

Biblical Prophecy in Recent American Theological Politics*

Gabriel Levy

Abstract

This article argues for the relevance of biblical thought to progressive political philosophy. One of the most significant problems for political philosophy is the role that religion, and particularly the role that biblical faith, ought to play. Philosopher Leo Strauss provided some of the most influential answers to this problem. He is also often credited with providing some of the intellectual foundation for the “neoconservative” movement. In particular, Strauss addressed two questions relevant to today’s political environment: What is the role of truth in politics? And, what is the relation between philosophical reason and prophetic revelation? This article offers a genealogy of the concept of prophecy with particular focus on sexuality and media technology. It juxtaposes a biblical story with a modern one about how religious sovereigns come to acquire information about things beyond their control. It concludes with the argument that the Bush doctrine is an anathema to Straussian political philosophy. Neither Bush’s invocation of prophecy *nor* his neoconservatism provide him any theoretical ground to walk on.

Introduction

Biblical prophecy is a useful subject by which to come to terms with George W. Bush’s presidency. This article interrogates the central role of biblical prophecy in both Bush’s religious nationalism and his neoconservatism. The article, a study of the motivations of Bush policy through the lens of prophecy, has three aims. The first is to trace the rudiments of a genealogy of prophecy. The plotline of this genealogy is owed to Weber’s historical

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analysis of authority modified by Foucault, Preus, and Friedland. Second, it seeks to show some of the discursive conditions that allow Bush to mediate between religious nationalism and neoconservatism. Third, it examines whether and to what extent the philosophy of Leo Strauss, who is often cast as one of the architects of neoconservatism, serves these purposes. While many people are aware of the role the Bible plays in the Bush presidency, this article seeks to lay bare some of the intricacies that connect his use of biblical prophecy with his neoconservatism.

The rhetoric of prophecy in religious politics is nothing new. For Bush, however, prophecy is not just a rhetorical stance: rather, he believes he is in communication with a god who wants him to choose specific policies for his nation. In casting himself as a prophet, Bush has indeed spoken to a large number of Americans who also want to ground their fundamental values and those of the nation in that ground of all grounds, the biblical text. This is a religious form of nationalism in the sense that it is an attempt to "politicize" religion, which may be defined as propositional attitudes and practices about superhuman agents (Penner 2002, 169).

Since religions are always political, we may deepen this statement by saying that religious nationalisms ground the political life of nations with religious meaning and values. Modern religious nationalisms seek to move particular religious language and values into the public sphere, as policy choices of the nation state. They are reactions to Enlightenment secularization which tries to limit religion to the private sphere, reserving politics and science for the public sphere. Bush's conception of religion may even spill over beyond the nation state becoming a global "crusade" reminiscent of religious pre-state imperialism (Carroll 2004).

Bush and Bin Laden, who represents another form of religious nationalism, have used one another in astutely productive ways to get some of the things they wanted; they serve one another's interests (Beckett 2004). Bush uses fear of a bearded, dark person for geo-political, economic, energy-mongering, and religious purposes, most notably to establish a military presence in Iraq and to "spread freedom." Bin Laden continues to use the image of devil Bush as a foil to recruit and train future *jihad* warriors, a situation exacerbated for the long and short run by the war in Iraq. What was arguably the death-throes of a fading movement, the desperate attacks on the WTC, have provided the grounds for what Juergensmeyer prophesied in 1993 as "the new cold war" (Juergensmeyer 1993).

Social theorist of religion Roger Friedland provides the frame for understanding the role of prophecy in Bush's nationalism. He argues that religious nationalisms drive to control money, sperm, and signs; these are fluids that tend to leak the boundaries of collectivities and are therefore dangerous (Friedland 2002).¹ The family values program of religious

1. My interest in the three domains of life, labor, and language takes its cue from both Foucault (1974) and Friedland. Foucault identified these as the

nationalism concerns sexuality at its very center, but the familial economics, religion, and politics within these nationalisms cannot be easily divided. Religious nationalisms desire to control not only bodies, sperm, and women, in terms of the production and consumption of goods and pleasures, but also to control a homologous semiotic or media order. Within this semiotic order, though Friedland does not discuss it, the prophet should be understood as the bearer of currency, the deliverer of seed. By invoking the figure of prophecy Bush resonates with a similar erotic order within the prophetic literature. Both Bush and prophets are aware that the family is a subject-producing machine.

Bush's rhetoric and policy are guided by a prophetic form of politics, but there is another element that is at least as important. This element may be described as a "neoconservative" influence. Confirming the idea that a new type of conservatism is guiding his policies, Bush quipped in a speech at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC on February 23, 2003: "You are some of our country's best brains...[so good] that my government employs around twenty of you" (Frachon and Vernet 2003). Since those who are called and those who call themselves neoconservatives rarely agree on very much, let us say for the moment that what characterizes this politics is an intellectual movement that traces back to the counter-Enlightenment of the 1960s, draws a hard line between friends and enemies, and pursues an active defense, which might otherwise be called an *offense*, of the "homeland," in terms of both liberal economic policy and aggressive military policy.

Another less-mentioned element of this ideology concerns the securing of energy resources that would further or endanger that aim, especially oil. Michael T. Klare has recently provided detailed evidence that American dependence on petroleum has dictated much of Bush's policy. He finds a general conflation between the war against Islamic extremism and the protection of petroleum assets (Klare 2004, 72). He notes that the plan to "project American power" has long been Bush's plan, as early as his Citadel speech in South Carolina in 1999, when Bush spoke of "extending the current peace...across the world...across the years..." and a "new architecture of American defense." Much of this strategy was based on Wolfowitz's *Defense Planning Guidance* written for Dick Cheney and a document by The Project for a New American Century also authored by Wolfowitz called, "Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources For a New Century." Cheney's *National Energy Policy* (NEP) of May 17, 2001 actually proposed steps to increase oil consumption.²

"empiricities" or "positivities" which constitute the domain of knowledge in the modern episteme, while Friedland has focused on their role in politicized religion.

2. See Klare 2004, 59–60, 67. Oil is a fossil fuel; that is, solar energy stored in dead ancient organisms. The control of energy is indeed tied to the semiotics outlined by Friedland: "Emile Benveniste noted that while the Indo-European languages had

Many positions and policies of present neoconservatives are known to be derived from Leo Strauss's Platonic political philosophy. Shadia Drury has made this point most forcefully in a number of books and articles (especially Drury 1997). While it may be doubted the extent to which his philosophy is given actual application, there is no doubt that a significant number of Bush policy makers trace a lineage to Strauss. They even have a picnic in Washington each year ("Philosophers and Kings" 2003).

What is Biblical Prophecy?

