

The Holy Text and Violence: Levinas and Fundamentalism

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The Talmudic lectures of Emmanuel Levinas constitute a unique element of his oeuvre. At first glance, they merely treat matters that are important to the Jewish religion. The Talmud is the authoritative codification of the Jewish law interspersed with narrative material in the form of debates on the Mishnah. While the Mishnah dates from the end of the second century AD, the Talmud was completed in about the sixth century AD. Curiously, this huge bulk of mainly oral tradition was composed by leaving out all literature that was influenced by Hellenistic philosophy.

Moreover, the topics of the Talmudic lectures do not betray a philosophical bent. Levinas' first lectures on the Talmud dealt with messianic expectations,¹ followed by a booklet containing four commentaries: on forgiveness on the Day of atonement, the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, the entrance of the Jewish people into the land of Canaan, and the assembly of the court of Justice, the so-called Sanhedrin.² All these lectures were delivered at the yearly *Colloque of French Jewish Intellectuals*, to begin with the year 1960, at least as far as Levinas' participation is concerned. This booklet was followed by another one containing five lectures: on the treatment of workers on the field, the nazirite vow, astrology, the creation of woman and the damage caused by fire.³ A mixed collection appeared in 1982 containing another five lectures and several articles on related matters such as the Jewish reading of Scripture, revelation, Spinoza's Bible criticism.⁴ The Talmudic texts deal with the permission to study Greek (which the Talmud seems to reject), the cities in Israel that may offer asylum, the regimes of Rome and Persia, the covenant at Sinai, and the fear of God.

The collection of articles that appeared in 1988 under the title: *À l'heure des nations*, contained *inter alia* another five Talmudic lectures, on the sanctity of Biblical books (or to use the Talmudic expression for holy books: "those

1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile Liberté*, Paris 1976², pp. 83–129. See my dissertation: Marcel Poorthuis, *Het gelaat van de Messias. Messiaanse Talmoedlezingen van Emmanuel Levinas. Vertaling, commentaar, achtergronden* [*The face of the Messiah. Messianic Lectures of the Talmud by Emmanuel Levinas. Translation, Commentary, Backgrounds*] (Zoetermeer, 2000³).

2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris, 1968).

3 Emmanuel Levinas, *Du Sacré au Saint. Cinq nouvelles Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris, 1977).

4 Emmanuel Levinas, *L'Au-delà du Verset. Lectures et Discours Talmudiques* (Paris, 1982).

that render the hands impure”), on the translation of the Bible, on the contempt of the Torah as a form of idolatry, on the commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt and on the attitude of Israel towards the other nations. Finally, a small booklet appeared in 1996 dealing with God’s authority and the power of man, with Alexander of Macedon posing questions on the statehood and with Abraham expressing his condition to be only dust.

The philosophical thrust of these lectures is not at first glance apparent, dealing as they do with religious issues in an agricultural society some 1500 years ago or more. Hence even for a modern Jewish audience, these topics are far remote from their religious experience. Still, Levinas manages to clarify the relevance of these lectures for today, not only in view of a religious Jewish audience, but also in view of philosophical debates. Those acquainted with these lectures know that they treat the relation between the subject and the political realm, the responsibility of the subject towards the other, even for what I have not done personally (compare with the damage caused by fire, which was beyond my control). The lectures debate the significance of the difference between male and female, the relation between memory and ethics, and so on.

Because of the dialectical style of the Talmud, it is quite difficult to summarize even one of these lectures, without repeating the whole. Studies devoted to these Talmudic commentaries often limit themselves to a sketch of Levinas’ Talmudic hermeneutics, as can be distilled from the introductions to his lectures. The question of the status of these lectures,—I mean whether they are really capable of dealing with philosophical issues—, is not often raised as a problem *sui generis*. In what way these old texts, dating from a period in which modern Western philosophy is generally assumed not to have begun, really shed light on contemporary issues, otherwise than as *auctoritas* which would only be valid for those already convinced of the truth of these texts? To clarify this, we will have to describe the specific attitude of the reader towards these texts. This critical investigation does not remain at a mere literary level, but will have repercussions for basic philosophical issues such as subjectivity, freedom, time, and rationality. In fact, Levinas is not alone in his staunch rejection of philology as an adequate approach to the text. Here is already some sort of a philosophical tradition than can be traced from Nietzsche (*Homer und die klassische Philologie*) to Heidegger (“Der Spruch des Anaximander” in *Holzwege*), and to Gadamer (*Wahrheit und Methode*). This paper wants to describe the attitude of the reader towards the Talmud not as one activity among other activities, but as a concrete *access* of the subject to the text with implications for his being in the world.

