be alone (2:18). The text goes on to state that "for the human no fitting helper was found" (2:20), but it fails to specify whose judgment this was.

⁵⁷ The man gives the woman a proper name, Chava, only after he learns that he must return to the dust from which he came (3:19–20). Mortality and individuality seem to go hand in hand.

particular, the man is mistaken about his priority to the woman: *isha* was not taken from *ish*, but from *adam*. Indeed, it is only through the separation of “woman” that “man” comes to be.⁵⁸ This error is absolutely fundamental, because it effectively obscures our human origins. The man’s confusion is metaphysical and ontological; he mistakes a part for a whole, and what is posterior in the order of being for what is primary. He thereby evinces a desire to create, as God does, by calling things into being through speech alone. What is more, he absurdly presents himself as utterly independent; in forgetting *ha’adam*, he also forgets the God in whose image *ha’adam* was created. His declaration that “this one shall be called woman, for from man was this one taken” (2:23) is thus a comic echo of “male and female He created them” (1:27); in content as well as form, it is pure poetry.

In sum, the creation of the woman marks a transition between two distinct phases of human existence which match up roughly, but not precisely, with the two stories of origins. The first phase, which extends into the Eden narrative, is characterized by intellectual perfection coupled with a lack of self-consciousness. The second phase is characterized by an intellectually deficient form of self-knowledge that reflects a misguided aspiration to divinity. One could state the difference between these phases in Greek philosophical terms: in the first phase, *ha’adam* exists as a genuine likeness (*eikōn*) of God, but does not know it; in the second, *ha’ish* exists as a mere imitation or apparition (*phantasma*) of God just to the extent that he wrongly identifies himself with Him.⁵⁹ In both phases, as in the two cosmic cycles of the *Statesman*, the combination of life and knowledge that would constitute the happiest or most blessed existence is unavailable to human beings. The transition between these two phases is marked by the introduction of human sexual differentiation and the consequent birth of sexual desire. This is the Bible’s version of the *Timaieus*’s point that the intellect is disturbed when it is joined with the body; in Genesis, however, this disturbance arises not from corpore-

⁵⁸ Sandor Goodhart, “The End of Sacrifice: Reading René Girard and the Hebrew Bible,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 14 (2007): 63–64. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, “And God Created Woman,” in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 167–68 and Ronna Burger, “Male and Female Created He Them: Some Platonic Reflections on Genesis 1–3,” in *Nature, Women, and the Art of Politics*, ed. Eduardo Velasquez (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 1–18, esp. 6 with n. 24, 16.

⁵⁹ Cf. *Sophist* 236b, where a *phantasma* is said “not to be like [*eikos*] that which it claims to be like [*eoikenai*].”

ality as such, but from sexuality.

The understanding of the *isha*, like that of the *ish*, is less than perfect: in responding to the serpent's opening question, she adds to God's prohibition, and she seems to confuse the tree of knowledge of good and bad with the tree of life (3:1–3).⁶⁰ It is to the woman that the serpent seems to promise the opportunity to become “like divine beings” by eating the forbidden fruit (3:5). But as Maimonides observes, everything turns on the ambiguity of the word *elohim*, which may mean “rulers” as well as “the deity” and “the angels.” In eating the forbidden fruit and being expelled from Eden, he explains, human beings assume the burden of self-rule and become absorbed “in judging things to be fine or bad.”⁶¹ Fine (or good) and bad are furthermore not objects of intellectual cognition, but “things generally accepted as known”—matters of *nomos*, as is suggested by the subsequent desire of the man and the woman to cover their natural nakedness.⁶² But why is this particular distinction lost on the first human beings? Why do they mistake rulers—mere *images* of God—for the genuine article?

We have already begun to answer this question in observing the man's intellectually confused aspiration to divinity. The knowledge of good and bad—which resembles the knowledge of true and false in that it is inherently dichotomous, and can be represented as a treelike series of branching distinctions—is particularly attractive from a human standpoint because it is productive in a way that at least superficially resembles the creative power of intellect through which God fashions the cosmos out of chaos. This point is implicit in a rabbinic midrash that has the serpent connecting the knowledge of good and bad with

⁶⁰ See Rashi on 3:3 with Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 84–85 and Goodhart, “The End of Sacrifice,” 66.

