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Literature as a Burning Bush

> hierarchitectitiptitoploftical, with a burning bush abob off its baubletop.
>
> (James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*)

1 Introduction

Imagine a transcendent moment which astonishes man but does not infringe upon his freedom to decide, as the natural world remains intact. This may be an apt description of how the divine word, using as its medium a natural element (a bush), came to Moses at the burning bush, which burned without being consumed. Moses was free to ignore the message, as he was not forced into his decision by any lasting infringement upon the natural order. Moses could not even point to the ashes of the burning bush, because the very thing remained as it was. The call to responsibility was so personal as to border on a phantasmagorical vision. Moreover, the truth conveyed was radically personal: no one else heard or saw anything that could corroborate Moses' vision. The proximity to its message cannot be figured by historico-critical tools alone: At the burning bush, Moses was reminded of the fate of his brothers and sisters, even as he was spatially far removed from them. The transcendent message of the divine name, which cannot be pronounced, almost coincides with Moses' awareness of this responsibility.

In a way, the spirit hidden within the letter is similar to this radically personal revelation. The reader unveils a truth that is felt to be meant for him or her alone, and which was perhaps not even explicitly intended by the writer. In a way, the writer is the medium of the truth rather than the originator of the truth. The poet who transmits words without completely understanding them can be compared to an oracle in Antiquity who conveys divine messages without being at their origin. This latter description fits Heidegger's idea of poetry being an access to Being and of the poet being neither an active forger nor a passive recipient of poetry but rather a medium through which the language becomes speech: "die Sprache spricht." Undoubtedly, historico-critical methods which attempt to pinpoint the meaning of a text by treating it as a historical residue of bygone times cannot do justice to the "Anspruch" of poetry. For Heidegger, Hölderlin's complaint, "What use are poets in times of need?" (in his elegy *Bread and Wine*), does not evoke a long-forgotten past, but is in fact more present and more a herald of the future

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than contemporary writers.[1] In a way, Levinas's approach to literature/poetry shows similarities with that of Heidegger. Both discover in poetry essential elements of their own philosophy, as if it were preluding upon their own thought. Heidegger demonstrates the difference between Being ("Sein") and the totality of beings ("Seienden") in Hölderlin's poetry as well as in pre-Socratic maxims. Levinas points to the difference between I and the other as the experience par excellence, forgotten in philosophy but expressed in poetry. Rimbaud's "Je est un autre," a quotation from his letter of May 15, 1871, may be read as the experience of alienation of the subject without specific reference to the other human being; in Levinas's reading it becomes an allusion to the intrigue of the uniqueness of the subject as being-for-the-other. This *re-contextualization* of lines of poetry allows for a creative renewal by which poetry becomes "food for thought," transcending the mere intention of the author. In a way, this re-contextualization is quite similar to how the Talmud reworks biblical quotations. In the famous story of Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eliezer, in which even a heavenly voice cannot decide their difference of opinions (Babylonian Talmud *Bava Metsia* 59b), Rabbi Joshua underlines his position with the statement, "the decision follows the majority" (Ex 23:2).[2] On closer scrutiny, however, the biblical quotation in question states "you shall not follow the multitude to do evil." Implicitly, the rabbis take this to mean that one should follow the multitude in good cases, but this of course raises the question of how one can be sure of that. Hence this quotation does not conclude the debate but instead deepens it in such a way that the reflection is continuously enriched and open to new perspectives, without coming to a conclusion. This "infinite reading" of the Talmud, in which quotations are sometimes molded in such a way that they may state the opposite without betraying the original, is similar to how Levinas refers to literature. The world literature of Shakespeare and Molière, Cervantes and Dante, Goethe and Pushkin, form a national treasure, Levinas states, yet contain significance beyond their primary meaning and invite exegesis (Levinas 1982a, 8).[3] Rimbaud's famous line "The true life is elsewhere," the opening lines of the same page of Levinas's *Totalité et infini*,

1 See Martin Heidegger, "Wozu Dichter?" (1980). About Hölderlin as "Vor-gänger" Heidegger states: "Sowenig überholbar der Vorgänger, so wenig vergänglich ist er auch" (Heidegger 1980, 316).

2 Levinas adduces the story several times. See for one example "La révélation dans la tradition juive" in *L'au-delà du verset* (Levinas 1982a, 175).

3 All literature is perhaps an anticipation of remembrance of the Bible, Levinas states. See Levinas, "Philosophie, justice et amour" (1983, 64). See also Rudi Visker, *Lof der zichtbaarheid* (2007, 183).

are followed by "But we are in the world" ("La vraie vie est absente. Mais nous sommes au monde"), although Rimbaud had stated: "La vraie vie est absente. Nous ne sommes pas au monde."[4] For both philosophers, philological and historical considerations are anything but decisive. Poetry escapes as if it were the general "Seinsvergessenheit'" (Heidegger) or the ignorance of the Other (Levinas), from which Western thought suffers. This is not to say that there is an "agreement" between Levinas's thought and poetry – as noted, Rimbaud stated more or less the opposite of Levinas; rather, there is a Wahlverwantschaft, an intellectual affinity in the search for a truth that is not ready at hand.

Although Levinas denies to poetry the status of the privileged medium to transmit the ultimate meaning of life, we may safely conclude that in the rejection of historico-critical tools Levinas and Heidegger agree. A historico-critical approach does not know about this proximity of text and reader. It fails to consider the unique position of the reader of the text; instead, it favours an objectifying approach to the truth of a text which can be unearthed without resorting to the position of the subject. This leads to a thoroughly truncated understanding of a literary text. For Levinas, the model and archetype of any literary text is the Bible. Hence, reading a text is more than just one activity among others; it is an ontological event, a modality of being.[5] Hermeneutics have taught us to take into account the position both of the subject and of the text, stressing that it is precisely the historical distance which enables proper understanding. Nonetheless, Levinas's approach to the text of the Talmud should not be regarded as a hermeneutical understanding in the sense by which Gadamer has introduced it, although the latter's hermeneutics may already be understood as a correction of a one-sided historical-critical approach in which the significance of the text would remain enclosed in the past.[6]

4 On Levinas's transformative reading of these lines from Rimbaud, see Eric Marty, "Emmanuel Levinas avec Shakespeare, Proust et Rimbaud" (2016, 5–9).

5 See also Levinas, *Éthique et infini* (1982b, 16). Hence there is no real gap between the Bible and other literature, for in a way, the meaning of life constitutes the core of all literature.

6 According to Levinas, philology reduces the text to an object and does not invite the reader to a genuine application of the text to his or her own life. See for example Levinas, *Difficile liberté* (1976, 50, 77, 95, 122, 284, 330, 343–344). See also my *Het gelaat van de Messias. Messiaanse Talmoedlezingen van Emmanuel Levinas. Vertaling, commentaar, achtergronden* [*The face of the Messiah. Levinas's Messianic Talmud Commentaries. Translation, Commentary, Backgrounds*] (1992, 265).

2 Levinas's "Hermeneutics"

The merging of historical "horizons," which is at the basis of a hermeneutical process, does not play a role in Levinas's interpretation of either the Talmud or literature in general. Levinas even claims that the Talmud, in contrast with the Bible, directly addresses the reader without resorting to supernatural manifestations to impose the truth.[7] In contrast with popular – or, rather, Christian-theological opinion – the Talmud is not a chauvinistic document limited to the well-being of the Jewish people; rather, it opens up the universal dimensions of the Hebrew Bible, which would otherwise remain a mere national history.

> Why was the Torah given in the wilderness? Because if it would have been given in the land, each tribe might have said to the other tribes: "I am better than you." It was given in the wilderness because there all are equal. (Numeri Rabba 19:26)

The book in the desert: here is the purity and renouncement of the so-called civilization, which makes a truly ethical existence possible, according to Levinas. The rootedness in this book would uproot all dichotomies between autochthonous and allochthonous existence in favour of the naked face of the other. However, the relationship to the Torah cannot be exhaustively interpreted as being rooted in the book and being uprooted from the soil, as the promise of the land remains a central element in it.[8] Still, even then the obligation of hospitality to the stranger remains in force, "for you yourself were strangers in Egypt" (Lev 19:34).