The rhetoric of biblical prophecy used by Bush is derived from the modification and solicitation of the pan-human phenomenon of divination, which is the use of media technologies, including human media, to communicate with postulated superhuman agents. Religions that have paid attention to the Hebrew Bible and its discourse on prophecy have placed a variety of restrictions on divination in what Samuel Preus termed the "domestication of divination" (Preus 1991). Preus (among others) argues that biblical prophecy only makes sense in the context and background of writing and written tradition, in which the reification of the word allows for prophecy's subtle distinction from divination (Levy forthcoming).

The core of the prophetic literature, if there is such a thing, was a response to first-millennium BCE imperialism (by the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires in succession) as much as it was a propaganda movement of Judean nationalism. The ancient environment surrounding biblical prophecy was characterized by violent colonialism on the part of new world empires. Israel and Judea were minor vassals, caught in the power struggles between Egypt and the East (Assyria, Babylon), and later between Persia, Greece, and Rome. The prophetic impulse, which I am characterizing as an early form of religious nationalism, was a response to these events. The prophets were often represented as rebel rousers and propagandists of the proper Judean religion.

The prophet, however, is a primarily a literary phenomenon.³ The term *prophet* derives from the Greek word *prophētēs*,⁴ an interpreter, proclaimer,

no common word for religion, they concurred on the meaning of God as 'luminous.' The sun's emission of the living light, this primal condition of knowledge, is widely interpreted as the emission of sperm from the phallus" (Friedland 2002, 414).

3. This point is very much disputed. For a summary of some of the issues, see Davies 1996. For another good overview, see Ben Zvi 2000.

4. "The Greek *prophētēs* was originally the spokesman or interpreter of a divinity, e.g. of Zeus, Dionysus, Apollo, or the deliverer or interpreter of an oracle, corresponding generally to the Latin *vates*. By the LXX it was adopted to render the Heb. *nabi'*, in the O.Test. applied indiscriminately to the prophets of Jehovah, of Baal and other heathen deities, and even to 'false prophets,' reputed or pretended soothsayers. In the N.T. it is used in the same senses as in the LXX, but mainly applied to the Hebrew prophets of Jehovah, also to John the Baptist, as well as to certain

or spokesperson, which Jewish translators of the Septuagint used in place of the Hebrew word *nābî'*. The Hebrew word *nābî'* is of unclear derivation, and is used inconsistently within the text, for "the diverse activity and the historical development of Israelite prophecy do not yield a single prophetic essence" (Fleming 1993, 219). There are several different distinctive overlapping uses of the term *nābî'* or "prophet" in the Hebrew Bible. They include champion, rabble rouser, ecstatic, king's advisor, king's anointer, cult figure, medium, intercessor, leader of bands, social critic, poet, and historian (Peterson 1981; Blenkinsopp 1983; Wilson 1984). This floating characteristic of linguistic signs is a notorious result of written technology.⁵ In non-literate cultures, there may be various meanings of words one could isolate, but they are only reified as such when linguists come in to study them, or when the words are subject to the technological focus of ritual and religion (Olson 2001).

The anchor or center of gravity to this floating concept is the sense of the prophet as *chorus* for the historical narrative, whose main character is the "people of Israel." Prophets are constantly repeating the same themes in the Hebrew text: "return to your god...don't follow foreign gods." At each historical turning point a prophet comes in to steer the course, to enunciate the logic of the emplotment (see White 1987). Rather than a figure of power, the prophet is most often posed as a tragic chorus to whom no-one listens.

Historical Background

Despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that the concept of Hebrew prophecy is floating, it has been put to significant political use. Three periods are particularly relevant to a genealogy of prophecy. The first period is the second-temple era in Judea and Palestine. The second is the era of the

persons in the Early Church, who were recognized as possessing more or less of the character of the old Hebrew prophets, or as inspired to utter special revelations and predictions; also applied historically to Balaam, and by St. Paul, in the old Greek sense, to Epimenides the Cretan, while 'false prophets' are frequently mentioned. The Greek word was adopted in L. as *propheta* chiefly in post-classical times, and largely under Christian influences; and this is the regular rendering in the Itala, Vulgate, and Christian Fathers. From Ecclesiastical Latin it has passed down into the Romanic and Teutonic languages. In English the earliest uses are derived from the Scriptures; but the word is currently used in all the ancient senses and in modern ones derived from them" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://dictionary.oed.com>, s.v. "prophet").

5. For the classic illustration of the floating sign/signifier, see Levi-Strauss 1987, 63–64. The argument about the effect of writing is based on Derrida's 1973 reading of Levi-Strauss in "Structure, Sign, and Play." I use the designation "floating sign" as opposed to "floating signifier" because I think the term floating *signifier* is a misnomer. Floating signification has primarily to do with *reference*, which is the relation between a sign and a *referent*, not with signification, which is the relation between a signifier and a signified.

Reformation in Europe, with its climax in the Enlightenment and the modern nation state. The third is the present, Anglo-European culture in the year 2006, coming to terms with religious nationalism. The period of transition in modern Europe, in which we are perhaps still caught up, has been marked by the most extreme violence in human history. Particularly relevant for a study of prophecy are the religious wars following the Reformation and the current media-formed "War on Terror," which is inflected quite consciously with the rhetoric of first-millennium BCE prophecy.

These historical phases correspond to the loose historical typology already worked out by Max Weber. The first period was dominated by what Weber called traditional or patrimonial (*Patrimonialismus*) authority, while the second phase saw the emergence of bureaucratic authority. More recently, J. David Schloen (2001) has argued that the institutional matrix known as patriarchy, with its main symbol the father and his house, dominated and still dominates the cultures of the Near East. It was not until "the Axial Age" that the patriarchal matrix began to lose its firm grip. Patriarchy, or traditional authority, lost its grip because a new culture of writing staffed by bureaucrats and secretaries was on the move. In short, what defined the new age was a division of labor, where new education systems slowly organized their managers. Though there were flashes of massive bureaucracy before this time, it was not until the Assyrian dominance (in the late eighth century BCE) and the new Western empires that this form of authority truly fits the typology assigned by Weber: a systematic and abstract form of reflection on one's own system of authority, on gods, who are superhuman, and royals, who border on the superhuman, is required (Weber 1999).

Patriarchy was not finished by any means. The two forms of authority have competed ever since this time. It was not until the end of feudalism, in Europe at least, that we see the bureaucratic authority take over and define the modern condition. "Bureaucratic-rational authority" and "patriarchal-traditional authority" are thus structured in relation to one another beginning in the "Axial Age," the age responsible for our notion of prophecy. Prophecy is one condensation (among many) of contradictions between these two forms of authority, or knowledge-power arrangements: the bureaucratic management of concepts, or media, who in exchange for conceptual management, give up claims to real political power, which belongs to the sovereign.