⁶¹ *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.2 (23, 25). The punishment for disobeying God thus consists in trading a good thing for a bad one, as is clear from the immediate sequel: “Then he knew how great his loss was, what he had been deprived of, and upon what a state he had entered.” Because human beings are notably resistant to moral order—because, as God is forced to admit when he smells the odor of Noah's burnt offering, “the devising of man's mind are evil from his youth” (8:21)—the project of self-rule involves great toil and trouble. Cf. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 94: “To sum it [the punishment] up in one word: civilization. The ‘punishment’ for trying to rise above childishness and animality is to be forced to live like a human being.”

⁶² *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.2 (24). In the Greek tradition, clothing is regularly associated with *nomos*, and nakedness with *phusis*; see Herodotus, *The History* 1.8 with Plato, *Republic* 452a–e.

the power to “create other worlds.”⁶³ In particular, the opportunity to produce laws and customs that reflect their own judgments of good and bad promises to allow human beings not only to issue commandments, after the fashion of God, but also to create an ordered *social* world of their *own* making. Another midrash, on the creation of *ha’adam* in the image of God, clarifies what is involved in attempting to imitate God in this manner. According to Rashi, “man was made with a stamp, like a coin which is made through a die.”⁶⁴ The conventional character of coinage is reflected in the English term “numismatics,” which is built on the Greek word *nomos*. If human beings are “coined” in God’s image, their very being may be said to reflect, in an artful and conventional manner, that which is ontologically prior to all artifice and custom. What the first human beings seem to mistake for godhood is *nomos* as such—the power to coin or mint human beings through laws and customs.⁶⁵ But considered in itself and apart from the knowledge of God, *nomos* has no discernible form; it thus falls short of being any determinate kind of power or capacity at all, much less a divine one.

While the preceding reflections clarify both the attraction and the difficulty of human self-governance, the narrative suggests a simpler and more plausible explanation of the allure of the forbidden fruit. Let us therefore return one last time to the text.

IV. A Brief Conclusion: Mimetic Desire and the Word of God

The serpent initiates the first conversation recorded in the Bible. This fact seems significant, because it alerts us to the genesis of desire in a social context. In particular, the woman’s longing for the forbidden fruit is aroused by the serpent’s claim that “God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will become like *elohim* who know good and bad” (3:5). Upon hearing these words, we are told, the woman “saw that the tree was good for eating,” and so forth. Yet it is only after she shares the fruit with the man that “the eyes of both of them were opened” (3:7), a phrase that suggests awakening from sleep. In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates defines dreaming, “whether one is asleep or

⁶³ *Bereshit Rabbah* 19:4.

⁶⁴ *The Torah: With Rashi’s Commentary*, 17 (on 1:27).

⁶⁵ In Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, the character of Socrates uses the same numismatic image to make a more radical suggestion about the nature and existence of the gods. When Strepsiades swears to pay Socrates for his lessons, Socrates replies: “What sorts of gods will you swear by? For first of all, the gods are not current coinage [*nomisma*] for us” (247–48).

awake,” as “believing a likeness of something to be not a likeness, but rather the thing itself to which it is like” (476c). This precisely describes the woman’s confusion of rulers with gods.

In mistaking what is human for what is divine, the woman falls into idolatry.⁶⁶ Her idolatrous dream is induced by means of the triangular mechanism of mimetic desire—desire for an object that is mediated or modeled by the desire of another for that same object.⁶⁷ In this case, the desirability of the forbidden fruit is mediated directly by the serpent and indirectly by the figure of God. But what does the serpent wish to accomplish? In a remarkable midrash, Rashi attributes to the serpent his *own* mimetically-induced dream; the serpent, he claims, aims to supplant the man in order to have sexual intercourse with the woman.⁶⁸ According to Rashi, the serpent trusts God’s pronouncement that eating the forbidden fruit will cause death; he assumes that the woman will be cautious enough to test the fruit by first giving it to the man, who will expire after tasting it.⁶⁹ But in the event, the serpent arouses in the woman a desire that is strong enough to make her forget God’s warning altogether.⁷⁰

Rashi’s midrash is particularly illuminating because it closes the circle of mimetic influence, a circle that connects God’s creatures only insofar

⁶⁶ Cf. Goodhart, “The End of Sacrifice,” 68.