I will start by a short description of fundamentalism as a historical movement (§ 1). Then I will distil from it the implications on the realm of subjectivity and hermeneutics (§ 2), followed by a sketch of the remarkable similarities

between Levinas' hermeneutics of the Talmud and religious fundamentalist claims of holy texts (§ 3). In spite of Levinas' claim that the Talmud, in contrast to the Bible, belongs to a critical discourse, the similarities between Levinas' hermeneutics and fundamentalism will turn out to be considerable. After assessing the differences as well (§ 4), I will offer some concrete examples of Levinas' reading of the Talmud (§ 5). In the concluding paragraph, I will describe the different approaches of fundamentalism and of Levinas' hermeneutics to violence and martyrdom as the ultimate consequences of the sacred text (§ 6).

1 The Origin of Religious Fundamentalism

Recent years have shown a return of religion into the public realm. Part of that increasing influence of religion is a specific attitude to a holy text, known as fundamentalism. In the use of the word 'fundamentalism', both descriptive and evaluative elements play their role. As such it belongs to the so-called *persuasive definitions*, in which the speaker describes a phenomenon in such a way that it amounts to a clear invitation to the audience to condemn the phenomenon in the same way he himself does. Hence it is appropriate first to start with an inquiry into fundamentalism, before we deal with the question in what way Levinas' attitude to the religious writings of Judaism may show similarities and differences with it.

As is well known, the roots of fundamentalism reach back nearly two centuries and can be traced to American protestant circles. These protestants modelled their ideal of an unshaken and unambiguous Biblical truth after the pattern of the natural sciences. One of the fathers of fundamentalism, Charles Hodge, stated:

If natural science be concerned with the facts and laws of nature, theology is concerned with the facts and principles of the Bible. If the object of the one be to arrange and to systematize the facts of the external world, and to ascertain the laws by which they are determined; the object of the other is to systematize the facts of the Bible and ascertain their principles of general truths which those facts involve.⁵

5 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1872), quoted in Heike Papenhin, "Entstehung und Entwicklung des (klassischen) Amerikanischen Fundamentalismus," in *Religiöser Fundamentalismus – unverzichtbare Glaubensbasis oder ideologischer Strukturfehler?* ed. Carsten Colpe and Heike Papenhin, (Berlin, 1989), p. 20.

Although here natural science and theology are duly distinguished, the structural similarity is no less emphasized: both are concerned with “facts and principles.” Although formulated in opposition against the scholarly historical approach to the Bible in the so-called ‘higher criticism’, the fundamentalist approach does not coincide with a pious otherworldly reading, but remains highly indebted to science. In addition, we should note that Hodge describes the Bible as the *only* object of theology. Towards the end of the 19th century, this perspective of the so-called Princeton School was increasingly narrowed, until the character of the Bible as a historical document from the past was completely replaced by a systematic approach yielding principles of general truth.

Fundamentalism was in origin a proud self-designation: fundamentalists lived according to the fundamental values that were described unambiguously in the Bible. As such it was coined only in 1920, but, as stated, its roots were much older. Leaving aside all social and political factors that contributed to the shape of fundamentalism, its characteristics consist in a direct access to the Holy Scripture, without any need of guidance from either Church authorities or from theological experts. Ironically, fundamentalism was tributary to the idea of the autonomous individual, who needed no moral or religious authority to gauge the truth. However, this autonomy amounted to a totally heteronomous attitude toward Scripture as the sole legitimate authority. Even scientific insights in the field of biology, physics and astronomy should be judged by Biblical standards and, if contrary to these, should be rejected, fundamentalism states. The underlying assumption is that the Bible supplies all knowledge on all fields of life with an unequivocal clarity, comparable to that of a scientific theory. The infallibility of the Bible *on all issues* is a cornerstone of protestant fundamentalism, just like the infallibility of the holy Scripture on all issues is for all fundamentalist movements, including Islamic fundamentalism.

There is a strange paradox about the nature of the truth revealed in the Bible: although the truth of the Bible is readily at hand for everybody, still no one can be guided by it unless he is personally reborn. On the one hand, its truth is independent of a personal approach and available in an objective way, on the other hand, without the personal conversion to Christ as Saviour, these truths have no guiding function, the Niagara Creed states:

No degree of reformation however great, no attainment in morality however high, no culture however attractive, no humanitarian and philanthropic schemes and societies however useful, no baptism or other ordinance however administered, can help the sinner to take even one step toward heaven; but a new nature implanted from above, a new life

implanted by the Holy Ghost through the Word, is absolutely essential to salvation.⁶

Hence the revealed truth is readily available, but is on the other hand worthless without personal repentance. Note that even baptism does not count, which means that all churches remain in principle outside salvation, unless their members become personally repentant and reborn. Another remarkable trait is the narrowing down of the community of believers to the strict adherents. Not all Christian churches deserve their name, but most of them are wolves in sheep-cloth. The real enemy is within the gates.