Preus was the first to localize on these historical periods as important phases in the history of prophecy. In his article, "Secularizing Divination: Spiritual Biography and the Invention of the Novel," he calls our attention to the close relation between the invention of the printing press and the Protestant Reformation. Preus argues that the effect of the new hermeneutics brought on by printing, "a new form of religion in early modern Europe, a lay book-religion—a religion of 'the word'" bears historical analogy to the

shift from divination to *midrash* following the invention of written language, which he says “transformed the religion of ancient Israel into Judaism” (Preus 1991, 443).

This point bears significant relation to Benedict Anderson’s argument about the role of the novel in the formation of the modern nation state in *Imagined Communities*, though he does not tie this explicitly to the concept of prophecy. The basic idea, which Anderson draws from Walter Benjamin, is that the age of mechanically reproduced media has dramatic effects on the formation of subjects; in other words, changes in media technology lead to changes in subject formation (Anderson 1983; Benjamin 1968 [1936]).

Anderson notes further that characters in modern novels are all embodied in very specific times and places, as citizen-subjects in societies and states. He argues that the novel and newspaper “provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation.” He contrasts this conception of subjectivity and time, “the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time,” with that of the pre-modern period in which media settings were “utterly removed from time and space” (Anderson 1983, 25–28).

Preus (1998) locates this modern hermeneutical shift in the writings of Spinoza and Hobbes, two literary figures on the verge of modernity for whom prophecy was a central concern: Spinoza, notably in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, and Hobbes, in *Leviathan*. When we understand the birth of the modern age in terms of Luther’s hermeneutic reformation, Luther seeing his new religion of prophetic spirit in opposition to the entrenched priestly structure of the Catholic church, the importance of the discourse on prophecy becomes clearer.

It was this vision of prophecy that would come to dominate the modern conception, particularly in the burgeoning field of biblical criticism. Most notably, Wellhausen believed that prophecy predated the “Law,” understanding the Law as a corruption of the original innovation of Spirit. Wellhausen understood Christianity itself to be a rebirth of an original divine spirit, in opposition to the liturgical religion of priests (Wellhausen 1885). This conception of biblical prophecy was to dominate biblical scholarship until very recently, and played an important part in Weber’s notion of Charisma (see Shils 1965, 200).

Preus ties these changes more explicitly to the discourse on prophecy. He advises us that the historical development of authority is explicitly linked and perhaps derived from our conception of prophecy. In this picture, “the Protestant ethic” is equivalent to “the democratization of prophecy” or what he calls the “domestication of divination” through mass literacy. The modern citizen consuming/producing subject is a reading/writing subject.

Biblical prophecy is thus an extremely important, though less often examined, figure in modern politics. Prophecy played a central role in Thomas Hobbes classic text, *Leviathan*, because, among other things,

prophecy concerns the central question of politics: the legitimacy of violence by the mythic state. Like the prophet Samuel, on whom Hobbes focused especially, prophets are understood to anoint God's representative king on earth, who reserves the sole right to execute God's judgment (see especially the chapter in *Leviathan*, "Of the Word of God, and of Prophets").

A final figure in this brief genealogy is Leo Strauss who offered political theological critiques of both Hobbes and Spinoza and was interested in their ideas about prophecy (Strauss 1961 and 1997; Vatter 2004). It is no wonder that, as one of the great political philosophers of our times, Strauss was interested in the political-philosophical engagement with prophecy. Strauss wished to turn back the clock on the democratization of prophecy, preferring a medieval conception, such as that of Maimonides (Strauss 1995, especially Chapter 3).

Prophecy and Eros

With this historical frame in the background, which implicates prophecy in the dynamic between *oikonomia*, media, and subject formation, we can now turn to Bush's use of prophecy. Bush's rhetoric is powerful because it activates the erotic order of biblical prophecy, especially its understanding of the relation between the collective body and God in heterosexual terms that are under threat. Bush's opposition to "gay marriage" resonates with the prophetic literature's anxiety over the penetration of foreign gods.

George Bush says he reads the Bible every day and he has invoked the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah in his speeches (e.g. Bush 2003b, 2005). He says that he prays to God asking for the ability to make the right choices. As someone guided by what he sees as faith, he says he tries to make his actions in the world a way for God to "speak through him," and a way to bring about "God's will" (Cooperman 2004). His former chief speechwriter, Michael J. Gerson, nicknamed "the scribe" by the President, has made prophetic imagery a central feature of Bush's rhetoric. Gerson noted that Bush and his speechwriters "have tried to employ religious language in a way that unites people... Martin Luther King did it all the time during the civil rights movement. He was in this long tradition, going back to Old Testament prophets that says God is active in history and, eventually, he's on the side of justice" (Allen 2002).

At times, Bush is modest in his statements about his relation to super-human agency, for example when he declaimed, "We do not know—we do not claim to know—all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them" (Bush 2003a). One of his supporters, writing for the *Economist* ("George Bush and God" 2004), pointed out that Bush has not tended to associate the workings of "Providence" with America or himself. A political virtuoso with skilled speechwriters, Bush knows better than to do so. He often says things like, "the liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world. It is

God's gift to humanity" (Bush 2003a). Perhaps when he says that God talks to him and through him he means that he has moments of inspiration that encourage him to act in certain ways. Bush cannot explain nor understand, nor does he want to, the source of this inspiration, the source of his choices for action. These are left to superhuman Providence.

At other times, however, Bush lets his guard down, allowing one to see just how deeply he believes in his prophetic role. In his autobiography, he wrote of his call to the presidency as a kind of Mosaic coming of age story (Bush 1999, 8–9). Much has also been made of comments he made to some Palestinian leaders: "God told me to strike at *al Qaida* and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle East..." (Regular 2003) and to a group of old order Amish people, "I trust God speaks through me. Without that, I couldn't do my job" (Brubaker 2004).

In his re-employment of the typology of authority described above in the terms of sexuality, Foucault, like Weber, postulates two competing forms: a pre-Capitalist mode of sexual production dominated by the space of the family, and a typology known as biopolitics,⁶ where top-down authority is no longer so necessary since sex has become the object of disciplines of knowledge. Foucault is talking about the very same transition as Weber, only in terms of sexuality and bodies, rather than "authority." Weber was quite clear that each of his typologies corresponded to a particular ethic, to particular practices—Foucault merely extended this notion of ethics to include the way in which any matrix of authority also disciplines and is disciplined by relationships to the body, and by extension, to sex.

Like all forms of speech and politics, then, prophecy also has an *eros* (see Tribble 1978; Holden 1991; Weems 1995; Brenner 1996; Stone 1996; Biale 1997; Berquist 2002; Malul 2002; Gaca 2003). Though there are women prophets, there are few of them. For the most part, biblical prophets were represented as participating in the semiotics of religious nationalism, as we have already seen.⁷ Similar modalities that animate the modern

6. Foucault took up the concept of biopolitics in his final project on the history of sexuality. See Foucault 1978, 1985, 1986. With regard to the implications of Foucault's arguments for ancient subjectivities aside from the Greek citizen, see also Boyarin 1995 and Boyarin and Castelli 2001.

