looking for applicable moral lessons. In these narratives, however, the interest of the biblical author is mainly in God’s activity, not man’s. In the story of the Davidic monarchy, for example, Hazony discovers the beginnings of a “limited state,” with features similar to a constitutional monarchy. Hardly, I think. Let him test the theory by consulting texts like Psalm 89 (Greek 88), a poem that integrates the historical Davidic covenant into the constitutive structure of the cosmos itself.

**Specifically Hebrew**

The central core of the biblical literature is inseparable from the uniqueness of Israel’s experience and the uniqueness of Israel’s God. I can agree with Hazony’s declaration that “the word of God is continuous with human reason and wisdom,” but only in the sense that the children of Israel have the same humanity as the rest of us. The Hebrew Scriptures, however, are specifically Hebrew; if God had spoken in another language, it would have been another message, because the uniqueness of Israel cannot be cut away from Israel’s sacred literature.

However God’s choice of Israel is to be understood, it was a choice. After the confusion of the tongues on the Plains of Shinar, the Almighty was obliged—so to speak—to pick a tongue in which to address the human race. When he chose Hebrew, he necessarily chose the people who spoke it. When he entered into their history by redemption and covenant, he caused his message to be written into their literature. This is why the truth conveyed in Holy Scripture is necessarily the *hebraica veritas*.

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**Our Final Draft**

**Joshua Schulz on the Revisionist Narrative of Christian Hope**

In the 2012 film *Flight*, Denzel Washington plays a pilot named Whip Whitaker, who, while experiencing the catastrophic mechanical failure of a commercial aircraft carrying over one hundred souls, does what looks to be courageous: he calmly guides his crew and the mangled plane to a crash landing that saves all but a few passengers. When the wing flaps controlling the jet’s altitude get stuck in a position that drives the plane towards the ground, Whitaker inverts the aircraft so he can control its descent until he can put it down in a field. It is an amazing feat of technical prowess.

After the crash, many call Whip a hero. As the film continues, however, we learn that the meaning and value of his actions in the aircraft are not so straightforward. The movie clearly and painfully portrays Whip as a late-stage alcoholic, a compulsive liar, and an absentee father. We see him deliberately using his friends, family, and lovers as props for his addiction until he has alienated everyone but his coke dealer. His character is incontinent bordering on vicious.

The opening scenes of *Flight* are thus a metaphor of Whitaker’s life. Caught in a downward spiral brought on by alcoholism, he appears to the world to be soaring when in fact he has desperately inverted his priorities so as to maintain a similitude of life just a little longer, sacrificing relationship after relationship to keep himself in booze. The dramatic tension of the film arises from our hope that he will, at the last moment, save everyone caught onboard his failing life rather than trap them all in the wreckage.

**Courage or Despair?**

Given what we learn about Whip’s character, we must ask whether his actions in the cockpit were truly heroic. I would argue that, far from being so, they were simply the
actions of a despairing man with nothing to lose. Just as a glutton might, out of embarrassment, eat temerately at a public function, so too a vicious man might, in a given situation, act like a courageous one.

Several considerations support this interpretation of Whip’s actions. Though he feels proud of the technical prowess he displayed during the flight, he cannot feel the noble pleasure one experiences upon acting rightly, because he knows his actions were occasioned by alcohol and cocaine rather than courage. Indeed, all the pilots who subsequently try to recreate his stunt in flight simulators are unsuccessful, suggesting that while the outcome of Whip’s action may have been good, the act itself was foolhardy—aviation’s equivalent of charging a tank with a bayonet. Its result was only incidentally (or perhaps providentially) happy rather than tragic.

Furthermore, in light of his subsequent self-destructive behavior, we could also argue that Whip emerges from the crisis frustrated by the fact that he is still alive. A courageous man will feel pain when he faces a life-threatening situation and relief when he escapes from it. Whip, by contrast, is clearly unmoved at the prospect of death, either in the plane or as a result of his binge drinking. He is fearful of going to jail for flying inebriated—that would cut off his access to alcohol—and only appears relieved when he retreats from the world into an alcoholic coma.