Nowadays, fundamentalism is primarily associated with the rise of Islam as a political factor in world politics. Undoubtedly, for several Arab countries, the end of the colonial period, coupled with a time-lag in comparison to Europe and America regarding technological development, contributed to the emergence of fundamentalism as a modern phenomenon. The feelings of anxiety and of inferiority vis-à-vis the dominant Western culture that seems to sweep away traditional values and ways of life search for an outlet in a renewed religious consciousness of a moral and religious superiority. Curiously, fundamentalism does not turn its back on Western technological and economical attainments, but makes ample use of it. There is an analogy to the protestant American fundamentalism in this respect, as the followers of it do not step outside their American society, on the contrary. It even seems that the scientific attitude with its requirements of unambiguous truths in the field of mathematics and physics has a strong appeal upon the fundamentalist who tries to achieve the same in the field of religion. Seen in this light, fundamentalism is both tributary to Western society and highly critical of it.

The distinction between the would-be believers of Islam and the real believers is another common element of fundamentalism. Quite often, the first group of considered would-be Muslim, who are accused of adapting themselves to modern society and its temptations, constitutes an even more serious target of violence by Muslim fundamentalists than Western society as such.

For our purpose, the social and political dimensions of fundamentalism are not the focus of our research. What interests us is the specific attitude to the Holy Writ it entails. By mapping out this specific attitude, in which the access to the Holy Scripture is more relevant than the actual contents, we will be able to compare this with the way Emmanuel Levinas introduces the Talmud into the philosophical debate.

⁶ Isa. 64:4; John 3:5; Gal. 6:15; Phil. 3:4–9; Tit. 3:5; Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23; Niagara Creed (1878), quoted in Papenhin, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

2 History and the Position of the Individual in the Fundamentalist Attitude to Scripture

By rejecting venerated religious traditions and theological expertise as necessary prerequisites to understand the Holy Writ, fundamentalism highlights the position of the individual. The historical and communal dimensions of religion are no longer crucial to a proper understanding of the Holy Writ, but are rather conceived as obstacles to an unbiased understanding. Although popular opinion is convinced that venerated religious traditions try to eliminate plurality of opinions in favour of imposing the one revealed truth upon the believer, according to the fundamentalist, rather the opposite is true. The fundamentalist blames religious tradition for a supposed labyrinth of opinions and conflicting judgments. The truth of the Holy Writ is of an objective nature, which means that historical conditions and subjective perceptions are not allowed to play a role. The more or less universal demand of modern man to understand each religious text first and foremost in its proper historical context and hence the necessity of exegesis with its historical and philological tools is rejected by fundamentalism. The historical relativism caused by such an exegesis, is considered one of the greatest threats to a genuine religious understanding of the Holy Writ. Fundamentalism accuses such an approach of the underlying presupposition of sacred revelation being a mere product of historical and social circumstances that could be analysed with the same tools as other documents from the past. The rise of critical exegesis, roughly from the 17th century onward (although predecessors can be found in the Medieval period as well and even in post-Biblical writings from Gnostic provenance that display a critical attitude towards the Bible as sacred revelation), is considered a deterioration of the religious understanding of the Bible. The Bible is supposed to deal with *all* matters of importance, whether from the past or from the present or even from the future. Historical relativism that would argue that modern issues cannot be answered in documents from several thousand years ago is rejected by fundamentalism.

Paradoxically, the plea for a religious understanding of Scripture does not amount to a view of divine revelation as something transcendent, beyond human understanding. A common sense understanding is enough for the fundamentalist to gauge the divine truth that is not far away but available for everybody who wants to see it.⁷ The fundamentalist rejects the idea of human understanding as a continuous interpretation without ever bridging the gap

⁷ See for the influence of the Scottish 'common sense philosophy' upon American Presbyterianism: *Ibid.*, p. 20.

between divine revelation and human understanding. In fundamentalism, interpretation is a circuitous route which does not lead to God's truth as an objective category, but only to subjective human perceptions. Hence the history of religions is full of such human accretions that only serve to obscure the divine truth by replacing God's demands with human interests and search for power. The intention of the interpreter to adapt the revealed truth to his own situation is another target of the fundamentalist. Not adaptation to a variety of circumstances but a judgment over the circumstances by the one revealed truth should be the aim of reading the Bible, the fundamentalist maintains.