7. The waste of seed is a more general biblical concern. That which semen has touched becomes unclean (Lev 15:16–18, 32). Both the P source and D "sources" place restrictions on ejaculation (Deut 23:10–12). We may also recall Onan's sin of failing to fulfill his levirate obligation (see Deut 25:6) by practicing *coitus interruptus* (38:8–10). In response Yahweh kills Onan. For a morphological analysis of this narrative, see Sharon (2005). Semen is thus a fluid that is subject to lawful control. Money is more complex because there could clearly be no polemic against capitalism in the biblical text. Coinage in the Bible is tied to precious metals, especially silver. Taxation was always an issue in the Near East at the time, for example in Samuel's diatribe in 1 Sam 8:15–17 against taxation within the institution of kingship.

religious nationalist impulse to control sexuality, money/value, and language/gods and their associate homologies animated earlier forms of religious nationalism (*sans nation states*) such as biblical prophecy.⁸ The prophetic narratives are occupied with illicit sex and foreign penetration on the land and body of female Israel, for the "ability of sexuality to blur existential categories makes it a cosmic national issue. Like murder, aberrant sexuality could pollute the land and endanger the very survival of Israel" (Frymer-Kensky 1996).⁹

This imagery is vital in all forms of religious nationalism. For the scribalists responsible for the idea of biblical prophecy, it was not, or not simply, that they seized hold of sexuality as a metaphor to make sense of the loss of values in the face of colonization or deportation. It was rather that they understood the threat to the collective body in sexual terms, because the threat *was* sexual, and the others' sexuality was threatening. It is not only that Bush's masculine identity is threatened by impotence and failure, but that the very process of rebuilding his manhood constitutes his conception of the collectivity of which he is a part. The Protestant ethic is also an erotic one, where that eros is constitutive of the collectivity, and collectivities are arousing (Friedland 2005a).

Like the prophets of old, Bush's prophetic rhetoric is closely tied to his masculinity. Much has been made of the fact that he credits an all male Bible group in Midland Texas for changing his life and setting him on the right track (Cooperman 2004). As Friedland reminds us,

President Bush achieved sobriety, saved his marriage and his self-worth in the face of a collapsing Texas oil economy, and entry on the road towards political power through his participation in an all-male Bible study group in Midland, Texas which he joined in 1985. The President was "born again." For George Bush, Christianity and masculinity are tightly joined, both now being tested by irredentist Islam in Iraq. (2005b, 42)

In response to the current debate over "gay marriage," Bush says he regards marriage as "the most fundamental institution of civilization," "the sacred commitment of a man and a woman, the basis of an orderly society, and the defining promise of a life..." (Bush 2004). But Bush "never talks about policy—even issues with a moral component—in terms of doctrine or revelation. Evangelicals, for example, want to ban gay marriage because (they say) it is against God's will. Mr. Bush never says this. He opposes it

8. On the question of the distinction between contemporary and ancient nationalisms, see the illuminating paper by Routledge 2003. The term "religious nationalism," for all its problems, is a useful condensation to get at the relation between religion and politics.

9. It is interesting to note in this context that one of the two forms of condoned divination takes place in the context of sexuality out of bounds (Num 5). Boyarin 1995, 346 makes a similar point.

on the grounds that marriage is an institution so fundamental to society that it should not be changed" ("George Bush and God" 2004). Bush's handlers are smart enough to limit any bombastic religious talk; instead they phrase their opposition in terms of a religious sociology, where the very institutions of our manhood are threatened by porous boundaries.

Bush's religious sociology concerning marriage is tinged with a most central image utilized by the Hebrew prophets to express their religious-political message, that of Israel's promiscuity, a sexualized language that represents the "people of Israel" as a *zōnā*, or harlot, cheating on her faithful husband. Perhaps the strongest example of this image is a story about Hosea, who in his own version of a *lech lecha*, Yahweh tells to go take a whoring wife and children (1:2). (See Runions 2005; Toorn 1989; see also, Exod 34:15; Lev 17:7; Isa 1:21; Jer 2:20, 3:1–8; Ezek 16:15–41, 23.)

If prostitution is the oldest profession we might also say that it is a biopolitically ambivalent one, because at the same time that it institutes a form of patriarchal authority, it also deconstructs that authority on the basis of the father's inability to control himself within the space of the family. Or we might say that the brothel is one zone of indistinction outside the space of the family. In this context, following unsanctioned values is equivalent to promiscuity. Thus the biopolitical, like the brothel and the bathhouse, encourages this spread of uncontrolled seed, of media, of language, and gods; and this is the reason religious nationalism and conservative politics oppose it. Biopolitics is a threat to the patriarchal family, but as far as the patriarchal family is "the most fundamental institution of civilization," biopolitics is also a threat to itself.

Religious nationalism is thus powerful not simply because it offers critique of the degradation of the boundary between the public patrimonial sphere and the private, but because it is explicitly erotic in doing so. Biblical prophecy is a central element in Bush's religious nationalism, and it is a central subject for Leo Strauss's form of conservatism, to which I now turn. Religious nationalism and neoconservatism have spoken to universal human interests: the family, honoring one's parents, and a return to order. In opposing feminism, materialism, or socialism, both religious nationalism and Straussian neoconservatism are aligned on similar erotic grounds to the extent they are both defenses of the male head. While religious nationalist discourse represents a certain type of return to the patriarchal body, organized within the space of the family, that denounces the out-of-control bodies and pleasures of capitalism, Straussian neoconservatism, though also denouncing capitalism to some extent, represents a dualist defamation of the body, a purposeful disdain for matter in competition with the high potencies of the mind. For Strauss, as for his Platonist forefathers, materiality and bodies were the location of all that was gross and ungodly, "the ground of all becoming and passing away—of all imperfection in general—is matter" (Strauss 1995, 108). Bodies and pleasures are dangerous precisely

because people can be manipulated on the basis of them. Bodies and pleasures must therefore be controlled.¹⁰

Prophêtes, Media, Realia

Strauss is useful as a representative of a turn against the academic establishment of the 1960s–1980s. The neoconservative movement is united primarily in its disdain for the relativism, progressivism, and materialism of these years; and it is for this reason Strauss is thought of as one of its spokesmen. The basic tenets of Straussian conservatism see religion as a useful tool to keep the unreflective masses in line so that the simple gentlemen can rule with help from the wise. Bush is thus able to unite neoconservative politics and religious nationalism because, as Shadia Drury put it in a recent interview, Strauss's arguments fit

perfectly well with the desire for honour and glory that the neo-conservative gentlemen covet. It also fits very well with the religious sensibilities of gentlemen. The combination of religion and nationalism is the elixir that Strauss advocates as the way to turn natural, relaxed, hedonistic men into devout nationalists willing to fight and die for their God and country. (Postel 2003, 4)

But religion and Straussian conservatism are often seen as "diametrically opposed" (Frachon and Vernet 2003). As far as Leo Strauss is considered a neoconservative thinker or venerated as a neoconservative "prophet," his philosophy finds the conflation between these two forms of politics extremely destabilizing and dangerous.

