Journal of Law and Religion (2022), 37: 2, 399–402.

BOOK REVIEWS

Athens and Jerusalem: God, Humans, and Nature.

By David Novak. Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 2019. Pp. 392. $129.00 (cloth); $51.00 (paper); $51.00 (digital). ISBN: 9781487506179.

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doi:10.1017/jlr.2022.8

A review of David Novak's magnum opus, *Athens and Jerusalem: God, Humans, and Nature*, requires a small team of scholars. Novak is learned in classical, medieval, and modern philosophy, as well as in biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and modern Judaism. Based on Novak's Gifford Lectures, the six essays collected in the volume are the summation of a long career in Jewish philosophy.

Chapter 1 is a masterful survey of the reason versus revelation ("Athens" versus "Jerusalem") argument that has lasted for centuries. Novak argues that this discussion ought not to be acts of "intellectual triumphalism" (15). Nor should this discussion be understood to claim that universals are the domain only of philosophy, and revelation the domain only of theology. Finally, he argues, the discussion should recognize that reason implies a faith in the a priori ontological reality of nature/God, and faith implies the necessity for ratiocination. "Both Athens and Jerusalem have their foundational myths" (34).

I see two problems with this learned position. First, both philosophy and theology must, at some point, deal with real life, and real life is not always a function of either philosophical or theological reason. Real life deals with people's conflicting values and ambivalences. Real life is not about proper definitions; it is about conflict resolution, which is not always achieved through logic.

Two examples: (1) Abortion is not about defining when "life" begins. It is about defining the limitations that our social, emotional, spiritual, and other understandings of "life" place on us. Different people and different traditions have diverse understandings of what those limits are. We need to think carefully, but consistent reason is only one tool. Law, not theology or philosophy, will have to resolve this conflict in real life. (2) Hate speech is not about the definition of what is "hateful." It is about what we say about each other. Real life is not about the imposition of theological or philosophical reason; it is about the compromises we make as our values change. I remember when there were no (or very few) "rights" for LGBTQ+ persons, Blacks, Jews, women, and other groups. Now, there are substantial rights under the law for these groups. This change in values is not a function of reason but of "love" in one sense or another. Again, law, not theology or philosophy, will have to resolve this conflict in real life.

Second, Novak, true to the Greek traditions he represents, wants to reserve "truth" to that which reason can approve. As he puts it, "Sadly enough, theologians have often been willing to let theology be *demoted* to the kind of psychological subjectivism that only speaks of feelings that needn't be thought of as intending any external reality, let alone any higher reality, to which truth is adequate. Yet not only does this approach have much too little correspondence with Jewish and Christian traditions to be considered authentic Jewish or Christian theology, *it also opens up theology to the judgment of the psychologists*" (41, my emphasis).

However, the loving yet demanding God of Judaism, the self-sacrificial love of Christ, and Allah, the powerful God of Islam, are not just metaphors, as the Greek traditions would have it. They are living religious entities that interact with us, evoking devotion, fear, love, confusion, despair, and spiritual bliss. The "judgment of psychologists" is, indeed, an integral part of the personalist theology of the great monotheistic faiths. Philosophy and philosophical theology, in many ways, failed to capture the interpersonal nature of revelational religion.

In addition, Novak, while arguing strongly for what one might call "philosophical pluralism," which would include the unique insights of Judaism (and Christianity and Islam), has explicitly excluded the insights into religion from psychology, especially from psychotherapeutic psychology. Excluding personalist, psychological theology from theological-philosophical discourse is not consistent with intellectual pluralism.

Chapter 2 is, again, a masterful survey, this time of one of the basic differences between philosophy and theology: the place and role of the divine. Novak explains clearly that, in classical philosophy, there is God, who is involved in self-contemplation. There are gods, who prescribe the political order for humans. And there are humans, who imitate the gods and God. Humans do this by seeking wisdom and justice and by contemplation. However, since God and the gods did not create humans, they are not responsible for humans though humans must conform to the political order of the gods. Also, in classical philosophy, nature is a given, in and of itself; it is a good. But, since God is not responsible for nature, there can be no miracles. Humans must learn to live within nature.

By contrast, in biblical tradition, God is *responsible* for creation, including humans. The latter takes the form of covenant in which God has "chosen to *react* to His human creatures, as well as to act *with* His creatures … [in which His] consistent self-identity is manifest to us when God keeps His promises that He has chosen to be irrevocable" (72, Novak's emphasis). Further, covenant is immutable because God has promised that it is—that is, because God has assumed responsibility for covenant. Divine responsibility also means that God must "change" in response to what humans do though how and why God changes is not always clear to humans since God's knowledge exceeds that of humans. Human responsibility means that humans are answerable to God through covenant. Nature is not good in and of itself. Nature is good because it enables God to relate to humans. Thus, God can change creation—that is, create miracles. The purpose of miracles is to alert humans to what follows—God's Word. Covenant, not nature, is the medium of relationship between God and humans. Because God and humans have responsibilities, they must have free will to exercise, or refuse, those responsibilities. Humans are "junior partners" in creation.

