



# **“Sweetness and Light”: Hellenic and Hebraic Wisdom in Dialogue**

**Matthew Farrelly**

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### Introduction

Moral philosophers and educators in the classical tradition rightly look to Plato and Aristotle as indispensable guides for giving shape and direction for the attainment of wisdom and human flourishing. The Hebraic wisdom tradition is also concerned with human flourishing but has often been overlooked or esteemed altogether incompatible with the Hellenistic. For those who see the two traditions as dichotomous, human flourishing is achieved, for the Hellenic, by means of a more “philosophical” endeavor that is dedicated to the use of reason and free inquiry. Conversely, human flourishing for the Hebraic is realized through its more “prophetic” spirit guided solely by faith and servile obedience to law and revelation which alone impels all human activity. The Hebraic tradition is allegedly fideistic, ultimately disavowing the use of reason and free inquiry as hubristic due to reason’s wrest of revelation. Upon first glance, the two traditions would seem altogether incompatible, however, these interpretations tend to simplify key elements of both traditions to the point of misunderstanding.

In this paper, I summarize the argument for the alleged dichotomy between the two traditions and offer my own critique, especially focusing on what I see as misunderstandings of the Hebraic that lead some to interpret it as wholly incompatible with the Hellenistic. I describe an ancient Hebraic paradigm toward the cultivation of wisdom and human flourishing that is both compatible with and complimentary to the Hellenistic. For the ancient Hebrews, gaining wisdom meant far more than servile obedience to divine law. Rather, optimal human flourishing is experienced as persons live in what I call a *covenantal nature of reality* in which humanity exists in intimate, interdependent relationship with all spheres of reality: the divine, human society, the self, and the natural world. For human flourishing to happen in such a matrix requires *holistic wisdom*, which, for the Hebrews, invited one to live a *rightly-ordered life in right relationship with all these spheres of reality*. Here I will focus particularly on key facets of their anthropology and vocational responsibility with respect to the natural world in particular. For it is within the Hebraic tradition’s covenantal framework that the exploration and contemplation of the natural world was encouraged in a spirit of free inquiry and joy very much like the Hellenistic philosophical spirit. Addressing the alleged dichotomy between the Hellenic and Hebraic traditions is important as both are foundational to our Western tradition and continue to influence our reflection and educational endeavors toward the pursuit of wisdom and human flourishing. What is more, the Hebraic wisdom tradition offers compelling mythic imaginaries that may aid moral philosophers and educators who draw from ancient sources of wisdom for inspiration toward the envisioning of human identity and vocation in the context of our contemporary world.

### The Hellenistic and Hebraic Traditions: Schism or Synthesis?

The Hellenistic and Hebraic traditions are the foundational sources of our western heritage. They have bequeathed us such gifts of philosophy, jurisprudence, education, ethics, physics, and metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> Though he was not the first to explore the interrelationship of the two traditions, it was Tertullian of Carthage (second-century CE) who famously raised the question, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” (*De praescriptione haereticorum*, Chapter 7). He thought Hellenic Athens had no share with Hebraic Jerusalem, though many contemporaries of his thought otherwise. Since the time of the earliest interpenetration of

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<sup>1</sup> In John C. Collins’ words, the biblical text and tradition is to be valued in light of the debt we owe it as a culture and for the studies of the humanities in particular: “The Bible is relevant to our present discussion [because it] is broadly humanistic. The biblical ethic has had a profound and long-lasting influence on human civilization especially in the West. It deserves our consideration on its own merits, just as Plato’s *Republic* or any other classic text from the past does.” (2005, p. 78)

Hellenistic and Jewish culture, scholars and practitioners have held varying positions on their sympathy or antipathy with one another. As 21st century moral and civic educators that desire to link the wisdom of the past with the present, our understanding of these ancient traditions are shaped by our own implicit and explicit assumptions about the nature of reality that are guided by our own cultural moment and the influence of our contemporaries and near antecedents.

In his seminal work, *Culture and Anarchy* (originally published between 1867-1869), Victorian poet and educator, Matthew Arnold, was concerned with what he saw as the lack of robust human flourishing — what he termed “culture” — in 19th century England. He believed that both traditions offered a vision for human flourishing that aimed at the perfection of human nature and the betterment of the world through vastly different means, therein creating an “ineffaceable difference” whose “practical consequences which follow [...] leave their mark on all the history of our race and of its development” (Arnold, 1924, p.112, 114). Following on the heels of Arnold in the 20th century, Leo Strauss identified this same dichotomy and coined it as the “theologico-political problem,” which Jon Fennell has taken up in his 2009 article, “Public Education and the Aesthetic Dimension of Strauss’s Theologico-Political Problem”, wherein he argues that “this difference [between the two traditions is] so fundamental [...] that we are faced with two contrasting conceptions of what it is to be truly human” (p. 321).