Leo Strauss's writings are filled with a form of "prophetic" ambivalence that first arose in the late biblical period with the emergence of a new type of literate class that, in exchange for control over the means of media and sexual production, gives up any claims on royal or princely authority. The bureaucratic class is made up of civil servants who serve in the interests of the state or monarch. But as Weber, Schloen, Ricoeur,¹¹ and others point

10. Strauss was in favor of the *Law* already in place for precisely this reason. It would be madness for him to base his political philosophy on the uncertain ground of nature, represented in the free sex and Marxism of the 60s. One of the most powerful progressive alternatives in recent years would therefore be Cornel West's (1989) "prophetic pragmatism," which combines Quinean pragmatism with a neo-Gramscian version of materialism (231ff.). A full comparison of the polemics against materialism in religious nationalism and neoconservatism, though certainly in order, is just outside the scope of this article.

11. Though I protest his use of outdated arguments from the History of Religions, particularly his reliance on the outdated notion of "the Sacred," Schloen (2001) sums up the (Ricoeurian) argument well when he writes that the "logic of correspondences" that characterize "polytheistic" religions comes into contrast with the "logic of limit-expressions," which are characteristic of "Jewish and Christian narratives and paranetic discourses beginning with the Israelite and Judahite prophets of the

out, because of this very ability to reflect abstractly, a utopian discourse emerges that is critical of royal and state authority. The figure of the prophet embodies a contradiction inherent in patriarchal systems to the extent that he (or she) speaks for the great, abstract Father beyond the sovereign. The result can lead to a divided conscience on the part of *literati*. Prophecy is a violent reaction in response to out-of-control fluids at the same time that it is the basis of utopian projects. Prophecy is thus an indicator that the word is out-of-control, that it cannot be controlled by the sovereign order.

This contradiction is constantly played out in the prophetic ambivalence toward kingship. The prophetic figure in the Bible competes narratively for territory belonging to the priest and the king, the temple and the palace.¹² Perhaps no figure better represents this competition than the strange and ambivalent prophet Samuel. In the canonical version of the book of Samuel, the people demand that he name them a king. After a long speech critical of the very idea of kingship, Samuel eventually selects Saul as the first king through a form of divinatory lot taking. He is the architect of the monarchy at the same time that he is critical of it.

The prophet thus demands some measure of control over both the conceptual and political. The classic History of Religions formulation of this concerns the relation between the pure-impure axis and the sacred-profane axis; the former is the conceptual domain of the priests, the latter the political domain of the king (Smith 1987, 56; Olyan 2000). Prophecy emerges at a time when priestly divination is barely democratized, when writing replaces divination as the dominant hermeneutical trope. The reading-writing prophet thus prefigures the modern subject as paradigmatic figure of the new bureaucratic class.

Similarly, just as the prophetic medium is a source of ambivalence, both religious nationalism and neoconservative politics view media in general as the source of greatest evil because, in the case of religious nationalism, media has the capability to penetrate and run out of control on the territorial body, and in the case of neoconservatism, because mass-media sophistication enervates the dangerous masses. For example, the Bush administration

Assyrian period. In Judeo-Christian religion, myth is 'broken' and the world desacralized by the paradoxical and hyperbolic use of traditional modes of discourse. The intensification wrought by limit expressions points not to correspondences between the cosmos and the numinous, but to personal 'limit-experiences,' whether of crisis or culmination. Thus they call for a 'hermeneutic of proclamation' rather than a 'phenomenology of the sacred'" (360).

12. See, for example, Miller (1986) and Cross's classic discussion of the prophetic critique of kingship (1973, section IV). For Cross, the prophet mediated between league traditions and the centralizing concerns of kingdom: "among the major institutions limiting kingship in Israel were the traditional law of the league and the phenomenon of prophecy... It is fair to say that the institution of prophecy appeared simultaneously with kingship in Israel and fell with kingship" (222-23).

has almost completely dismantled what was left of a legitimate public sphere.¹³ At the same time, media is these politics' greatest potential tool. It is within this context of an executive administration both militarily and communicatively adept and powerful that we can begin to make sense of a senior Bush administration official's confession, boast, or perhaps toast, to *New York Times* reporter Ron Suskind during Bush's first term:

[...] after I had written an article in *Esquire* that the White House didn't like... [the official] expressed the White House's displeasure [...] and then he told me something that at the time I did not fully comprehend—but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency.

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors [...] and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." (Suskind 2004)

In other words, the Straussian idea that the will to power creates its own reality has been coupled with the notion that America is an empire destined for prophetic greatness. This viewpoint relies quite explicitly on the notion of world-historical actors, a self-consciousness about the plot-line or narrative dimension of history, which is a basic characteristic of prophetic rhetoric. According to this viewpoint, when as literary theorist Giles Gunn put it, "faith co-opts the entire cosmos of the concrete and the actual and taunts them with their own impotence,"¹⁴ the world is divided into those who examine "reality" and those who "create reality." There are those who examine the past, and those who create the future, people of contemplation and people of action.

A more sustained reflection on the extraordinary statement of this senior aide is in order. For, like much of Bush's neoconservative program, it is

13. As partial personal illustration of the reach of sovereign control, a modified shorter version of this essay was to appear on the Society of Biblical Literature Forum, an online "popular" front for that society. According to the editor, the essay was already on the server when some higher-ups decided not to publish it, claiming I did not cite the proper sources on prophecy. This was a poor excuse for what was clearly a politically motivated decision.

14. Gunn (2005) also points out that Bush's version of Christianity stands in contrast to many Christians for whom "faith was specific and detailed both as to its content and its obligations...they never confused their own utterances with the Divine Word, so they regarded certitude in matters of faith as the most heinous of sins. In the strictest Puritan circles, it was even forbidden to talk about the attributes of God, much less God's mind or intent..." As I read him, Gunn then goes on to explore some of the inherent contradictions between democracy and monotheism.

derived from a form of Straussian Platonism, which called for a reemphasis and recommitment to "Western values." This theology is advocating a politics of action, not of contemplation. It understands the typical European mindset to be one of passive reflection, that rarely acts, and when it does, acts too late. Bush's political action is understood to be taking place on a world-historical, prophetic, stage where "peace" and "freedom" are in jeopardy. The storyline of this ideology refers further to the loss of values in the wake of the First World War and the relativism of the Weimar Republic which led to fascism. For neoconservatives, the Western political experiment is the best yet devised and thus deserves defense from those who would seek to dilute or destroy it.