Whip Whitaker thus shows us that individual acts are not self-interpreting: different persons may engage in the same behavior but with differing degrees of moral value. Nor can the meaning of an act be determined merely by looking at the emotions and intentions of the agent at the time, important as those considerations are. We must also attend to the narrative arc of his moral life—in this case, to Whip’s substance abuse, dishonesty, cruelty, sloth, and despair—which frames his actions and fits them into the larger story of his person.

BILBO’S PLOY

As a point of contrast to Whitaker, let us consider Bilbo Baggins’s apparent betrayal of the dwarves in chapter 17 of J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit. This occurs after the death of Smaug the dragon at the hand of Bard the bowman, and revolves around the Arkenstone, a beautiful gem Bilbo has found in the dragon’s lair and secretly pocketed despite its being greatly coveted by his friend, the dwarf Thorin Oakenshield, who has something of a rightful claim to it. (How rightful we will not consider here.)

Besieged by Bard and his men from Laketown, the dwarves are walled up in Smaug’s lair, starving on a heap of gold. They also face the looming threat of the Elvenking of Mirkwood, who is marching towards the mountain with an army bent on profiteering. During a parlay, Bard makes a twofold claim to a share of Smaug’s treasure: first, it was he who killed the dragon; and second, Smaug’s treasure was originally plundered from men as well as from dwarves. These are demands of justice, but Bard also appeals to Thorin’s sense of charity: insofar as Laketown has suffered as a result of helping the dwarves, he looks to Thorin for compassion and aid in rebuilding the town. Bard offers Thorin not only the opportunity to do what is minimally required by justice, but also to go beyond justice and to reclaim the noble glory of his forefathers.

Bilbo considers Bard’s requests reasonable, but Thorin coolly rejects them all, a response that “stinks of dragon” to Bilbo in its hard-hearted avarice. So, sneaking from the dwarves’ cave, Bilbo secretly meets with Bard and the Elvenking and gives them the Arkenstone to use as a bargaining chip with Thorin. The plan works. During a second parley with Thorin, Bard reveals that he has the Arkenstone, and the dwarf reluctantly agrees to barter some of the other treasure for that prize, satisfying Bard and averting foolish harm to both sides.

BETRAYAL OR FRIENDSHIP?

Nevertheless, Thorin denounces Bilbo as a betrayer. Despite the hobbit’s protests that he acted for the sake of friendship, Thorin orders him off the mountain, announcing that “no friendship of mine goes with him.” At one point he even threatens Bilbo with violence, and he would have killed the hobbit but for the intervention of Gandalf and the somewhat pressing business of preparing for the attack of an approaching orc army.

Is Thorin correct to characterize Bilbo’s act as a “betrayal”? I think not. In previous adventures with spiders and elves, Bilbo repeatedly showed that he was willing to put himself in danger for the sake of the dwarves.

Individual acts are not self-interpreting: different persons may engage in the same behavior but with differing degrees of moral value.
Moreover, during the second parley, Bilbo volunteered his own rightful share of the treasure for Thorin to exchange for the Arkenstone, giving justice and succor to Bard while allowing Thorin to save both face and gold, and gain the stone to boot. (Thorin accepts Bilbo’s generosity, but repays it coldly, and immediately begins plotting how to cheat Bard of Bilbo’s gold.) By sacrificing his own material good and, he knows, his relationship with Thorin, Bilbo reveals himself to everyone but Thorin not as the dwarf’s betrayer, but as his true friend.

Here again we see that the meaning of a particular act cannot be determined in isolation from the actor’s life and character. In an interpretive vacuum, Bilbo’s handing over of the Arkenstone could be seen as a vicious betrayal of Thorin. It is only in light of Bilbo’s history and subsequent generosity that we know it actually to be a heroic act of friendship, one that analogically prefigures the even greater sacrifices to be made by his nephew Frodo and his gardener, Samwise Gamgee, whose selfless actions will save the world.

**Augustine’s Insight**

Within these literary musings hide metaphysical foundations of Christian hope. St. Augustine can help us see this. Although many consider his *Confessions* the world’s first autobiography, it is common to note that Augustine himself points to the presumption of autobiography. We cannot interpret the meaning of our own lives, cannot discern whether our story possesses a tragic or comic arc, because we do not know how our lives will end, which is another way of saying that individual actions are only intelligible as moments within the greater tale of one’s life. When Augustine realizes this, he says, “I became a great question to myself.”