The claim of the Bible to be universally relevant in terms of the issues dealt with, varying from biology to physics and astronomy, is combined with an equally universal application: the Bible is not confined to the community of Christians but addresses in principle everybody. The fact that not all people obey to this call is possibly a matter of time, if not events of a catastrophic nature will cause a speedy conversion and/or destruction. Idolaters and true believers are the main categories mankind can be summarized under. Other religions and their Holy Writ are not considered allies in the battle against secular society, on the contrary: the existence of rival religious claims is at least as serious an offense against the sanctity of the Holy Writ (as distortion, corruption or heresy), as the outright non-believer.

3 Levinas and Fundamentalism

To avoid the impression that the journey into fundamentalism is only a rhetorical device to let Levinas emerge as the absolute counterpart of it, I will deal with some characteristics of Levinas' approach to the texts held sacred within Judaism. I will highlight similarities between Levinas' hermeneutics and the fundamentalist approach to the text described above.

According to Levinas, the philological approach to the Jewish sources including the Bible and Talmud has not been able to reveal the real genius of Judaism. A philological approach pretends to be more intelligent than its object.⁸ Philology studies texts from the past as if they were a kind of folklore or merely a sediment of history. Philology speaks *about* the text without allowing the text to speak. In this way, the sacred texts do not get the chance to address modern man. Philology reduces sacred texts to an object and to a relic from the past. Just as archaeology does not invite us to use the stone axe, in the same way philology does not invite us to take the old truths seriously, Levinas

8 Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile Liberté*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1976), pp. 343–44.

exclaims.⁹ Levinas does not remain indifferent to historical criticism, but actually considers this approach as an infringement upon the revelatory character of the Bible. According to Levinas, the philosophical and philological trends of our time constitute the yardstick of scholarship at all the universities in the West. Still, the prophetic voice of rebuke and criticism loses most of its power and impact, “like a poem in translation.”¹⁰

Levinas perceives a wide gap between the “Western” academic approach and a traditional Rabbinic approach to be described later on. He definitely sides with the latter. Levinas realizes that his approach to the sacred texts goes against the grain of academic and scholarly insights. He rightly considers the Jewish thinker Spinoza as one of the fathers of the historical approach to the Bible. Spinoza claimed that the Bible consisted of several historical layers. Although with support from isolated opinions from centuries before, Spinoza was one of the first to introduce the question concerning the Pentateuch, i.e. whether the whole Pentateuch could have been written by one and the same person, Moses. For Spinoza, it is obvious that the necessary denial of that possibility entails a wholly different approach in which the different authors are studied within their own historical contexts. The instruments necessary to analyse a sacred text are not different from those to analyse nature. The author’s origin and biography contribute to a better understanding of the text.¹¹ Levinas does not hesitate to reject Spinoza’s approach out of hand, claiming that Spinoza has never understood the traditional Jewish way of explaining Scripture.¹² Apparently then, it is the traditional Jewish way of explaining Scripture, which is closer to Levinas’ own approach than the scholarly academic exegesis.

The issue at hand is not a mere debate about texts and their interpretation. What is at stake here is the possibility to let the text speak to modern man about everything that is important. It involves a whole worldview. Levinas is so bold as to state that the traditional Rabbinic approach to Scripture would already contain the mold of all modern problems. Even our industrial society and technocracy have in a certain sense been thought through. If that would

9 Ibid., p. 284, cf. pp. 50, 77, 79, 95, 122, 284, 322, 330, 344; *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, pp. 15, 23–24; *Du Sacré au Saint*, p. 8; *L’au-delà du verset*, pp. 41–42; 143–144; *À l’heure des nations*, pp. 12, 22, 48, 110.

10 See Levinas, *Difficile Liberté*, p. 187.

11 Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus* 7. Still, Spinoza allows for a revelation transcending mere historical data, for according to him, by doing so “the temporary elements and the eternal teaching can be separated.”

12 See in more detail my dissertation: Poorthuis, *Het gelaat van de Messias*, pp. 266–7.

not be the case, Judaism would come down to folklore and to stories about Jewish history. But why continue that?¹³

Here Levinas astonishingly claims that the Talmud is not only the adequate approach to Scripture but contains all of modern issues as well. The well-known Rabbinic dictum about the Torah: “turn it around and turn it around for everything is contained in it (*Kol-bo*),” is appropriate here. Interestingly the expression *Kol-bo* (“everything in it”) is used today in Israel for a supermarket! The universal dimension of Scripture is not narrowed down by later Jewish interpretation, as is often held—an opinion perhaps unconsciously influenced by Christian claims of a universalist religion over against a chauvinistic ethnic Jewish religion. On the contrary, it is only the later Jewish interpretations that bring to light the universal significance of the Bible, according to Levinas.