Bush's theology, however, is utterly alienated from the kind of materiality that was often a concern of biblical prophecy. Worsening poverty, world hunger, disease epidemics, and the injustices of torture have mostly been ignored in favor of the "spread of freedom" and the securing of oil fields. It would seem that all his policies are based on the presumption that changing metaphysical reality will somehow benefit material reality. This is most obvious in the president's dismissal of facts. The reality-based community relies on empirical facts and figures to make assessments about the course US policy should take. From Bush's perspective, facts are too insecure to provide him the right ground to make decisions. Instead his decisions are based on his own personal conviction. Once a decision is made, there is no going back, and little remorse. The sovereign's decision is what determines the reality of the situation, not materiality, and certainly not facts.

Bush's version of neoconservatism is the Protestant ethic gone wild. He has found the ability to act on the basis of neoconservative Platonic "principles" at the same time that he grounds such actions in the certainty of a kind of Protestant faith. These are faith-based principles, faith-based values, where principled action is a good in itself, and "reality" will submit accordingly. This gives substance to the failure of the administration to plan for, as much as facilitate, the on-the-ground mobilization of such principles. For Bush, the spread of Protestant liberty is closely related to the spirit of capitalism. Spreading freedom to Iraq means making consuming producing subjects out of Iraqi subjects-*cum*-citizens, who are then free to sell their oil (and everything else) on the open market. Bush's faith in Providence is closely related to his faith in market principles, where the "spread of freedom" is both a religious call and a call for liberal economic policy on the oil resources of the Middle East.

A story from the first book of Kings (22:19–23) has similar resonance:

[Micaiah] said, "so hear the word of Yahweh: I saw Yahweh sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing around him to his left and to his right. (20) Then Yahweh said, 'Who will trick Ahab into going up and falling against Ramoth-Gilead.' One said one thing, and another said another. (21) Then one particular spirit came out from among the host

and stood in front of Yahweh. He said, 'I can trick him.' Yahweh said to him, 'by what means?' (22) He said, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' [He] said, 'You will trick him, and you may even succeed. Go out and do it!' (23) So look here, Yahweh gave a lying spirit into the mouth of all these prophets of yours. Yahweh spoke misery upon you."

Aram and the Israelites have been at war for three years. Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, is willing to form an alliance with the king of Israel (Ahab) to fight against Aram, but he wants to inquire first from a diviner/prophet who has heard the word of Yahweh. Four hundred prophetic yes-men are gathered and tell the king what he wants to hear, that he will be victorious. But Jehoshaphat presses the king of Israel to bring in another prophet by the name of Micaiah ben-Imlah. After some pressure, Micaiah reports that the joint alliance will be defeated. Yahweh had convinced one from among the council of superhuman agents, a *lying spirit*, to trick Ahab's four hundred yes-men so that Ahab would be defeated.

Students of religion, anthropologists and psychologists among them, have long been interested in the phenomena of possession and divination. Though related, the two phenomena are distinct. In the first, religious actors claim that their behavior is not under their control but is directed by superhuman agents.¹⁵ In the second, specialists are trained in techniques that allow them to communicate with superhuman agents. These agents affect patterns in the material world (or the heavens) that the diviner may "read" to determine that agent's intention.

Similarly, in the study of biblical prophecy, prophets have often been equated with both ecstasies and diviners (Parker 1978; Wilson 1996; Berchman 1998). The verbal root *nba* itself may express both these ideas in its *hithpael* and *niphal* verbal forms, respectively. The former means, "to play the prophet" and is associated with Saul's strange behavior in the first book of Samuel (1 Sam 10:10) when a superhuman agent's spirit came upon him.¹⁶

15. The term "superhuman agent" is an analytic term that helps scholars of religion pinpoint what is special about religious beliefs and practices. For the definition of religion, see Penner (2002, 169). In the study of religion, most of the characters in the story, including Micaiah, may be defined as superhuman agents. These agents are different from you and me in the ways in which they minimally violate our folk conceptions about what human agents can do. For example, a superhuman agent can walk through walls or be in two places at once, while a human agent cannot do such things. Psychologists of religion argue that this minimal violation increases the likelihood that these figures, and stories about them, will be remembered and transmitted. For the idea that superhuman agents are minimally counter-intuitive, see Barrett and Keil (1996) and Boyer (1996); and for a good summary of the literature, see Barrett (2000).

16. Fleming (1993) notes that the passive and active inflections are also diachronically justified, though he opts for the active form as the core of the etymology.

The latter verbal form is associated with prophecy proper, which is a form of intermediation with superhuman agents for the purpose of getting information, a kind of religious intelligence gathering. Prophets in the Hebrew Bible sometimes spy in on the council of the gods; that's how they get good information. Those who invoke the figure of the prophet often forget that the prophet literature was consumed with the distinction between true and false prophets, since lying spirits often got involved, and Yahweh's own motives were particularly tricky to detect. Thus prophecy was never, or never simply the (over)hearing of some divine words, but always involved an element of doubt—falsity, perhaps, a more important concept to understanding prophecy than truth. Like Ahab's yes-men, Bush's yes-men are confronted with reality's resistance to the reality-makers.

Straussian Prophecy

Pursuant of the gap that separates true from false prophecy, I turn now to the details of Strauss's writings on prophecy, which have a great deal to say about reason and power and the relation between reality and reality-making. I argue that Bush's invocation of prophecy is deeply unsettling from both biblical and Straussian perspectives. In these last paragraphs, I explore how Leo Strauss would respond to the invocation of prophecy in Bush's rhetoric.

Though Strauss "did not express opinion on contemporary politics or policy issue" (Fukuyama 2006), and despite the fact he considered himself greatly indebted to the Enlightenment's classical principles (of, say, reason and justice), his writings are tinged with the kind of anti-Enlightenment nostalgia all too well known to us now following George Bush's rise to power. Strauss bemoaned the 999 other Nietzschean gods (or "cultures"),¹⁷ but this was not because he thought they were worthless; rather, it was because he believed their return in the age of Enlightenment resulted in modern relativism and a weakening of fundamental principles.