Yet our reflections suggest that the open-endedness of human narratives is due to more than mere ignorance of the ending of our tale. It is also due to the possibility that the moral quality of our stories will be retrospectively revised, either for the better, like Bilbo’s, or for the worse, like Whip’s.

Revised, but not re-written. Consider Augustine’s famous account of stealing pears as a boy. The theft was done without reason, he tells us, out of malice, and in committing it he traded the real satisfaction of *ordo amoris* for an empty mouthful of things that left him empty and hungry. Later in life, Augustine realized that this seemingly trivial incident of his youth embodied the three concupiscences of 1 John 2:16 (lust, curiosity, and ambition), every one of them a negative sign of his true desire for intimacy, truth, and the gift of self. In other words, just as the cries and squalls of the infant Augustine describes in *Confessions* 1.6 correctly and naturally indicate its true good, though it later lies to its detriment with the same mouth, so too do the desires that motivate his later theft of pears in *Confessions* 2.6 correctly and naturally.
indicate that his ultimate good lies in God, though the theft twists and obscures their original meaning. The very possibility of falsehood in word and action presuppose nature's true sign.

The Confessions is the narrative of Augustine's painstaking path back along the trail of such signs, led ever onwards by grace, which is therefore "ever ancient and ever new." His conversion re-creates him, makes him a new man. It consecrates his life, turning his infidelities into a different kind of confession: not of guilt, but of thanksgiving for the mercy of God. Augustine comes to recognize that because of its role in his eventual conversion, his restlessness itself was a gift, one of the many ways God sought him even when Augustine knew it not.

As he remembers his life according to the great biblical narrative of sin, fall, and redemption by grace, Augustine the bishop praises God that the meaning of his youth was not fixed. Christ's sacrifice redeems our past, present, and future; God could turn even Augustine's sin to his own glory and praise. This, then, is the foundation of Christian hope: not that our sins be ignored or forgotten, but rather that they be reinterpreted in the eschaton by the Word who makes all things new.

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The Rights of Aphrodite

W. E. Knickerbocker on C. S. Lewis & the New State Paganism

In the essay "We Have No 'Right To Happiness,'" C. S. Lewis tells his readers of a conversation he had with a woman who was one of his neighbors. The subject of the discussion was two neighbor couples, Mr. and Mrs. A and Mr. and Mrs. B. Mr. A had divorced Mrs. A to marry Mrs. B, who had divorced Mr. B. Mrs. A's looks were not what they once were, one cause of which was the number of children she had borne to Mr. A. Mr. B had been disabled in the war and was out of a job. The neighbor with whom Lewis was having the conversation justified these divorces and the remarriage by saying that Mr. A and Mrs. B "had a right to happiness."

Lewis says the neighbor who justified this behavior was "rather leftist" in her politics and a teetotaler, who would certainly not approve of a ruthless businessman whose happiness consisted in making money or of an alcoholic who was happy when he was drunk. Rather, the happiness to which this neighbor said Mr. A and Mrs. B had a right was solely "sexual happiness." The right to sexual happiness justified breaking vows solemnly made and legally validated.

In the course of this essay, Lewis refers, as he often does in other writings, to natural law, which he sometimes calls the Law of Human Behavior (Mere Christianity, ch. 1). He goes into greater detail about this law in The Abolition of Man, there contending that it has been proclaimed in various ways by all the great religions and philosophies. All of them recognize that our ability to know how we should behave is greater than our ability to behave as we should, but, he argues, this is no excuse for discounting the natural law, which is accessible to all people—what St. Paul calls the law written on the hearts and consciences of the Gentiles (Rom. 2:14–15).

In a direct reference to American culture, Lewis cites the Declaration of Independence and its statement about "the pursuit of happiness." He then says,

And now we get to the real point. What did the writers of that august declaration mean? It is quite certain what they did not mean. They did not mean that man was entitled to pursue happiness by any and every means—including, say, murder, rape,
A Greenland Diary
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The Final Draft
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Books Too Soon?
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