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Athens, Jerusalem, and the Orient Express of Philosophy

The distinction between Athens and Jerusalem plays a prominent role in the discussion on Jewish philosophy. While it has gained a certain popular currency, the article argues the distinction is false. It does, however, express a sentiment that sheds illuminating light on the history of the institutionalization of philosophy as a discipline taught at the modern university in “the West.” Originally a patristic distinction, it gets curiously adopted by philosophers such as Leo Strauss. A closer look at the trajectories of Jewish philosophers from Spinoza and Mendelssohn to the present shows that there is little room left for a philosophical argument for maintaining the distinction. Rather, the distinction works much like the Orient Express that did reach Istanbul but never left the European continent. Just like the Orient Express, the distinction between Athens and Jerusalem runs on a track that seems to highlight the difference between destination and point of origin but ultimately only proves the deep nexus established through the link along which the distinction runs.