The historical distance of – let us say – fifteen hundred years is not decisive for Levinas, who claims for the Talmud the same critical attitude as for modern philosophy. The traditional division of history into a pre-critical period, ending either with Descartes or with Kant, and a post-critical one, does not seem to affect the status of the Talmud for Levinas.[9] The fact that the Talmud quotes biblical verses as authorities should not be considered as the end to critical thinking; on

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7 For an analysis of the differences and the similarities between Levinas and a fundamentalist approach to a holy text, see my study "The Holy Text and Violence: Levinas and Fundamentalism" (2015b).

8 Levinas's well-known polemics against Heidegger about the rootedness in the soil, negatively contrasted with being a "stranger on earth," betray characteristics of Jewish thought as developed in the Diaspora and fail to account for the new situation of Judaism in the political arena. See for example Levinas, "Heidegger, Gagarin et nous," *Difficile liberté* (1976, 301). For the same polemics against paganism and rootedness against Simone Weil, see Levinas, "Simone Weil contre la Bible," *Difficile liberté* (1976, 183). See also my *Het gelaat van de Messias* (1992, 182). Visker takes up this issue without completely resolving it (Visker 2007, 184).

9 Spinoza's criticism of the Bible hardly impresses Levinas, who is convinced that Spinoza has not understood the Talmud at all.

the contrary, each quotation adds a new dimension to the debate by introducing a new context.[10] By exploring the context some arguments may receive a wholly different meaning: the initial harmony of Psalm 104 turns out to be an evocation of human animalism.[11] After such a quotation the Talmudic debate simply continues with another quotation. Hence it is clear that the biblical quotations do not serve as a conclusive proof; rather, they should be considered as providing "tonality" to the debate, more or less comparable to the status of a specific human experience in phenomenology. By exploring the context of each biblical quotation, this tonality becomes ever more apparent and comprehensive. Still, there is a difference between the traditional study of the Talmud and Levinas's approach. Traditional Talmudic study, intricate as it may be, is generally confined to Jewish piety and halakhic rules that are valid only for Judaism, and fails to take into account the universal dimensions of Talmudic reasoning. It is probably Levinas's Lithuanian background, in which strict reasoning about the Talmud gets its due, which explains why he views piety and charismatic claims as not offering adequate access to Talmudic debate. He advocates instead a constant alertness to review venerated opinions in the light of universal problems.[12]

The reason why Levinas distances himself from a mere historico-critical reading becomes clear from his philosophy: neither the object/text nor the subject/reader can be understood solely from their historical contexts, not even by merging the two historical horizons. This holds well for the understanding of the Talmud and for understanding literature tout court. In a way, the Bible offers a model for understanding literature as such, by emphasizing the status of the book (and any book) as a living reality, opening up the reader to that living reality. The Talmud offers an access to the living reality in all its details and paradoxes, without being submerged into pre-critical adherence to miracles

10 Searching the biblical context of each quotation in order to assess the tonality of the argument is one of the hermeneutical devices that Levinas learned from his Talmud teacher Chouchani. See also the debate between Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eliezer, a battle of quotations from Scripture, each adding an aspect of freedom versus constraint, in *Babylonian Talmud* Sanhedrin 97b–98a, and my *Het gelaat van de Messias* (1992, 76–97 and 162).

11 See Levinas, *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, (1968, 26–33, 120). The reference to Chouchani is on page 26.

12 Here again the influence of Chouchani may be felt, who constantly and bluntly confronted his disciples with different conclusions of the same debate, mocking pious readings. See also Elie Wiesel, "Le juif errant" in *Le chant des morts* (1966), for a romanticized picture of this legendary teacher-clochard. Salomon Malka, in *Monsieur Chouchani: L'énigme du maître du xx siècle* (1994), offers many anecdotes, but apparently the Talmudic method remains for the writer an enigma.

and dogmas. Reading literature is being confronted with "sense," sense of life and sense of the other. The subject confronted with the other is ultimately confronted with a sense that transcends horizons. Levinas's understanding of the Talmud displays considerable distance from a hermeneutical process in which the subject is merely enriched by broadening his horizon. Levinas understands literature as a serious matter, dealing as it does with the meaning of life and uprooting the reading subject from its comfortable instalment in the world. On one hand, philological and historical tools as such are not sufficient to realize this confrontation. On the other hand, a traditional Talmudic approach fails to acknowledge the universal dimension of the Talmud, which in that respect shares with all serious literature the dimension of world literature, not limited by ethnic or linguistic barriers. Levinas's Talmudic lectures should not be regarded as merely another addition to the vast Rabbinic and midrashic sea of commentaries (in which they do not stand out for their intricacies). They receive their specific meaning from a philosophical perspective only, and in that respect should not be viewed as addressed solely to a Jewish audience, despite Levinas's own affirmations.[13] It is only by resorting to Levinas's philosophy that his Talmudic readings display their significance. Viewed as Talmudic readings only, they do not reach the heights of the yeshiva learning.[14] Still, his approach to the Talmud contains certain dynamics that can be of relevance even to traditional Talmudic study. The inner-Jewish debates about agriculture, prayer, repentance, and days of rest do not exhaust the multiple meaning of the Talmud, in which universal topics like human responsibility are debated through daily issues. When my ox wounds someone, am I responsible? And when a fire destroys the land of my neighbour without me knowing it, am I still responsible? Both examples transcend my consciousness of my actions and thus refer to a responsibility even for what I have not committed myself.[15]

13 See Levinas's first Talmudic lectures in *Difficile liberté* (1976, 83–129) and my *Het gelaat van de Messias* (1992). These lectures were followed by *Quatre lectures talmudiques* (1968); *Du sacré au saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (1977); *L'au-delà du verset : Lectures et discours talmudiques* (1982a); *À l'heure des nations* (1988); and *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (1996).

14 Levinas limits his use of traditional Talmudic commentaries to Rashi (1040–1105) and to Maharsha (Edels) (1555–1631).

15 See Levinas, "Les dommages causés par le feu," in *Du sacré au saint* (1977, 149–180).

3 Translating Jewish Wisdom into Greek

Levinas's project: translating Jewish wisdom into Greek presupposes a paramount importance of both elements: the Jewish and the Greek. Opting for only one of them is not in order, despite the many attempts to contrast a supposedly superior Jewish thought with a Greek thinking by facile polarities, such as time versus space, concrete versus abstract, and so on.[16] Levinas's aim cannot be to consider one or two cultures as a privileged access to truth, which would then be denied to other cultures. Although Heidegger considered both Greek and German as privileged to communicate truth precisely because of their etymological reservoir which would hide-and-unveil a truth hidden to other cultures, Edmund Husserl cherished another perspective of "Greek," one which seems to be closer to Levinas's own idea. "Greek" stands for philosophy as such, not because Greece is a superior culture, but because Plato and Socrates succeeded in transcending the boundaries of their culture by addressing universal problems. To put it differently, the universal concept of mankind has been discovered by Greek philosophy. The concept of "human being" stresses the fundamental equality of all human beings, irrespective of race, language, and gender. In that perspective, all wisdoms of the world should be translated into "Greek" in order to assess their universal significance, transcending mere intuitions or chauvinist claims to truth meant for a few elect only.[17] The precarious enterprise of translating Jewish wisdom into Greek becomes immediately apparent: what could the Jewish particularism of election and being chosen add to the universal significance of humanity? The radicalism of Greek universalism should either dispense with such particularistic claims altogether or integrate them into a universal perspective, which may amount to the same. Here we encounter a central hermeneutical device of Levinas, the *transposition*. Levinas claims that the expression "Israel" should not be taken primarily as a description of an empirical reality of a given culture. Rather, it should be understood from an asymmetrical responsibility which ultimately refers to the subject: I am more responsible than the other. This responsibility cannot be described on the level of mankind or of the

16 See Thorleif Boman, *Das Hebräische Denken im Vergleich mit dem Griechischen* (1952). Abraham Joshua Heschel, in *The Sabbath: Its meaning for Modern Man* (1951), likewise contrasts Jewish predilection for time with Greek affinity with space. However, this polarity does not clarify Greek culture, but merely serves as a rhetorical tool to highlight Judaism and the Sabbath as a "palace in the time." Reference to the land of Israel, the Temple, and the present Western Wall should be sufficient to discard the idea that Judaism would refrain from holy places.

17 There is a certain Eurocentrism involved in both Husserl's and Levinas's assumption that Indian or Chinese philosophy would not be sufficiently universal to be called philosophy. However, for Levinas, the same holds for Jewish philosophy, which remains mere wisdom without being confronted with Greek philosophy.

concept "human," as I would attribute to the other the same surplus of responsibility. This would ultimately benefit myself and thereby would annul my surplus. This asymmetrical responsibility is the inequality between me and the other which lies hidden under the concept of man, serving even as the foundation of the equality of all human beings. This forms the cornerstone of Levinas's philosophy and explains why expressing this asymmetry in philosophy, i.e., in universal language, is so difficult: this asymmetrical responsibility is only valid *for me*. We should not, however, assume that this foundation of Levinas's philosophy has merely been read into the Talmud later on. More precisely, all great literature, all "world literature," according to Levinas, delves into the meaning of life, by posing the question of the humanity of mankind, sometimes even by testifying to a transcendence leading to asymmetrical responsibility.[18] Great literature is never merely national, but contains universal dimensions and is in that respect genuinely "world literature." This holds for the Bible as well. Far from being a chauvinistic plea for prerogatives destined for the Jewish people, it emphasizes the surplus of responsibility, at least if read through the lens of Rabbinical commentaries, Levinas maintains.

Indeed, this asymmetrical responsibility lies at the heart of the following Talmudic expression. The Talmud recommends passing over my rights and increasing my duties beyond a legal obligation: "lifnim mishurat ha-din."[19] The moment I would use this exhortation to remind the other of his responsibility, this would result in benefit for me: the other would refrain from his rights towards me and hence my duties would be alleviated. Perhaps this ethical attitude cannot be preached, but only applied to myself? The Sermon of the Mount contains the same asymmetrical responsibility Levinas is referring to: the exhortation to detect the beam in my own eye and not the splinter in the eye of the other can only be applied to myself (Mt 7:5). The moment I turn it into a general rule about mankind or into a sermon to be preached to others I turn my own beam

18 Most frequent is Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, which includes the line "Everybody is responsible for all others, and I more than anyone else." Next to the importance of the great authors like Pushkin, Shakespeare, and Proust, one should note that during the pre-war period Levinas showed a remarkable interest in French Catholic writers who stress the importance of self-sacrifice, such as Léon Bloy. See also Levinas, *Oeuvres*, 1: *Carnets de captivité et autres inédits* (2009, 154, 159). About this "renouveau catholique" in France see my article "Self-Sacrifice between Constraint and Redemption: Gertrud von Le Fort's *The Song at the Scaffold*" (2016) and Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature, 1870–1914* (1966, especially 149–222).

19 See my *Het gelaat van de Messias* (1992, 102 and following) and my article "Asymmetrie, Messianismus, Inkarnation. Die Bedeutung von Emmanuel Levinas für die Christologie" (1998, especially 206); and Levinas, *Quatre lectures talmudiques* (1968, 53 and following).

again into a splinter and the splinter of the other into a beam. It is this strategy which prompted the philosopher Nietzsche to denounce Christian charity as a hidden self-interest, a criticism which holds only when this would be preached to others instead of applied to oneself. Likewise, the concept "Israel" does not primarily refer to an ethnic entity which would be bestowed with more privileges than other peoples, but should be transposed towards this asymmetrical responsibility. Hence, Israel is not so much a predicate that can only be appropriated in its ethnical sense, but should be interpreted as an ethical challenge, which can be transposed to a universal meaning by indicating *my* surplus of responsibility.[20] "The lasting significance of Israel rests in the conscience of sanctity and in the possibility to judge history; this eternity of Israel is not a privilege but a human possibility" (Levinas 1982a, 37).[21] According to Levinas, Israel is certainly a specific ethnic group, but at the same time this concept stands for a people having received the Law and as such stands for mankind being conscious of its obligations.[22] The universality of the concept "Israel," its translation into Greek, cannot be realized by a mere equation of Israel and mankind. Such an approach would come down to an assimilation of Jewish values to Western insights, by which Judaism would lose its prophetic potential. The "burning bush" would then be no more than an illusion instead of an attachment to transcendence which goes beyond self-preservation. The universalism of the concept "Israel" happens when I realize that implicitly the ethical challenge to Israel denotes *my* strictly personal – but in that respect without any limitations as to religion, ethnicity, and so on – responsibility towards the other. The patriarch Jacob – later named Israel – was not prompted by mere self-interest when he took the clothes of his brother, Esau, in order to deceive their father; he took over the responsibilities of his brother (Levinas 1968, 181). And when Jacob was afraid to meet his brother at the Jabbok, he had not forgotten the divine blessing that God would

20 There is a striking similarity between this idea of Levinas and the patristic criticism of the concept of Israel as a mere ethnic category, as appropriated by the Jewish people. However, the patristic emphasis upon "Israel" as a divine surplus that cannot be appropriated by the Jewish people has led to an appropriation of the same concept by the Church! In addition, this appropriation is only partial, for when it comes to the biblical judgments and condemnations of Israel, the Church Fathers relegate them to the Jewish people. For a biblical debate about who the "children of Abraham" actually are, but without subsequent appropriation, see John the Baptist in Mt 3:9.

21 See also Levinas, *Quatre lectures talmudiques* (1968, 181).

22 See Levinas, "Judaïsme et révolution," in *Du sacré au saint* (1977,18) as well as "Textes messianiques," in *Difficile liberté* (1976, 112), and my *Het gelaat van de Messias* (1992, 122–124). Levinas learned this insight from his Talmud teacher Chouchani. Regrettably, the publications on Chouchani delve into the mythical, without paying attention to his approach to the Talmud.

protect him, but his conscience dictated to him that he had not yet realized his responsibility towards his brother (Levinas 1976, 112; Poorthuis 1992, 122–124). It is clear that Jacob's numinous encounter with the nightly opponent (Gen 32), which offers ample room for connecting the divine with the tremendous and mysterious, receives instead a wholly ethical interpretation in rabbinic tradition, followed herein by Levinas. For Levinas, the numinous coincides with idolatry. This seems to me one of the highly debatable elements in Levinas's philosophy.[23]

The divine revelation at the burning bush and even the revelation of the Torah cannot be viewed as a possession entrusted to a specific people while excluding the rest of mankind. Again we should speak of a translation of Jewish wisdom into Greek by *transposition*: the Torah is not a specific knowledge but a relationship with the Infinite. The Talmud teaches: "the Torah is not an obligation for you" (Babylonian Talmud *Menakhot* 99b). This is explained as: it is not an obligation that can be fulfilled in order to get rid of it. It is a relationship with the other that becomes more demanding in the measure that I deepen it. In earlier texts, even in the previously unpublished documents, Levinas even speaks about the "felix culpa," a happy guilt. The expression stems from the Christian liturgy of the Easter night in which Adam is said to have a "happy guilt," because it made the redemption necessary.[24] This should, however, not be interpreted as an alibi for one's own failures! According to Levinas, "felix culpa" presupposes the fertility of time and the Messiah as the apogee of history, without destroying time, but making forgiveness as a rupture with the past possible.