It was Arnold that said the Hellenic spirit offered us intellectual and existential “sweetness and light” (Arnold, 1924, p.116) due to the “flexible activity” it invited us to in discovery of “the whole play of the universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it” (Arnold, 1924, p.113). Hellenism invites and equips us to “free investigation” (Fennell, p. 312) or “unimpeded play of thought” (Arnold, 1924, p.112-113) toward the greater discovery and perfection of the self and the natural world. For Arnold, perhaps the Hebraic tradition’s best virtue is its strong will to action, but this action is motivated by a fideistic, small-minded, servile obedience to divine law and revelation: “this notion would not let the Hebrew rest till [...] he had at last got out of the law a network of prescriptions to enwrap his whole life, to govern every moment of it, every impulse, every action” (p. 112). Arnold and company assert that, for the Hebrews, giving reason such authority runs against the grain of the exclusive authority given to revelation. Fennell, following Strauss, speaks to the point clearly:

Strauss points to a condition within which reason loses its authority. Revelation, the expression of the will of an omnipotent God, not only may contradict the voice of reason, but it also constitutes an authority beyond the grasp of reason. Reason, the product of the comparatively puny human intellect, is denied ‘the right to judge revelation.’ Indeed, to wish to understand on one’s own is an act of rebellion [...] Any claim to knowledge is properly subordinate to the authority of the Law. (p. 319)

For many, this argument seems to have largely held true today. If the Hellenic tradition is dedicated to a pure and unadulterated philosophical and scientific spirit and the Hebraic to an anti-rationalism and obedience to law as exclusive means to human flourishing, the Hellenic seems all the more attractive when juxtaposed against the alleged spirit of the Hebraic.

### **Response to the Dichotomy**

Polarizing the two traditions as Arnold and company do is to oversimplify them, especially the Hebraic, to the point of caricature. Getting each tradition right matters for its own sake as well as the continued moral and imaginative freight these traditions, together, can still offer us today. Thankfully, we can go between the horns of this dilemma, for the traditions have far more in common than would appear at first glance. In his “Three Aesthetic Ideals: The Philosopher, the Prophet, and the Pluralist” (2009), Kevin Gary agrees. Gary responds to

Fennell's interpretation, positing that his treatment of the dichotomy "appears altogether too tidy, and overlooks the complex overlap between and within both ideals" (p.326).<sup>2</sup>

The heart of the dichotomy between the Hellenic and Hebraic tradition is the seeming epistemic antithesis: prophecy vs. philosophy, revelation vs. reason. Undoubtedly, for the ancient Hebrews, obedience to divine law was considered wisdom, however, this did not deny the possibility— *encouragement*, even — of finding wisdom outside the written law. Through aesthetic contemplation and a (albeit pre-modern) "scientific" spirit of investigation of the natural world one could gain wisdom. These were perhaps the earliest philosophical underpinnings of natural law. What is more, source-critical and historico-cultural evidence of the Tanakh yields evidence that strongly suggests that the Hebrew writers and redactors relied upon neighboring ancient Near Eastern texts and traditions.<sup>3</sup> This is significant because it shows that the Hebraic tradition did not reject so-called pagan sources of wisdom wholesale. Clearly, there are ideological places of departure, however, where they do agree, shared mundane sources of knowledge *became* revelation for the Hebrews. In his 1991 Gifford Lectures, James Barr speaks to this point:

Biblical revelation [...] took up into itself elements of legal and therefore of moral perception that already existed and were common ground to large human populations, even though these populations had very different religious systems. The Bible, perhaps, *made* this material *into* revelation, it became revelatory in its biblical form [...] If revelation took up into itself legal elements that were common property to large populations with differing religious conceptions, then it can take up into itself conceptions

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding the Hebraic tradition, it is important to note the historical-cultural context that Arnold and Strauss inhabited (and that seem to continue to influence people such as Fennell). These men's contemporary intellectual representatives of the Hebraic tradition and their personal interlocutors were of the Calvinist species — Puritans — of the broader Hebraic tradition. John Calvin, the 16th century Reformed Christian and progenitor of Puritanism, is known for his doctrine of total depravity of the human person, in which the human reason is so badly wounded by sin so as to render it ineffectual for gaining knowledge of self or God. Any attempts to gain knowledge of self or God by reason is one of the greatest acts of vanity and hubris. Calvin's unique reading and application of the Hebraic tradition is perhaps one of the greatest modern reasons for the perceived incompatibility of the two traditions. For a taste, see Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* at Book 2, section 12.

Indeed, much of this sub-tradition's biblio-centric worldview saw the *only* reliable source of knowledge was the revelation as contained in holy writ and codified in divine law. For any other system that encouraged the use of reason and philosophical investigation of the world to come to knowledge of God and humanity is considered hubristic. It should be noted that this tradition's interpretations of the Hebraic texts are among the minority in the broader Hebraic (Judeo-Christian) tradition. Such biblio-exclusivism was predominantly a reaction against what they saw as the overextension of the limits of human reason. Their reaction was an over-reaction. We can hear Arnold grinding at the bit with the Puritans of his own day: "think what intolerable company Shakespeare and Virgil would have found them! In the same way let us judge the religious organizations which we see all around us. Do not let us deny the good and happiness which they have accomplished; but do not let us fail to see clearly that their idea of human perfection is narrow and inadequate, and that the Dissidence of Dissent and the protestantism of the Protestant religion will never bring humanity to its true goal" (1924, p. 23-24).