The drum-line of this stream of thought argues that without an active form of democracy (promoting freedom and justice) in the world and willing to commit violence on behalf of it, we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of Weimar Germany when democracy was not sufficiently fortified even to protect itself. Required now is a vigilant form of democracy that can even go outside the law to protect itself, witnessed, for instance, in the recent attempts within the administration to suspend the law, with the justification

17. Strauss (1983 [1967]) writes that the "objects to which we refer by speaking of Jerusalem and Athens" are noted by Nietzsche as two "cultures" among 999 others (148). At the same time Nietzsche could say that the "concept of culture is an outgrowth of 19th century Western culture," and in place of this relativism sought "a culture that would no longer be particular and hence in the last analysis arbitrary" (149).

that it promotes national security (Luban 2005). Many have seen in Bush policy a return to the Hobbesian/Schmittian political order, where sovereigns protect us from a state of nature, and if you are not a friend, you are an enemy (see Agamben 1998).

Though often difficult to tell exactly what he believed because Strauss thought that linguistic opacity (i.e., deception) was necessary in some political writing (Alterman 2004; Rozen 2003), it seems sure that he believed biblical thought and Greek thought, Jerusalem and Athens, were polar opposites (Strauss 1983 [1967]). In his seminal paper, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections," he argued that the former is bearer of faith and the latter of reason. Strauss saw the stream of Greek thought to lie behind the rational politics of Western institutions. Philosophers value reason and order, and favor the predictable gods of heaven, not an invisible, unpredictable god who seems quick to anger and acts on whims (like in the story from 1 Kings above).

The figure of the prophet plays a central role in Strauss's argument, for he understands the opposition between Jerusalem and Athens to be represented in the relation between prophecy and philosophy. In this ideology Jewish and Greek cultures are seen as the "two conflicting roots of Western civilization" whose relation constitutes or "provides" its "secret vitality" (Strauss 1981, 44). But Strauss argued that modernity made a mistake when it attempted the "great synthesis" of these traditions. Rather, Strauss is "confronted with the incompatible claims of Jerusalem and Athens to our allegiance." We are then compelled to "make a choice and take a stand" (Strauss 1983 [1967], 149). To summarize, all too briefly, the essential differences Strauss finds between the traditions are:

1. With regard to wisdom: biblical wisdom is "fear of the Lord" while Greek wisdom is wonder (149);
2. in terms of the basic cosmology of creation: in Bible, man is the culmination of creation, evil is brought by man, and the heavenly bodies are not gods but are created and controlled by the god, while in Greek thought, man is insignificant to the gods, gods are bearers of evil, and the gods are not "made" by anybody (152);
3. these in turn involve the relation between men and gods: in Bible, the god makes a covenant with man, makes contracts with him, and man is in the god's image, while in Greek texts, men are the sport of the gods, and there is a decline of races (154, 163);
4. the nature of gods: in Bible, the god is a fickle living god, the god who will be what he will be, while the Greeks adored cosmic, predictable gods (162);
5. in Bible the god selects a chosen people who, like Abraham, stand out because they have complete trust in him, while in Plato, the high god creates other gods and the eternal ideas are higher than him, so in turn, the philosophy of forms replaces theology;

6. for the Bible, the god who manifests himself according to his will, and who is *not* universally worshipped is the only true god, while Plato prefers the cosmic *visible* (and thus publicly observable) gods over the traditional gods; this is the “fundamental opposition”: a particular familial god, that “of Abraham, Isaac...” to universal gods, which Strauss calls the “opposition of Reason and Revelation” (166).

All of these points lead up to Strauss’s conclusion in the essay, which concerns the opposition between prophecy and philosophy; in sum he argues: (1) philosophers seek Reason, prophets seek Revelation; (2) in turn prophets speak of universal peace and utopian dreams, while philosophers speak of the virtuous city; (3) prophets lack the idea of natural science, for true prophets predict the unexpected and unforeseeable; (4) prophecy is progressive, whereas philosophy is realistic; (5) prophets preach while philosophers dialogue (167ff.).

According to this account, the Hebrew prophet calls for *universal* peace on the historical earth and mediates with a *particular* god of a particular community, while the philosopher calls for a *particular* peace of a particular virtuous city-state (one that recognizes friends and enemies) and mediates with *universal* gods. For the philosopher, peace and bread cannot be brought to all. For the prophet, peace and bread come when messianic kingship is restored to Israel. Israel is thus unique because it is a *nation without* a king, or with a future-king. For Strauss, the attempted synthesis of these two is dangerous, for that would mean either a call to universal peace *and* universal gods that would eradicate difference altogether, or to a particular peace with a particular god, which though perhaps more desirable than the former, would be an unsustainable non-politics, collapsing in on its own particularity.

Strauss wanted prophecy to be inassimilable to the imperialism of reason because he wanted a place for difference (i.e., Judaism), so he drew a sharp contrast between prophecy and philosophy. At the same time, when difference becomes inassimilable to reason, the door is open to irrational or dangerous politics. This is why in a much earlier discussion of prophecy Strauss did not stress the distinction between prophecy and reason. In *Philosophie und Gesetz* (1935) he argued that Maimonides’s study of prophecy, which he called “prophetology,” was the culmination of Plato’s philosophy because Maimonides showed that “man” is a political being and thus needs laws by nature, which the prophet, who combines perfect practical knowledge with perfect theoretical knowledge, provides: “What Plato called for—that philosophy stand under a higher court, under the state, under the law—is fulfilled in the age of belief in revelation” (Strauss 1995, 132).

Prophets stand higher than philosophers because they enunciate the law for them. Thus only the prophet can found the perfect city. In this earlier vision, the prophet has perfect knowledge, so the conflict between reason

and revelation is simply out of the question.¹⁸ Since no one can presently claim perfect knowledge, Straussian conservatism is based on the fact that prophecy is in the *past*, and this is where the reasonable philosophers come in. For Strauss not just any leader would suffice to admit the possibility of a sovereign going outside of the law. Since no one in the present can possibly claim the perfect knowledge of prophecy, the Straussian sovereign has no choice but to act within the law (Strauss 1995, 131). In other words, difference is inassimilable because it is in the past, not because it is unreasonable; in this sense, reason for Strauss is characteristically medieval.¹⁹

I offer then the following two points in order to refine my thesis concerning the confluence of neoconservative ideology and religious nationalism. The first is that there are serious problems with Strauss's ideas concerning prophetic religion. The second is, even if we accept his flawed arguments about prophecy as aiming towards a rhetorical point, they give us good reason to think that the current American regime is dangerous to Straussian order. The danger is due precisely to the distinction noted in point one.