The question of which audience Levinas had in mind for his Talmudic lectures has received different answers. The forum for his lectures, constituted by the yearly meetings of the Colloquia of French-Jewish intellectuals, organized by the *Alliance Israelite Universelle*, might indicate an exclusively Jewish audience. There would be then a kind of division of labour: the philosophical works would aim at a general audience, whereas the Talmudic lectures would be addressed to ‘the own parish.’ Although Levinas himself has stated this once or twice himself, it goes against the claim of these lectures to discuss matters of universal importance, which cannot be confined to a confessional milieu. No doubt then, Levinas claimed that the texts of Judaism, the Bible but read through a Talmudic lens, address themselves to all people interested. Levinas even enjoyed demonstrating to his admittedly Jewish audience (although not always well informed about Judaism) that those seemingly antiquated texts from the Talmud contain in reality highly actual debates addressing modern man. The sacred book of the Bible is universalized *via* these Talmudic debates and as such is a universal book. This claim, which coincides remarkably with the fundamentalist opinion quoted above, would meet with objection by moderate and tolerant believers. The latter group would probably argue that just as Judaism has its sacred book, other religions have their sacred books, meant to guide the believer from that confessional milieu.

Although Levinas does not deny that claim and accepts the guiding function of Bible and Talmud for Jewish ceremonial and spiritual life, at the same time these books contain a truth long forgotten by Western society. This Jewish truth is not confined to a confessional milieu but is a *modality of truth as such*. Perhaps other religious traditions may convey the same universal truth to mankind, next to the guidance they offer to their adherents. Still, for

13 See Levinas, *Difficile Liberté*, p. 188.

Levinas, Judaism is the living tradition that preserves this truth for mankind. “Translating Jewish wisdom into Greek” is the aim of his philosophy, and just as Greek is synonymous with philosophy as such,¹⁴ Jewish wisdom stands for the one forgotten element in that thought. No quotation from any other sacred book and religious tradition can be found in all of his oeuvre, except for a few New Testament quotations in so far that they convey the same Jewish truth.

In a certain sense, it does not matter which text from the Talmud is selected as all of the Talmud breathes this same truth. Levinas is never baffled by discovering contradictions between Talmudic texts. All contradictions are only ostensibly contradictory and in fact lead the reader infallibly to the same hidden truth. Still, Levinas does not consider the traditional Jewish approach to the Talmud sufficient. Precisely because in that approach, practiced in *Jeshivot* (Talmud schools), inner-Jewish questions have replaced the debate for universal truth, this pious attitude has become narrow-minded, and insufficient to challenge modern philosophy.¹⁵ The pious approach limits itself to the Jewish audience, convinced that the Talmud has nothing to say to the non-Jewish world.

Levinas searches for those insights that have a compelling force for anyone searching for truth. It may seem that with this statement, Levinas’ Talmudic lectures are widely remote from the fundamentalist approach to sacred texts, as Levinas addresses the free searcher for truth and in no way indicates a preference for a religious audience. But this may be a too easy way out. We noted in the Niagara Creed quoted above, how a belonging to a Church and the sacrament of baptism do not constitute an advantage in any way to the understanding of the real meaning of Scripture. In fact, this ‘real meaning’ is no longer communal, but addresses itself to the individual. Becoming ‘reborn’ is an individual act par excellence. Reading Talmud with Levinas certainly means bypassing the merely confessional meaning of these religious texts, but in order to arrive at what? Not at an academic approach but at the unearthing of a truth that holds good only for me and calls me to a kind of conversion of

14 Levinas does not claim that Greek (and German) are the carriers of philosophy because of supposed idiosyncrasies of those languages, as Heidegger did. Against this cultural chauvinism, Levinas maintains, with his teacher Husserl, that only philosophy born on Greek soil is able to transcend its cultural limits (even of Greece itself) and to address mankind as such. See my article: “Athene en Jeruzalem. Twee polen van de Westerse beschaving,” in *Nexus*, 7 (1993), pp. 117–131.

15 Cf. Levinas, *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, p. 12: “The thought that lays hidden in the debates of the Talmudic sages, does not come to the fore in traditional study of the Talmud nowadays.” (my translation).

my freedom into responsibility. This conversion as the act of the individual transcending collective ecclesiastical dynamics is another similarity between fundamentalism and Levinas. It will take more effort to arrive at genuine differences.