In his work, *English Literature of the 16th Century Excluding Drama* (1954), C.S. Lewis provides a helpful counterbalancing perspective: "Of course not all Calvinists were puritans [...] we must distinguish a hard core of puritans and a much wider circle of those who were, at varying levels, affected by Calvinism. But a certain severity (however seriously we may take it) was diffused even through that wider circle, in the sense that denunciation of vice became part of the stock-in-trade of fashionable and even frivolous writers" (pp. 43-44). And even more to the point, "What has been said above about the intellectual character of puritanism is quite consistent with the fact that an extreme puritan could reach a position which left hardly any room for secular learning or human reason. It is a paradox which meets us more than once in the history of thought; intellectual extremists are sometimes led to distrust of intellect" (p. 46).

<sup>3</sup> Examples include the famous Egyptian "Hymn to the Aten" and Psalm 104, as well as Hammurabi's Law code with the Mosaic, and the structural and ritual parallels of Israel's covenant ceremonies and those of her neighboring Hittite Suzerain-Vassal Treaties, to name only a few.

of God and of morality that exist in Greek antiquity and elsewhere. Revelation, this suggests, builds upon human insights existing over a wide spectrum. (Barr, 1993, pp. 97-98)<sup>4</sup>

Apart from the violence done to the Hebraic tradition, Arnold and company's clear demarcation of philosophical vs. law-based epistemology between Hellenistic and Hebraic, respectively, misunderstands even the Hellenistic tradition's position on the value and purpose of law. In her chapter, "Virtue and law in Plato" in *Plato's Laws: A critical guide* (2010), Julia Annas writes that law, for Plato, was the necessary means to experience human flourishing. Additionally, Plato's metaphysics bears a striking resemblance to that of the Hebraic tradition and its view of law. Comparing the *Republic* with the *Laws*, Annas writes that Plato is concerned for the education of the Guardians, while in the latter, "law is prominent as the work of divine reason in the universe and in us. We are told that we should obey the immortal element in us as we order our homes and cities both publicly and privately", and that "the citizen's virtue, and thus *happiness*, is now to be sought through *obedience to laws* (2010, p. 71-72; emphasis mine).

One significant concern Arnold and company had for the Hebraic law ethic was what seemed a slavish obedience to legislation that hindered a freedom of discovery to gain wisdom. Annas notes how Plato safeguards against such servile obedience and loss of *intrinsic* desire to flourish: "the laws are to be preceded by [...] preambles or preludes [which] are introduced as a means of persuasion" that work "in non-rational ways, making [citizens] docile and law-abiding by rhetorical means" and "as loving parents rather than arbitrary tyrants," thus bringing them to a place of free obedience that results in their greater flourishing (2010, p. 74, 77-78).

Plato's view of law and human flourishing is aligned well with the Hebraic. In fact, Annas turns to the great Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, as a means of illustrating how the Mosaic law code and Plato's purposes are alike: that the laws are given by command *with encouragement* and as to those who are free rather than as slaves, exhorting rather than forcing (2010, p. 80). What is more, she sees the Hebraic tradition as encouraging "living according to the Mosaic law...[in order to] produce a virtuous character [...] and he does not by this mean the mere disposition reliably to follow rules. The character [Philo] has in mind is described as one in which *reasoning, feeling, and decision are harmoniously integrated*" (2010, p.81; emphasis mine). For Annas, Plato's preambles and the Hebraic law both function to "set out for the citizens ideals of living that they are to achieve *in following the laws*" (2010, p.84), which are not in any way contrary to reason and free inquiry.

The preambles are designed to enable the lawgivers to convey to the citizens their own articulate grasp of the good of having the law in question... [which would] help to make them [...] *active reasoners, active participants* in the rational ordering of the city, *rather than passive conformers* to the laws because of the threat of sanctions [...] Under most favorable circumstances, the preambles would be enough to give citizens an ideal to live by, thus rendering laws unnecessary. (Annas, 2010, p. 76, 79-80)

Far from servile obedience to a law given coldly and distantly from on high, obedience to law is guided by a vision for holistic justice that seeks for the flourishing of persons in relationship with one another and the natural world.

## The Need for Mythic Imaginaries

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<sup>4</sup> For further support, see also John C. Collins' *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (2005) pp. 92-102.

Before finally looking to the Hebraic wisdom texts themselves, I want to consider what Fennell calls the “aesthetic dimension of education” (2009), and its relationship to our present concern. For Fennell, each tradition is guided by an *aesthetic dimension* that shapes one’s vision for human flourishing. Gary agrees, and given Annas’ reading of Plato, we see the preambles serving such a function. In his closing words, Gary touches on a central need for any integrative educational enterprise, environmental or otherwise:

Informed by our intellectual and moral hungers, we can feast at the pluralistic banquet, noting with care, discernment, and good judgment what provides nourishment, and what is lacking. Rather than starting with a clash of absolutes - Law against philosophy, Law against Law, and philosophy against philosophy - an aesthetic education ought to awaken us to our profound human needs, both moral and intellectual, lest we remain ignorant of them and attempt to satisfy them on cheap fare. (2009, p. 328)

Perhaps the most profound human need for our schools and society, now and always, is for holistic wisdom and robust human flourishing, and we are indeed offered a feast in the best of our Hellenic and Hebraic heritage. Even if we bracket the metaphysical dimension of these ancient wisdom traditions, they offer us mythic imaginaries that tap into that *aesthetic dimension* and can help serve as *preambles* that help catalyze the imagination, the intellect, and the will to freely and powerfully shape our own sense of personal identity, vocation, and responsibility in relationship with society and the larger world.