4 Biblical Humanism

Transposed towards the relation of the other human being, the Torah as an obligation that cannot be fulfilled testifies to a responsibility which increases the more I respond to it. To put it in relational terms: the more I understand the other by approaching him, the more I will realize his needs, which merely

23 Not only Levinas's attitude towards non-biblical religions, but even his attitude towards other Jewish strands such as Hasidism and Kabbala are highly influenced by his Lithuanian Talmudic background. See my article "Gott steigt herab. Levinas über Kenose und Inkarnation" (2006).

24 See Levinas, *Carnets de captivité et autres inédits*, Oeuvres 1 (2009, 81); *Difficile liberté* (1976, 91,94, 188); and my *Het gelaat van de Messias* (1992, 48–49, 60, 107, 253). See also my article "De betekenis van de recent gepubliceerde vroege notities van Levinas" [The significance of the recently published early annotations of Levinas] (2015a). It seems that Levinas had been quite impressed by Christian notions of forgiveness and rebirth before the war, as is also clear in his "Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme (1934).

enhances my responsibility.[25] The Torah evokes the relationship with the transcendence as an infinite obligation towards the other. In that respect, the Talmud is loyal to the biblical message, in which the obligations towards the other human being are accompanied by the solemn assurance: "I am the Lord" (Lev 19). Levinas refers to "biblical humanism," while indicating how the obligation towards the fellow human being is ipso facto religious, even without me realizing it. Levinas recognizes this biblical humanism in the famous scene of the Last Judgement when both the righteous and the wicked stand before the Son of Man (Mt 25: 31–46). The wicked people had not met the Son of Man during their lives, but neither had the righteous recognized him when they visited the sick and the prisoner, fed the hungry, etc.[26]

We should be aware that Levinas does not use the concept of the Son of Man to clarify the "condition humaine," but to indicate the status of the other, which can only be understood from an I–thou-perspective and which increases *my* responsibility, not that of the other. Undoubtedly this can be of great significance for Christology. Other texts about Christ likewise do not clarify the "human condition" either, nor do they portray Christ exclusively as the other who has done it all for me (and possibly creating an alibi for my responsibility). These texts focus instead upon *my* position, by increasing *my* responsibility without enabling me to demand that of *the other*.[27] This transposition of concepts from a descriptive level to the level not of ethics as such but of asymmetry between me and the other, creating as it were a schism in the universe, constitutes the kernel of Levinas's Talmud hermeneutics and of *world literature* dealing with the meaning of life. Simultaneously, this asymmetry constitutes the cornerstone of his philosophy.

No doubt the hermeneutical device of transposition leaves much to be debated: what is the relation between a historical people (Israel) and the subject? In what way does this paradigmatic status of Israel allow other peoples and wisdoms to fulfil a similar role? It seems obvious that Israel as paradigm for a responsible humanity should not claim any exclusivism, at least not insofar as it concerns the philosophy of Levinas. The famous Talmudic story about the peoples of the world being present at Sinai and, although having been offered the Torah, refusing to accept it, whereas Israel willingly accepts the Torah,

25 See Levinas, *L'au-delà du verset* (1982a, 46) and my *Het gelaat van de Messias* (1992, 102).

26 See "Discussion d'ensemble" in *La révélation* (1977, 224–225).

27 A striking example is the key text of the kenosis (Phil 2:6–11), which should not be read as an event that exclusively concerns Christ, but is introduced by: "Let the same attitude be in you as was in Jesus Christ ... " See my article "Asymmetrie, Messianismus, Inkarnation" (1998). The concept of the Messiah in Levinas's "Textes messianiques" in *Difficile liberté* (1976) likewise clarifies my position in respect to that of the other, in both cases increasing my responsibility.

reflects a staunch chauvinism, historically perhaps fostered by rival claims of the Church to be the true heir of the revelation. It is striking then that the Talmud adds another story in which the people stands *under* the mountain, being threatened with death if they refuse to accept the Torah (Babylonian Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 2b). Hence it was not because of moral superiority and not from free will that Israel accepted the Torah!

Levinas recognizes here a responsibility based not upon a free decision but upon a relationship preceding it, without, however, identifying it with slavery.[28] This relationship even precedes the consciousness of oneself and hence opens up an immemorial past, a past that has never been in the full light of the present, and hence can be considered as an-archic. Again, what is at stake here is not a description of the special status of Israel receiving the Torah, but a debate about human freedom vis-à-vis my responsibility towards the other. In this one sentence both the Jewish wisdom of my unique responsibility and the Greek realm of reflecting upon the human being as a universal and egalitarian concept come together. Although my unique responsibility may seem to evaporate in front of the universal and collective and political realm of the human society, in reality the latter egalitarian level is tributary to the asymmetrical responsibility that precedes it. The full light of reason and Western philosophy may be oblivious to this notion, but the Jewish religion needs this light to bring to the fore the universal dimensions of its religion.[29] No wonder, then, that Levinas quotes the Talmud in a slightly ironic fashion. A student, Ben Dima, comes to ask his master and uncle, Rabbi Ishmael, whether he is allowed to learn Greek. Overly confident, the student professes to have "finished" his study of Torah. His master then quotes the Bible: "the words of Torah will not leave your lips and you will meditate them day and night" (Jos 1:8), and recommends his disciple to find a time in which it is neither day nor night (Babylonian Talmud *Menakhot* 100a). Although the story intends to state that this is impossible, Levinas detects here his own project of translating Jewish wisdom into Greek, which requires neither the option of remaining completely in the dark nor of entering the clear daylight, but embracing the domain of the twilight.[30] Neither the blind subjection to religious authority

28 See Levinas, "'La tentation de la tentation'. Texte du traité 'Chabat'," *Quatre lectures talmudiques* (Levinas, 1968, 80–84).

29 Commentators of Levinas such as Derrida in his "Violence et métaphysique" refer to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which in a way describes Western culture in search of its Hebraic origin: "Japhet in search of a father." The identities of the two main protagonists, Stephen Daedalus and the Jewish Leopold Bloom, are inextricably intertwined: "Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet."

30 See Levinas, *L'au-delà du verset* (1982a, 42). In a different context, this idea of philosophy in the twilight is strikingly similar to Hegel's famous assertion, in the preface to *Elements of*

nor an autonomous rejection of religion in favour of an enlightened reason form the valid alternatives here. The Greek language spoken at the royal courts, stands for the political realm which tends to suppress the individual in favour of the collective. A protest in the name of the individual seems unable to challenge the political order. Unless a certain notion of the individual is at stake, without which the political order, with its sense of justice and of equality of all human beings, is not even thinkable. Unless it is the justice done to the individual other which constitutes the *raison d'être* of the political order as such. What prompts the individual to accept the collective realm of the state if not as a necessary guarantee of his own responsibility towards the other and towards all others? Even my individual responsibility towards the other in front of me would remain an *egoisme à deux* if it would not be extended to the third and fourth, in short to the realm of society, even risking an anonymous administration instead of a personal solidarity. The objection that Levinas's philosophy would ignore the political realm fails to recognize the prime importance of the Greek language vis-à- vis the Jewish wisdom and the indispensable ambition to translate Jewish wisdom into Greek. To be precise, Levinas distinguishes between the Greek language, into which the Jewish wisdom should be translated, and the Greek wisdom, which is considered incompatible with Jewish wisdom. In other words: for the suppression of alterity in Western philosophy to be denounced by Jewish wisdom, translation into Greek is necessary.[31] It is only in that in-between that the burning bush can be the medium of revelation rather than being what it afterwards seemed to be: a thorny bush without any visible trace of something special.

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the Philosophy of Right, that "the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk" (Hegel 1991, 23).

31 See Levinas, *À l'heure des nations* (1988, 64–65), a distinction that can be found in Babylonian Talmud *Baba Kamma* 83a as well.

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