Especially striking is the theme of one of the more recent Talmudic lectures, published in 1985: "Contempt of the Torah as idolatry."¹⁶ Instead of arguing that such a harsh Rabbinical verdict about those who hold that not all of the Torah comes from heaven, belongs to a pre-critical period that does not yet share the necessary scholarly insights about the historical provenance of the Bible, Levinas explains that this verdict does not only reflect an inner-Jewish debate but conveys universal truth, valid for all people. Incidentally, the division of history into a pre-critical, a critical and a post-critical period, so dear to modern man, does not appeal to Levinas. The common watershed with Descartes, before whom philosophy would not yet have freed himself from theology, creating a genuine dark Middle Ages between classical antiquity and its renaissance, does not fit into the high appreciation of the Talmud by Levinas as belonging to modernity, although stemming from the 2nd until the 6th centuries AC. Denying that all of the Torah comes from heaven, even by admitting that one *tittle* or *iota* would have been added by man, is tantamount to idolatry, the Talmud states.

Here we will conclude our first comparison between Levinas' hermeneutics with fundamentalism. It is only fair to state that the similarities are remarkable. Let us now map out the hermeneutics of Levinas in a more elaborate way, in order to return to the question of the similarities and differences with fundamentalism at the end of this paper.

4 Levinas' Hermeneutics of the Talmud: History and the Subject

The phrase used earlier that one should not speak *about* the text but that the text should speak to the reader, might give the impression that here an objectivistic attitude is contrasted with a dialogical attitude, more or less in the way Buber contrasts the I-it relationship with the I-thou relationship. Dialogue then would be the privileged model to understand Levinas' hermeneutics of the Bible. Still, matters are more complicated than that.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "Mépris de la Thora comme idolatrie," in *À l'heure des nations* (Paris, 1988), pp. 67–88; Emmanuel Levinas, "Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry," in *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington, 1994), pp. 55–75.

The merging of different cultural and historical horizons is the way Gadamer describes the understanding of a given historical text, hereby rehabilitating the 'prejudice' of the reader as an indispensable element of understanding it. By doing so he is able to reject the historical critical approach of a text, in which the reader tries to eliminate his own historical and cultural context, as a mere barrier to proper understanding. By eliminating one's own historical and cultural *Vorverständnis*, one does not arrive at a genuine understanding of a historical text, Gadamer argues. One adopts a method that, although claiming objectivity, only yields a truncated understanding. But again, despite the similarities with the hermeneutics of Levinas, the latter's approach to Bible and Talmud cannot be equated with Gadamer's hermeneutics, be it only for the minimal role of the historical context—both of the text and of the interpreting subject in Levinas' reading of the Talmud.¹⁷

Let us then proceed by describing three characteristics of Levinas' approach to the Talmud.

First, Levinas regards the oral Torah of Midrash and Talmud as the indispensable access to the Bible. Without these, the Bible remains inaccessible to the modern reader and does not offer food for thought about contemporary issues. Where the Bible speaks in an authoritative way, the Talmud challenges the mind of the reader by offering several opinions and a lively debate, be it shrouded in a highly inaccessible steno. This famous Rabbinic pluralism does not detract from the inalterable holy text, on the contrary: precisely the fixed character of the Written Torah allows for endless debates within the Oral Torah. The multiple senses of Scripture only come to the fore because of the unity of Scripture. On closer scrutiny, this multiple sense of Scripture corresponds to the multiplicity of interpreters, so that one could understand the whole as a rehabilitation of subjective interpretations: "Both this opinion and that opinion are words of the living God," as a famous Talmudic dictum expresses it. Still, for Levinas this does not imply an appreciation of a multiplicity of interpretations in terms of contents but rather an appreciation for the participating subject as such. His (or her) interpretation is valued as a testimony of the deep sense of Scripture, namely the reverence for the alterity of the other, but this regardless of the contents! In that respect, there is no real rehabilitation of a historical sense in Levinas' Talmudic hermeneutics, just as the face of the other is in last resort not determined by historical and cultural elements but

17 A comparison between Levinas' hermeneutics of the Talmud and Heidegger's attitude towards the Pre-Socratic philosophers might yield surprising similarities as for both categories of historical and geographical distance do not determine the distance between reader and text.

transcends these horizons. Or, to phrase it in other words: the face of the other pierces through all horizons, forming something like a hole in them.

Levinas' notion of the trace is paradoxical in its relation to history. On the one hand, it can be understood as a rehabilitation of the subject with its historical and cultural conditions. Only the subject itself can perceive that the other is not a re-edition of myself but demands an irreversible responsibility from me. On the other hand, precisely this significance of the trace holds good for all people, irrespective of historical age and culture. Even my subjective perspective is not really valued as such: Levinas' appreciation of the subject deals with the fact of the speaking subject itself but does not refer to the specific contents of what the subject states. Hence the ultimate significance of Holy Scripture as appealing to the subject transcends cultural and historical conditions, although it is not accessible outside history. Levinas' rejection of historical exegesis which places the primary significance of the text in its time of origin, wants to safeguard this ultimate significance that appeals to me directly, unmediated by historical distance and cultural variety. The ultimate significance of the holy text can be described as an extreme *proximity* to the reader that cannot be explained by a affinity of culture or of history. However, precisely this proximity calls for reflection as the fundamentalist, too, claims that revelation is not buried within Scripture but is readily available for whoever is open to it.

A second characteristic of Levinas' hermeneutics of the Talmud concerns its paradigmatic character. Talmudic reasoning allows for a connection between seemingly archaic examples, betraying an agricultural society, and modern society. Eggs, cows, punishment of lashes, fire that destroys the neighbour's property and the sacrifice to God do not just denote these attributes and acts, but convey notions of property, justice, heteronomy and responsibility.¹⁸

The third characteristic is captured in the famous phrase with which Levinas describes his philosophical project. "Translating Jewish wisdom into Greek," in which Greek meaning the realm of philosophy as such indicates a twofold relation to philosophy. On the one hand, without this "Jewish" wisdom, philosophy would suffer from forgetfulness and as such would lack the fundamental and rational character that it claims to possess. On the other hand, philosophy is the indispensable realm for Jewish wisdom to reveal its universalist significance. Hence there is no ground to oppose a so-called Jewish thought to a Greek or Western thought as mutually incompatible alternative ways of thinking. There is no choice offered here for either

¹⁸ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, "De la lecture juive de l'Écriture," in Levinas, *L'au-delà du verset*, p. 127.

of them.¹⁹ Philosophy as such is Greek, Levinas would state in accordance with his teacher Edmund Husserl, not because of a chauvinistic glorification of a specific Western culture, but because philosophy has been able to transcend cultural chauvinism by introducing the concept of *mankind*.²⁰ Here we might point to a significant difference between Levinas and fundamentalism: whereas, for Levinas, Western thought is the indispensable discourse to express his thought, a fundamentalist regards Western thought as a mere threat to his pure revealed doctrine.

5 Some Examples of Interpretation of Sacred Scripture

Before I present some examples of Levinas' approach to the Talmud, I would like to adduce a well-known Biblical story, not used by Levinas, in order to clarify matters further. Moses was brought up at the court of the pharaoh, but one day he went out to the oppressed people in Egypt. Because he killed an Egyptian who threatened a Hebrew, Moses had to flee. In Midian, he tends the flock of his father-in-law and arrives at the mountain of Horeb. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush. He looked and there was the bush burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said: "I must turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not consumed." When the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush.²¹ Then God speaks to Moses to the effect that He has seen the suffering of His people.

The miraculous atmosphere of this story might be a stumbling block for those in search of universal elements, that might reveal something about the *condition humaine* as such. The plain meaning of Scripture seems to imply a conversation between Moses and God, but commentators were quick to interpret this in a more sophisticated and less anthropomorphic vein. Already in the Middle Ages, commentators tried to reduce the miraculous and anthropomorphic elements by pointing to a psychological growing awareness: first Moses sees a strange phenomenon in nature, then an angel appears and finally God himself speaks. It is not difficult to explain this awareness in psychological

19 See again my study: "Athene en Jeruzalem: twee polen van de Westerse beschaving", *passim*.

20 For a critical discussion of this claim, see *ibid.*, pp. 119–121.

21 Exodus 3:2–4.

terms: as an awakening conscience and as ascending grades of prophecy.²² Still, for Levinas, the explanation of this revelation as an inner process would not be sufficient. He would point to the geographic distance of Moses from his suffering people and how the voice of God bridges the geographical distance, transforming it into a strong, non-spatial proximity of Moses to his suffering people. God's voice and Moses' conscience about his suffering fellow-beings nearly seem to coincide. This interpretation would succeed in presenting Moses' prophetic experience as paradigmatic for man's conscience as such and not as merely an exclusive miraculous event meant only for this single man of God. Still it is worthwhile to note that this modern interpretation is not without its foothold in traditional religious sources from the Middle Ages and even older.

In contrast, a specific traditional religious approach might emphasize the supernatural elements in the story in such a way that no analogy to ordinary mortals can be drawn. What happens to Moses will never happen to other human beings.