### **Toward a Hebraic Wisdom Imaginary: Human Flourishing in the World**

Certainly, faithfulness to law is a central means of gaining wisdom for the Hebraic tradition, however, it does not denigrate other sources of wisdom or see them standing in *de facto* opposition to law.<sup>5</sup> As we consider how the Hebraic tradition might offer us compelling and generous mythic imaginaries to help us develop a holistic wisdom for human flourishing, we shall explore the generosity, wide-embrace, and even free play into which the Hebraic tradition, overlooked for so long, invites humanity. The Hebraic tradition encourages humanity to joyfully employ human reason and free inquiry toward the end of exploring humanity’s identity and purpose along with a deep knowledge of the the cosmos and the world around us. To do so, I draw from compelling Hebraic myths<sup>6</sup> that offer what John Collins has called “universal types” (2005, p. 102), or what I will call anthropological archetypes. These serve much how the preambles did for Plato. These mythic imaginaries provide aesthetic exemplars that aim to

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<sup>5</sup> John C. Collins writes regarding the Hellenistic-Jewish text, Sirach: “‘All wisdom is the fear of the Lord and in all wisdom there is the fulfillment of the law’ (19:20). The equation of wisdom and the law does not lead to the rejection of non-Jewish wisdom as superfluous. Rather, it broadens the concept of the law to include all forms of wisdom. The wise man will not hate the law (33:2), but he will not confine himself to the literal law either. The special Jewish revelation is compatible with and must be complemented by the wisdom that derives from common human experience” (p.102). For the Hebraic philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, the law was a copy of the “original” virtues embodied in the lives of virtuous persons, who lived their lives in accordance with nature and reason: “The story of the order in which the world was made has been set forth in detail by us as well as was possible in the preceding treatise; but, since it is necessary to carry out our examination of the law in regular sequence, let us postpone consideration of particular laws, which are, so to speak, copies, and examine first those which are more general and may be called the original of those copies. These are such men as lived good and blameless lives, whose virtues stand permanently recorded in the most holy Scriptures [...] for the instruction of the reader and as an inducement to him to aspire to the same; for in these men we have laws endowed with life and reason.” (*On the Life of Abraham* as found in *Outside the Bible*, vol. 1, p. 921)

<sup>6</sup> Here I am defining myth as the expression of human desire to probe the mysteries of reality and the search for human identity, meaning, purpose in relationship to that reality.

catalyze the human imagination, intellect, and will so that persons envision themselves as “*active reasoners, active participants* in the rational ordering of the city, *rather than passive conformers* to the laws” (Annas, 2010, p. 76). For the Hebrews, we shall see, humanity is more than a rational orderer of the city; he is a rational *orderer of the world*. Though we could draw from many other sources, we shall consider only a selection from the Hebraic wisdom corpus. These selections will constellate around the figure of Solomon, who, like Socrates is to the Hellenic tradition, serves as the archetypal holistically-wise human who embodies a certain environmental or cosmic wisdom in particular.

For the ancient Hebrews, the word “wisdom” — Heb. *hokma* — touched on a vast range of meanings that, interestingly, included possessing an ability to see the natural world’s mysterious essence and creatively “unlock” — or “master” — its fecund potentialities for the mutual, interdependent flourishing of the world and human society. Like Michelangelo “seeing” the David in the granite before chisel met stone, the wise person is one who sees the nature of things as they are (i.e. material cause) and all they can be (i.e. their formal and final cause).<sup>7</sup> Stephen Dempster captures, for the Hebrews, wisdom’s ability to penetrate into the nature of things and draw forth their potentialities:

‘Wisdom’ signifies the mastery of a skill on a particular domain. The word is first used in the Tanakh to describe the skill of individuals entrusted with the responsibility of making priestly garments (Exod. 28:1-3) and constructing the tabernacle at Sinai (Exod. 31:1-3). People skilled at various tasks, whether singing (Jer. 9:16-17) or sailing (Ps. 107:27), metallurgy (1 Kgs. 7:14) or military ability (Is. 10:13), shipbuilding (Ezek. 27:9) or snake-charming (Ps. 58:6), could be described as ‘wise.’ (2003, p. 202)

Ellen F. Davis’ understanding echoes Dempster’s own, though she also draws a more direct parallel between the Hebraic and Hellenistic traditions:

The kind of practical wisdom evoked here is less an individual quality than a *cultural disposition*, the common possession of a people. Because, as the proverbs suggest, “understanding, knowledge” is fully integrated into the economy of the household, that social capital is itself endangered whenever the community’s economic health and independence is threatened. Fresh insight into the interplay between knowledge and economics [...] comes from [...] James C. Scott, in his exploration of the concept he names *mētis*, or “practical knowledge.” He takes the word from Homer[:] *mētis* denotes *the special kind of intelligence* displayed by Odysseus, typically (but inadequately) rendered in English as “cunning” or “wily.” [...] The semantic range of *mētis* corresponds closely to that to that of *the Hebrew hokma*; *both denote practical wisdom, skill, craftsmanship — a kind of intelligence bred through generations of work done in particular places, with particular materials, in response to concrete and immediate problems*. It is the practice of “the art of the locality”: “To speak of the art of one loom, the art of one river, the art of one tractor, or the art of one automobile is not preposterous; it is to point to the size and importance of the gap between general knowledge and situated knowledge.” (2008, pp.151-152, emphasis mine)

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<sup>7</sup> This is much akin to what Arnold said was at the heart of the Hellenistic tradition: “The first motive which ought to impel us to study is the desire to augment the excellence of our nature [...] another view: *the sheer desire to see things as they are* [...] impulses towards action [...] the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion [...] to leave the world better and happier than we found it [...] Culture is then properly described...as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a *study of perfection*” (1924, p. 9).

We do well to acknowledge that this interpretation of wisdom stands in opposition to certain misguided readings of the Hebraic tradition that have influenced human action that resulted in environmental and human degradation.<sup>8</sup> These interpretations are not least due to the language of what has been called the “cultural mandate” given to the first human beings in some of the earliest sentences of the Jewish Tanakh: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue it*; and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28, NRSV, emphasis mine). On the surface this language would seem to render the environment an instrument for humanity’s purposes, no matter the reason or cost. However, such a reading does violence to how the earliest Hebrews would have read the text and understood their relationship to the natural world. Even a brief consideration of the immediate context of Genesis 1:28 bespeaks a reading contrary to a rapacious or instrumentalist view. The Hebraic creation myth recounts the first human (Hebrew, ‘*adam*) brought forth from the ground (‘*adamah*), which already places humanity in *close kinship* with the earth. Humanity’s endowment of the divine image was understood less as a domineering overlordship and more as an *intrinsic regal dignity suggesting a stewarding responsibility* to the natural world and society. Indeed, the immediate context suggests a more *tender* human relationship with the environment, itself imbued with inestimable value, due to the language of *tending and keeping* the earth (Genesis 2:15).

Recall that the Hebrews conceived of all spheres of reality existing in a kind of *covenantal bond*: humanity and the environment would reciprocally flourish or flounder depending on the people’s state of virtue. Prophets and sages of the Hebraic tradition were not wary to address the people’s abuses and injustices. As an example, Jeremiah railed against the the people’s injustice toward the poor and the land itself when he pleaded with them to seek wisdom for their good:

Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’ (Jeremiah 6:16, NRSV)

Because of their foolishness and injustice the land of Israel (understood by the Hebrews as a microcosm of the cosmos) became degraded — or, better *de-created* — resulting in its reverse to chaos akin to the state of the cosmos prior to the ordering the world:

‘My people are foolish [...] they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.’ I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo,

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<sup>8</sup> It was Lynn White Jr. who wrote in his 1967 *Science* article, “The Historic Roots of our Ecological Crisis”, that the Hebraic tradition (in the form of Western Christianity in particular) is largely responsible for our environmental crisis. He and others look to what has been termed the “instrumentalist” reading of God’s command for Adam to “have dominion” over the earth that assumes the natural world and humanity’s physical existence less important than the spiritual reality and human destiny since the physical world seems to come to a climactic dissolution and gives way to a spiritual one. While we do not have time to explore the historical backgrounds and development of such dualistic exegesis, a reading that denigrates the physical world in its various aspects has not always been predominant, which will become clear. In fact, perhaps now more than ever, practitioners in a wide spectrum of Hebraic traditions recognize where parties of the Hebraic tradition are responsible for contributing to our environmental crises and are working together in a spirit of ecumenical environmental recovery and stewardship, often with people outside of even the religious tradition. This would please someone like White who saw hope for the Hebraic tradition if someone like St. Francis of Assisi would represent the tradition in its efforts to heal the environmental wounds. For an example of one such call to a secular-religious collaborative effort see Wilson, E. O. (2006). *The creation: An appeal to save life on earth*. New York: Norton.



there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins. (Jeremiah 4:22-23, NRSV)

For the ancient Hebrews, the state of the environment served as a sort of barometer that indicated the state of virtue or vice of the people. When the environment languished, it was due to human injustice toward any of the other spheres wherein human is in covenantal relationship — social or ecological.<sup>9</sup> For the Hebrews, the dignity of being created in the divine image was that humanity was invited into a co-creative, co-laboring vocation to order the world in wisdom for the sake of the flourishing of the land and its people. Like Davis above, John C. Collins captures the intended fruits of this dynamic when he writes:

Regardless of the actual observance, the *intention of the law was evidently to protect the land from exploitation*. There was also the application that the natural fruit of the land belongs to all the people, and so the poor could enjoy it at least every seventh year. [...] The objectives, however, were important and remained matters of concern for our own time: how do we preserve the land for future generations and how do we provide for the poor society? The biblical laws but they suggest an attitude that is a prerequisite of any solution. *The landowners of ancient Israel were forbidden to think primarily in terms of their individual profits but were directed to think instead of the common good* (2005, p. 82, emphasis mine)<sup>10</sup>

For the Hebrews, God created the cosmos in and through wisdom, and humans were endowed with the capacity to perceive and respond to natural order of the world. An appropriate response would be to order one's own life in wisdom and seek for the continued order and flourishing of the world — a kind of obedience to natural law.<sup>11</sup>

## Solomon, the Archetypal Human

Solomon was the Hebraic archetypal wise human, and is considered the author of portions of the book of Proverbs (thought to have been compiled around between the 10th - 7th centuries BCE). Far from acquiring wisdom through servile fear of the divine, and slavish

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<sup>9</sup> Other examples of this reciprocal relationship include: "Evidence of their wickedness still remains: a continually smoking wasteland, plants bearing fruit that does not ripen, and a pillar of salt standing as a monument to an unbelieving soul. For because they passed wisdom by, they not only were hindered from recognizing the good, but also left for humankind a reminder of their folly, so that their failures could never go unnoticed." (Wisdom of Solomon 10:7-8, NRSV)

<sup>10</sup> Collins is most surely reflecting on the text of Leviticus 19, called the "holiness code" for the ancient Hebrews, in which their call to justice toward one another and the land was motivated by a desire to reflect the divine character.

<sup>11</sup> For a compelling call to ecological wisdom and stewardship from a re-worked natural law perspective, consider William Ophuls' (2011) *Plato's revenge: Politics in the age of ecology*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press. Though he is bracketing the metaphysical component of the natural law argument, consider his call for contemplation of the natural world, and what we have to learn from the enterprise: "Nature may not be a moral agent in the usual sense of the word - although a moral code is indeed implicit within the natural order - but it does have physical laws and limits that cannot be transgressed with impunity. Tragically, in the absence of mores that promote self-restraint and respect for nature, the exploitation of the natural world is bound to turn into overexploitation, for human wants are infinite. The long-term effect of unleashed passions therefore has been to violate nature's laws and limits and provoke an ecological crisis" (p. 19). And, "Ecology validates *the golden mean* [i.e. cosmic order] to speak of limits and balance is to acknowledge the fact of *natural interdependence, which leads to the deepest ecological wisdom and the highest ecological ethic*. *The live process is a unity in which everything is connected to everything else*. *Life is simply one very large ecosystem* — the biosphere — made up of progressively smaller ecosystems that nest inside each other hierarchically [...] and nonhierarchical to form a complex and manifold web of life in which humanity is organically embedded" (p. 33, emphasis mine).

obedience to law and revelation narrowly-defined, Solomonic tradition poetically personifies wisdom as a woman — “Lady Wisdom” — whose inviting call to humanity to explore the natural world suggests a playful festivity of delight in the discovery of the mysteries of the cosmos and humanity’s place therein. This is a far cry from the instrumentalist readings of the Hebraic tradition. Here we see Wisdom’s delight in the natural world and the human race:

When he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
then I [wisdom] was beside him, *like a master worker*;  
and I was daily his delight,  
*rejoicing* before him always,  
*rejoicing in his inhabited world*  
*and delighting in the human race.*  
And now, my children, listen to me:  
*happy* are those who keep my ways. (8:29-32, NRSV, emphasis mine)

Here wisdom invites the human race to share in her *happiness and rejoicing* in the unfolding fecundity of the world. We also get a glimpse into how later Hebraic authors in the Solomonic wisdom tradition saw humanity’s possession of wisdom as a gaining of knowledge of the order pervading the cosmos. William P. Brown ever-winsomely expresses this interdependent festivity of interdependent flourishing in his *The Seven Pillars of Creation*:

Wisdom, with her delight, informs humanity’s role and place in the world. Her play-filled development, in fact, mirrors human development, for she is created in the *imago nati*, in the image of the growing child, and the whole world is created in the *imago domus*, as Wisdom’s home. But her “edifice complex” exists not just for herself but also for creation’s inhabitants, her playmates. By making her home in the city, Wisdom also makes her home in the human heart (see Prov. 2:10). Her position in the world sets the context and catalyst for those who desire to grow in wisdom. Growth in wisdom does not diminish childlike wonder. Far from it: as a child Wisdom shares her wonder, and as a mother she nurtures it. (2010, p.167)

The figure of Solomon (Hebrew *Shelomoh*) himself, whose name derived from the Hebrew word for “peace” (*Shalom*), possesses a wisdom that confers a reciprocal human-environmental flourishing characterized by *peace* and *delight* in every realm of his domain. Note especially how “dominion” need not result in inimical subjugation of society and the world:

For he *had dominion* over all the region west of the Euphrates from Tiphshah to Gaza, over all the kings west of the Euphrates; and *he had peace on all sides*. During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety [...] *all of them under their vines and fig trees* [...] God gave Solomon very great wisdom, *discernment*, and *breadth of understanding* as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east [...] his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. *He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish.* People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kings 4:24-25, 29-34, NRSV, emphasis mine)

Though it would be anachronistic to call Solomon a “Renaissance man”, it is in that spirit that we see Solomon at his best. Here Solomon is a representative of what is possible for all humanity — ‘Adam’ — for we all possess the same dignity, potentiality, and regal responsibility. Humans

are invited to embody wisdom at the intersection of our spheres of influence in the wider “inhabited world.” This results in a just and flourishing existence for all. And far from possessing an *allergy to inquiry*, the Hebraic wisdom tradition offers a holistic wisdom that invites humanity into what is clearly a *revelry of inquiry* into the natural world and our place in it. Again, Brown:

God’s wisdom imparts knowledge of astronomical patterns and biological forms. Though such knowledge is considered a matter of *revelation*, it is still knowledge of *nature*, a *natural knowledge*. Wisdom, thus, blurs the boundary between the divine revelation and natural discovery, both of which are part of the same package of knowledge and neither of which settles for ignorance. (p.18)

We see this invitation to free inquiry in the natural world in later Hebraic texts that continue to offer wisdom to humanity in this Solomonic spirit. In fact, these later texts are representative of the *Hellenistic-Jewish* period, a time when Jews were responding to the influx of Hellenistic philosophy and culture. Many of the Hellenistic Jews saw compatibility between the two traditions. One such text that reflects this is *The Wisdom of Solomon*, written sometime between the first centuries BCE and CE. In it, the author is reflecting on the archetypal Solomon as exemplar of wisdom. We see that the readers — a universal audience — are invited to pursue wisdom, which is reflected in the natural order: “You have made all things by your word, and by your wisdom have formed *humankind to have dominion over the creatures you have made, and rule the world in holiness and righteousness [justice], and pronounce judgment in uprightness of soul*” (9:1-3, NRSV, emphasis mine). We see here that human dominion is to be guided by the virtue of justice and uprightness of soul, not selfish, rapacious domination. Expanding on Solomon’s wisdom of 1 Kings 4 above, the author of *Wisdom* particularly highlights Solomon’s expansive environmental wisdom:

For it is he who gave me [understanding (*phronesis*) and skill in crafts], unerring knowledge of what exists, to know the structure of the world and the activity of the elements; the beginning and end and middle of times, the alternations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons, the cycles of the year and the constellations of the stars, the natures of animals and the tempers of wild animals, the power of spirits and the thoughts of human beings, the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots; I learned both what is secret and manifest, for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me. (7:16-22, NRSV)

The pursuit of wisdom draws Solomon to the greatest depths and heights of cosmic contemplation. His extensive polymathic knowledge and education is the reflection of his free inquiry into the natural world for the sake of a robust human-environmental flourishing. This speaks to the great Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria’s, conception of the “first-formed father of the world” (*Wisdom 10:1*): ‘*Adam* was the first “citizen of the cosmos.” As the Greeks conceived of humanity as a political animal (Aristotle, *Politics* Book 1) — an orderer of the city — so Philo, reflecting on his own Hebraic tradition, conceived of humanity’s purpose as orderers of the world in the promotion of peace and mutual flourishing with the natural world, not unlike the figure of Solomon:

If we describe that original ancestor not only as the first human being, but also as the only real citizen of the cosmos, we shall be telling the absolute truth. The cosmos was his home and city, since no hand-made constructions built out of materials of stone and wood were yet present. He resided in the cosmos with complete safety like in his native land, wholly without fear, because he had been found worthy to exercise dominion over earthly affairs and all mortal creatures stood in awe of him, having either been trained or

compelled to obey him as master. And so he lived in the enjoyment of peace without conflict. But since every well-governed city has a constitution, it was the case that the citizen of the world necessarily made use of the constitution which belonged to the entire cosmos. This is the right reason of nature, which is named with a more appropriate title “ordinance”, a divine law, according to which obligations and rights have been distributed to each creature. (Runia, 2001, p.84)

Here we see Philo, along with his contemporary *Wisdom of Solomon*, arguing for a Hebraic anthropology that celebrates a human identity and vocation that encourages the use of *reason and free inquiry* through contemplation of the cosmos. For Philo, the codified law (which Arnold and company allege is the Hebraic tradition’s *sole source* of wisdom) is a source that is also a reflection of the inherent law and order of the cosmos that humanity can discern and follow for wisdom and flourishing.<sup>12</sup> For the Hebraic tradition at large, humanity lost that first innocence in a primeval event that befouled human nature.<sup>13</sup> To pursue wisdom, then, is to make progress