⁶⁷ On the triangular structure of mimetic desire, and the rivalry this desire entails, see René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 1–52. Although the theme cannot be developed here, Plato is well aware of the problem of mimetic desire. In the *Republic*, Socrates presents the natural impulse to imitate others—and in particular, to “say the same things are noble and base as they do, practice what they practice, and *be such as they are*” (492c, emphasis added)—as a serious danger to the development of philosophical natures; cf. 492a–d with 514a–517a and n. 75.

⁶⁸ This midrash picks up on the wordplay of 2:25 and 3:1: “The two of them were naked [*arumim*], the human and his woman, and they were not ashamed. Now the serpent was most cunning [*arum*]...” In his comment on 3:1, Rashi explains that, because the man and the woman felt no shame, they engaged openly in sexual relations; the serpent, having seen them copulating, conceived the desire to possess the woman for himself. Augustine connects the two desires at play in this part of the Eden narrative in comparing the rebelliousness of the sexual organs against the rational will to the disobedience of man against God (*City of God*, 14.17–19).

⁶⁹ See Rashi on 3:15.

⁷⁰ About the man’s desire, on the other hand, the text tells us simply that the woman “also gave [the fruit] to her man, and he ate” (3:6); it would seem that he passively follows her example.

as it excludes God Himself: the serpent's sexual desire is awakened and focused by the example of the man, while the man's consumption of the fruit may be traced back, through the mediation of the woman, to the speech of the serpent.⁷¹ A verbal echo underscores this connection with "the most cunning [*arum*] of all the beasts of the field" (3:1): "the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew they were naked [*eyrmin*]" (3:7). Having stripped themselves of the sole commandment of God,⁷² they perceive that they are left with nothing but their native cleverness, which immediately manifests itself in makeshift modes of self-concealment—fig leaves and pretexts. The sequel reiterates this chain of influence and reenacts it in reverse. When interrogated by God, the man explains that "the woman whom you gave by me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate" (3:12), and the woman, apparently taking her cue from this excuse, asserts that "the serpent duped me, and I ate" (3:13).

In these statements, ethical falsehood hides behind the mask of descriptive truth. How can human beings both know the good, and live by this knowledge? Outside of Eden, we may hope to answer this question only by "the sweat of [the] brow" (3:19)—that is, by intellectual and material labor. But unlike Plato's demiurges, God does not leave us to our own devices.⁷³

The imitative nature of human beings exponentially multiplies the confusion between the image and the original of God that coincides with the birth of human self-consciousness. Rashi's intuition that mimetic influence is a closed circle furthermore implies that there can be no immanent or "hermeneutical" solution of the sort the Eleatic Stranger envisions—the "gathering and collection of *phronēsis*" by means of dialogue (*Statesman* 272c). Human existence must instead be radically broken open. This is precisely what God attempts to do in calling out "Where are you?" (3:9). It is significant that the most promising sort of response—*hineni*, "Here I am!"—first comes from a man whom God has

⁷¹ I speak here of mimetic "influence" because desire cannot be *merely* mimetic; like sexual desire, the aspiration to divinity could not be aroused if it were not already present in human beings. As we have just seen, it is present in the man from the moment the woman is created.

⁷² See Rashi on 3:7 with Bereshit Rabbah 19:6.

⁷³ God's fabrication of adequate clothing for the man and the woman (3:21) anticipates his promulgation of guiding laws. See n. 62. Burger argues that the "clothing" of the law of God both "replaces the lost state of innocence prior to the experience of shame and fear by covering over the nakedness that elicits that experience" and offers an indirect path to the wholeness or completeness of *ha'adam* ("Male and Female," 12).

assiduously separated from his community (22:1). Yet the Bible's critique of the project of philosophical politics rests ultimately on the insight that it is not sufficient simply to take certain questions seriously. As the cosmological myths of the *Timaeus* and the *Statesman* make clear, Plato's philosophers are themselves guided, both metaphysically and morally, by the question "Where are you?" But trying to answer a question is not the same as hearkening to, and entering into a relationship with, the **N V** who questions.⁷⁴ This may be the most fundamental difference between Greek philosophy and the Hebrew Bible.

⁷⁴ No personal relationship—covenantal or otherwise—is possible with the demiurge of the *Timaeus*, whose involvement with human beings ceases prior to the construction of their bodies (42d–e), or that of the *Statesman*, who releases the "rudder" of the cosmos at the beginning of the current cycle (270a, 273d–e).