To the first: it should be noted that Strauss himself seemed to indicate that biblical thought *is* reasonable (Arkes 1996). Even for Strauss the idea that there is a simple opposition between biblical prophecy and Greek philosophy was untenable.²⁰ For example, in "Jerusalem and Athens" Strauss indeed recognized that *both* philosophy and prophecy have truth conditions, that prophecy can only be understood in the context of assertions that may be true *or* false. For Strauss, the difference between true and false prophecy is that false prophets tend to tell people what they want to hear: "They tell people what they themselves imagined (consciously or unconsciously) because they wished it or their hearers wished it." Furthermore, Strauss thought that in contrast to the true prophet, false prophets "trust in flesh, even if that flesh is the temple in Jerusalem, the promised land, nay, the chosen people itself, nay, God's promise to the chosen people if that promise is taken to be an unconditional promise and not as a part of a Covenant." In contrast, true prophets predict the unexpected, "the humanly

18. Strauss states: "The sovereign of the ideal state must be a prophet—a philosopher and a seer in one. He must have at his disposal by nature the following properties, *inter alia*: he must love learning and learn easily; he must have a strong memory; he must not be eager for sensual pleasures; he must love the truth and hate deception; he must not be a money-lover; and finally, he must be 'firmly resolved upon the object whose accomplishments he considers necessary, courageous about it, brace, fearless and not faint-hearted'" (1935; translation of quote from Strauss 1995: 126). If Bush casts himself as a prophetic sovereign, he surely fails to live up to these Straussian/Maimonidian requirements.

19. Strauss made a similar point in saying that the Epicurean thinks he can question the law, but in doing so he is merely being hedonistic, throwing "off the stern and exacting duties so that one can indulge in a life of pleasure" (1997, 29–30).

20. For more deconstructions of this simple opposition, one historical and one philosophical, see Neusner (1997) and Kavka (2004), respectively.

unforeseeable—what would not occur to men, left to themselves, to fear or to hope.” They thus “act by the spirit of Ehyeh-asher-ehyeh” (Strauss 1983, 170).

Some of his points concerning the differences between “Athens and Jerusalem” may stand, such as his arguments about basic cosmology, the relation between men and gods, and his contention that the heart of the difference is that Hebrew religion concerns the worship of a non-universal familial god while Greek religions favored universal gods. However, his argument is mostly a caricature of both traditions. There is no unitary essence of either tradition, rather if we may speak of their defining features, we might say that while Greek philosophy developed formally in the context of the citizen republic in Athens, the biblical, prophetic philosophy was an outgrowth of an entirely different history, one of constant colonization and threat.

As noted above, both “traditions” were part of a newly emerging literary culture, one that for the first time was reflecting in writing on the institutions of the city and nation. Both traditions represent what Giddens calls *disembedding*, a phenomenon due to loosening of networks, usually as a result of media innovation, when people begin to think outside of their own particular institutional structures (Giddens 1984). As Strauss often pointed out, the philosopher is a threat to the city; he is the atheist, the skeptic, and he is tolerated only to the extent that he will support the state.²¹ Socrates famously did not. Like the philosopher, the prophet is disembedded. He represents an ambivalent relation to sovereign authority.

As for the second point, let us accept Strauss’s theological-political position regarding these two oppositional elements: Greek reason and prophetic revelation. For Strauss their opposition constitutes the “vitality of the West.” Bush’s theology, much like the one Strauss seems to endorse, regards personal faith as private and uncontestable. Public policy then becomes a matter of unavowable faith.

To some extent, the modern liberal separation of public and private spheres lends the possibility to this. Modern states separate the powers of politics and religion, slicing them quite unnaturally along the public and the private, which mirrors Christian dualist notions about the soul. Americans at the center, Jews, and other minority religions, would not recognize themselves in Bush’s personal faith, so it is best for him to keep that private. To the extent that his speechwriters can translate his personal faith into a public language, they have done so.

Strauss, however, thought that a synthesis between these two elements was dangerous and was responsible for much of the trauma of the modern

21. See Klein and Strauss: “I arrived at a conclusion that I can state in the form of a syllogism: philosophy is the attempt to replace opinion by knowledge, that opinion is the element of the city, hence philosophy is subversive...” (1997, 463). See also Xenos (2004, 5).

age: "Since we are less certain than [Hermann] Cohen was that the modern synthesis is superior to its pre-modern ingredients, and since the two ingredients are in fundamental opposition to one another, we are ultimately confronted by a problem rather than a solution" (Strauss 1983, 168) To be more specific, it is not that Strauss thought "faith" has no role in politics. On the contrary, Strauss finds a version of prophetic revelation that has a higher place than philosophy. However, this is a reading of prophetic revelation cleared of any messianic fervor or progressivism. Rather, the prophet is a righteous one who founds the law.²²

Strauss leaves little room for modern prophets. Rather, he sees prophetic revelation as something that took place in the past. We already *have* the law, we have the tradition, so there is little need to go about inventing new ones. Strauss would thus encourage those within liberal democratic systems who have a problem with their government to seek a solution *within* the Law, since it is the best yet conceived. On Strauss's view, the problem with modern movements has been an attempt to *re-found* the law on unnatural biopolitical premises that create animal-citizens who are profane matter without value. This is the characteristic strain of Strauss's conservatism. Faith has to do with abiding by the Law and paying homage to the god of one's fathers.²³

Within the Bush Administration the guiding narratives for the emplotment of history, and thereby its motivations, are indebted to two related sources: the biblical discourse on prophecy and neoconservative ideology. Though erotically aligned, if we speak of a most dangerous idea in Leo Strauss's work, it would surely be this synthesis between neoconservatives and evangelical Christianity. This unholy alliance of course allows both parties unprecedented wealth and glory, and alliances of this type are not unknown to US history. Whatever we make of Strauss's proposed opposition between religion and reason, there are a number of reasons to think that the conflation between Athens and Jerusalem represented by the Bush presidency is dangerous to the Straussian order.

First, for Strauss, messianic fervor endangers faithful politics. The most dangerous moment is when a messianic, revelatory idea about the future is coupled with reasonable technology, when universal reason is understood as consummated in a universal god. Second, Bush is acting outside the law, without prophetic warrant. Third, prophetic revelation cannot have a role in politics because prophecy is in the past or future, but certainly not the

22. Though outside the scope of this article, a full insight into the role of prophet as Straussian founder of the law, also known as the "mystical foundation of authority," must include the critiques of liberalism worked out by Schmitt (1996) and Derrida, for example, in his essay, "Force of Law" (1992).

23. Aside from those noted so far, this reading of Strauss comes from a review of the following texts: Pangle 1983; Novak 1996; Jaffa 1998; Behnegar 1999; Havers 2004; and Verskin 2004.

present. Fourth, to the extent that he identified good politics with the Greeks, Strauss thought a synthesis with biblical thought was extremely dangerous, a major cause behind the horrors of the twentieth century (1983: 168). For Strauss, Israel must be a nation without a king, and false prophecy should play no role in politics.

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Gabriel Levy is a Ph.D. Candidate in Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His dissertation explores the cognitive impact of literacy on the prophetic literature in the Hebrew Bible. Most recently he has been a visiting scholar at the department of Biblical Studies at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

Email: GJL@umail.ucsb.edu

Mail: Department of Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA