

**Title**

“Sweetness and Light”, Jerusalem and Athens: A Hebraic and Hellenistic Dialectic

**Abstract**

Moral philosophers in the classical tradition standardly look to Plato and Aristotle for understanding wisdom and its place in moral education. While Plato and Aristotle are indispensable for guiding the efforts of moral educators, their approaches arguably overlook important dimensions of wisdom. In this paper, I explore the Hebraic wisdom tradition and argue that it offers a conception of wisdom that could complement and enrich the Ancient Greek tradition.

In drawing on the Hebraic tradition, I follow Fennell (2009) and Gary (2009), who have raised anew the enduring question of the relationship between the Hellenic and Hebraic wisdom traditions. The question of the compatibility of these two traditions is not novel. It is Tertullian who famously asked, “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” In his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Matthew Arnold echoed pessimism regarding Hellenistic and Hebraic reconciliation. Fennell takes Arnold’s pessimism a step further, claiming that the Hellenistic and Hebraic offer mutually exclusive educational ideals. For Tertullian, Arnold, and Fennell, the Hellenistic tradition is fundamentally “philosophical” in nature, dedicated to reason and free inquiry, while the Hebraic tradition is “prophetic,” dedicated to faith and strict obedience to Law or Revelation. This strict opposition is what Strauss called the “theologico-political problem.” Gary, by contrast, contends these traditions can (and did) exist in a dialectical relationship, whereby the weaknesses of each are minimized and the strengths preserved.

In this paper, I follow Gary and argue that the Hellenistic and Hebraic conceptions of wisdom are more complementary than Fennell and others suggest. Writing from the perspective of my work as a classical school teacher for the last eight years, I further argue that the Hellenistic and the Hebraic can work together to help support moral educators’ goals in cultivating wisdom and virtue in their students. To make my case I will examine some important, but largely misunderstood, elements of the Hebraic wisdom tradition.

Interpreting the Hebraic tradition in light of Arnold and Fennell, one comes away with a sense that wisdom is nothing more than living in strict obedience to the Law, disallowing one from ever exercising “free inquiry”, and that synthesis is impossible. However, this is to simplify to the point of misunderstanding. A more accurate understanding of the Hebraic model is that the wise person exists in *relationship* with all spheres of reality: the divine, the human (others and the self), and the environment. While obedience to the Law is part of wisdom, full wisdom is only attained when individuals see their own flourishing as tied up with having a *right relationship, rightly ordered* with these spheres. In the same way that Plato and Aristotle believe happiness is only possible when one wisely acts in accordance with virtue, so the Hebraic writers believe that happiness is only possible when one rightly acts in accordance with wisdom as it relates to the divine, the human, and the environment. For this paper, I focus on the Hebraic requirements for acting in right relationship with the human and the environment, and that this is compatible with classical Greek virtue ethics. What is more, it offers a unique conception of wisdom, enriching the Hellenistic tradition. I will conclude by suggesting that the notion of environmental wisdom found in the Hebraic tradition is one that has special application in helping contemporary students think about a need for their own environmental wisdom.