Chapter 3 continues this analysis from the point of view of humans. In religious thinking, humans are created with a need for mutual relationship with God. This relationship is reciprocal though asymmetrical. It is also freely entered into on both sides. As Novak puts it, humans need we-Thou and not I-Thou (83). Novak even concedes that "God is the *archetypal person*, because God reveals the fact that He does make deliberate choices and acts upon them in the world" (85, my emphasis). As a result, justice is socially located. It is not a

https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2022.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

combination of utilitarian social justice and justice as contemplative bliss (88–89). Because justice is a function of covenant, humans have a right, even the duty, to question God when that guardianship seems deficient (96). In religious thinking, God's guardianship for nature can be known only through revelation. Humans can use nature/creation for their communal life with God. They may not exploit it as they wish and they may not concede nature's use only to those most able to use it efficiently. As tenants, humans have no right to wantonly destroy the owner's property. As he does in the first essay, Novak lays out all this with great clarity of thought and language.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are essays on the contrast between philosophy and theology through a comparison of Philo and Plato, Maimonides and Aristotle, and Kant and modern Jewish philosophers. I am not competent to intelligently comment upon chapters 4 and 6, but I can offer a critique of Novak's treatment of Maimonides in chapter 5. Novak notes that the claim of philosophy to be universally valid for all cultures led Jews to be in the position of always having to argue for the superiority of Judaism over philosophy, the danger to Judaism from philosophy being assimilation to philosophy or, worse, interpreting Judaism as not truth (141–42). Novak then gives a very detailed exposition of Aristotle's theory of causality and metaphysics: God's Godself is the Unmoved Mover who neither extends himself towards others nor hides from them. The universe, including the intelligences, has a desire to "remain in perpetually cognitive orbit around God" (154–55). Contemplation (*theoria*) is, thus, the ultimate activity. It "lets the heavenly intelligences be known or be seen with the mind's eye" that "imitate[s] the heavenly intelligences being enjoyed by God as God enjoys Godself." This is, in Aristotle's words, "transcendently blissful" (150).

Novak then proceeds to a very detailed exposition of Maimonides's ontology and ethics, showing how Maimonides maintained the freely willed responsibility of God in creation and revelation (covenant) within Aristotelian causality. The culmination of the relationship between God and humans is prayer. Dividing prayer into "psychological," "political," and "metaphysical," Novak notes that prayer is an expression of "our deeper psychological need to talk to God directly" (171). It is also "the experience of the need for a community with which to speak, and the need to speak of the foundations of one's communal life, causes the truly rational members of the Jewish community to direct their attention to God as their community's Founder, Sovereign, and Redeemer" (173). "Psychological" and "political" prayer are a function of covenant (173). It is in Novak's description of "metaphysical" prayer that I think he has erred. Novak quotes the famous passage from Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* that describes ultimate worship as "setting thought to work on the first intelligible and in devoting oneself exclusively to this ... in solitude and isolation" (173–74).[1] From this, Novak draws the following conclusion: "In that case, then, this contemplative activity is not moving from the world up to God who transcends even the cosmos" (177).

This is not the argument that Maimonides is making in that stunning chapter. In fact, Maimonides argues that the human intellect makes "contact" (Arabic, *wusla*) with the Tenth Intelligence. He even uses the words "union" (Arabic *'ittihad*) and "bliss" (Arabic *ghibta*; Hebrew *no`am*) to describe this experience. Maimonides goes on to unify his theory of providence and even of the world to come with this form of worship, transforming the strong love motif in Song of Songs into a paean to "philosophical mysticism." There *is* a form of metaphysical prayer in Maimonides, but it is not one-way. It is, indeed, a meeting of the divine and the human, albeit limited in its character to pure mind (intellect). (For more on

[1] Citing Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. Leo Strauss, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) III:51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2022.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this, see my essays on philosophical mysticism[2] or my book, *Philosophic Mysticism: Essays in Rational Religion*.[3])

I have known David Novak for fifty years. We have always had respect for one another and for each other's work. But we have always disagreed on the role of the rational in religion. It seems that, in our elder years, we still disagree, respectfully, on this.

[2] David R. Blumenthal, "Selected Articles," DavidBlumenthal.org, last accessed January 4, 2022, http://davidblumenthal.org/index2.html.

[3] David R. Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism: Essays in Rational Religion* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006).

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