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<sup>12</sup> Consider, once again, Philo’s *On the Life of Abraham*: “Moses extolled [the Hebrews] for two reasons. First, he wished to show that the enacted ordinances are not inconsistent with nature; and secondly that those who wish to live in accordance with the laws as they stand have no difficult task, seeing that the first generations before any at all of the particular statutes was set in writing followed the unwritten law with perfect ease, so that one might properly say that the enacted laws are nothing else than memorials of the life of the ancients [...] For they were not scholars or pupils of others, nor did they learn under teachers what was right to say or do: they listened to no voice or instruction but their own: they gladly accepted conformity with nature, holding that nature itself was, as indeed it is, the most venerable of statutes, and thus their whole life was one of happy obedience to law” (p.922). And, “Abraham, then, filled with zeal for piety, the highest and greatest of virtues, as eager to follow God and to be obedient to His commands; understanding by commands not only those conveyed in speech and writing but also those made manifest by nature with clearer signs, and apprehended by the sense which is the most truthful of all and superior to hearing [sight] for anyone who contemplates the order in nature and the constitution enjoyed by the world-city whose excellence no words can describe, needs no speaker to teach him to practice a law-abiding and peaceful life and to aim at assimilating himself to its beauties” (pp. 937-938).

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that Matthew Arnold was concerned with what he saw as the Hebraic preoccupation with the notion of sin. He writes: “The difficulties which oppose themselves to man’s pursuit or attainment of that perfection of which Socrates talks so hopefully, and, as from this point of view one might almost say, so glibly. It is all very well to talk of getting rid of one’s ignorance, of seeing things in their reality seeing them in their beauty; but how is this to be done when there is something which thwarts and spoils all our efforts? This something is *sin; and the space which sin fills in Hebraism, as compared with Hellenism, is indeed prodigious*. This obstacle to perfection fills the whole scene, and perfection appears remote and rising away from the earth, in the background...” (1924, p.116-17). Sin, for the Hebrews, can be conceived of as failing to reach one’s god-given potential for their nature, something that Annas, reading Plato, also acknowledged that “the need for law represents a concession to the greed and competitiveness of our actual human nature” and, “are there to correct actual defective behaviour” (2010, p. 79, 80). Though we may want to bracket the metaphysical implications of a concept of “sin”, we recognize our own inherent selfishness and its effects in small and great ways. We see the fruits of irresponsibility and wanton greed and environmental abuse that our forebears and we ourselves participate to deleterious effect. Matthew Arnold, too, was concerned with the England’s “green and pleasant land” (Blake, 1810). He wrote, “Faith in machinery is [...] our besetting danger” (p.12). The Hebraic concept of sin can be conceived, in part, as a violation of the inherent cosmic covenant relationship. We might employ the language of “repentance” — to turn away from —if we are to educate the coming generations in environmental wisdom. In order to be better “citizens of the cosmos” we must face the injustices that riddle our society, polluting our minds and hearts, and keep us from making socially- and environmentally-responsible decisions for the flourishing of all.

Interestingly, Ophuls, who rejects a traditional natural law argument in light of its metaphysical implications, argues that as we continue to live uncontrolled lives of passion, unrestrained by reason, we exact a toll on the natural world that is fundamentally unsustainable. “Nature may not be a moral agent in the usual sense of the word — although a moral code is indeed implicit within the natural order — but it does have physical laws and limits that cannot be transgressed with impunity. Tragically, in the absence of mores that promote self-restraint and respect for nature, the exploitation of the natural world is bound to turn into overexploitation, for human wants are infinite. The long-term effect of unleashed passions therefore has been to violate nature’s laws and limits and provoke an ecological crisis” (p.19). And, “The only real solution is to put an end to the hubris itself by dissolving the dread-driven, neurotic hostility to nature that fuels the urge for domination. Ecology is the surest cure for modern hubris...[it]

toward the restoration of human nature in all of its capacities. Hence Solomon, following ‘*Adam*, resembles that “original ancestor” as “citizen of the cosmos.” It is in this way that Solomon serves as an archetype of the wise human for the Hebrews. Wisdom, more precious than rubies, can be gained, but it can be lost — as the story of Solomon reminds us. It is worth returning to Gary once again:

Informed by our intellectual and moral hungers, we can feast at the pluralistic banquet, noting with care, discernment, and good judgment what provides nourishment, and what is lacking. Rather than starting with a clash of absolutes - Law against philosophy, Law against Law, and philosophy against philosophy - an aesthetic education ought to awaken us to our profound human needs, both moral and intellectual, lest we remain ignorant of them and attempt to satisfy them on cheap fare. (2009, p. 328)

The ancient Hebraic and Hellenistic traditions that undergird our rich western heritage, together, offer us a feast of wisdom for our many and profound human needs. Far from the “cheap fare” we so often find proffered in our schools and society, the ancient paths of the Hebraic tradition offers an intellectually- and morally-compelling holistic wisdom imaginary that invites humanity into a free and spirited exploration of the self, society, and the wider world for the reciprocal flourishing of all.

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exposes the grand illusion of modern civilization: our apparent abundance is really scarcity in disguise, and our supposed mastery of nature is ultimately a lie. To put it more positively, ecology contains an intrinsic wisdom and an implied ethic that, by transforming man from an enemy into a partner of nature, will make it possible to preserve the best of civilization’s achievements for many generations to come and also to attain a higher quality of civilized life. Both the wisdom and the ethic follow directly from the ecological facts of life: natural limits, balance, and interrelationship necessarily entail human humility, moderation, and connection” (p. 29).

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