A fundamentalist approach would go even further and attribute to Moses' revelation the unique way to abolish idolatry and to know the true God. Instead of appealing to the conscience of all men, this interpretation would draw a sharp distinction between the true belief of Moses and the rest of mankind still steeped in idolatry. The Christian fundamentalist would have to narrow this interpretation even further, for the revelation of the truth in Jesus would render even this revelation to Moses obsolete *post Christum*.

6 The Fundamentalist Ultimate Significance of the Holy Text and the Trace: A Comparison

Levinas' notion of the ultimate significance of the holy text is, according to his own wording, a hidden notion, a *sensus Scripturae* that needs effort to unearth. Still we noted that this effort cannot be equated with historical and philological analysis. The notion of subjectivity comes to the fore here. The ultimate significance as asymmetrical responsibility is hidden for all but me. This significance appeals to my subjectivity only, and, as such, it is incommunicable to others and cannot be expected from others. The extreme

22 See for example Bahya Ibn Pakuda (second half of the 11th century) in his commentary on Exodus 3 and Maimonides (12th century) in his *Guide of the Perplexed* 1, 4. Cf. N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, 1 (Israel, 1976), p. 52 ff. The burning bush as indication of the slavery of the people is likewise a transformation of the mere miraculous into the symbolical and is employed already in the midrash.

idiosyncrasy of this significance would condemn the reader to silence as there is no common language between him and his fellow human beings. This forms a contrast with the fundamentalist approach to Scripture that yields a clear message about all other human beings. Steeped in idolatry as they are, there is little hope for them unless they repent. The spatial metaphor to account for the difference between Levinas and fundamentalism would come down to an extreme distance between the text and the reader who has to search in depth, *vis à vis* a perfect accessibility of the message being ready at hand. However, this spatial metaphor is unclear as proximity is precisely one of the characteristics of how Levinas describes the trace.

Perhaps it would clarify matters better if we were to introduce the notion of *phenomenon vis à vis* the trace. The fundamentalist bridges the gap between his human understanding and the transcendence by approaching revelation as a phenomenon, comparable to physical phenomena and with the same empirical status. As such his approach would not regard divine revelation as something absolutely beyond comparison, on the contrary, his interpretation would come down to a wholesale secularization. The fundamentalist refusal to distinguish between divine revelation and human interpretation, reduces divine revelation to the human opinion of the reader. By identifying the divine will with his own human understanding, he abolishes the distance between text and interpretation. Paradoxically, the identification of one's own interpretation with the divine message itself is tantamount to idolatry! Idolatry is here interpreted as the confusion between the divine and the human by usurping divine authority for a mere human perspective. The violence against other human beings to which the prohibition of idolatry so often seems to instigate, in a way negates revelation itself. Man himself, created in the image of God, is the place where idolatry is refuted.

The fundamentalist option that revelation reveals the will of God without immediate repercussions on my relation towards the other human being allows for holy frenzy and for violence against humans to go hand in hand. However, the intertwining of the relation towards God and the relation towards human beings, forgotten by fundamentalists, is no recent discovery by Levinas but seems to be the core of monotheist religion. This notion of transcendence connected with my neighbour being in the image of God should not be called "horizontal transcendence," as humanists do, hereby negating the religious heritage, but should be acknowledged as an essential element of religion. Only in this way it becomes clear that fundamentalism comes down to a negation of religion itself.

The ultimate significance of a religious text is the appeal to the subject to total surrender, Levinas claims. The notion of sacrifice is dear to Levinas who

is convinced to unearth here the core of Jewish religion in its relevance for philosophy. However, notions of sacrifice and of surrender have received an alarming ring due to the rise of political fundamentalism. Levinas describes my surrender to the other not as a mere mental act, but as including skin and bones, even against my conscious wish. This might apply to the religious extremist as well, convinced as he is to fulfil a vocation that nobody else can fulfil. No family, friends, material considerations or desire for self-maintenance can stop him. Can we detect a difference between Levinas and fundamentalism in their stress upon sacrifice?

According to the Talmud, sacrificing oneself is the ultimate act of testifying of faith in God (compare the Christian notion of martyrdom from *marturein*, to testify).²³ “You will love your God with all your might”²⁴ means: “with all your possessions,” whereas “You will love your God with your whole life” means “even when He takes your life,” the Talmud explains.²⁵ This ultimate surrender transcends the urge for self-maintenance. In the first line of this Biblical injunction (“with all your might”), Levinas recognizes the duty to approach the other with food and drink rather than entertaining a dialogue with him. In the second line (“with your whole life”), Levinas sees an appeal to a responsibility for which there is no escape or refuge, not even within my own skin:

The human of flesh and blood can offer his skin. [...] The skin as such denotes not a undisturbed being with myself as a feeling at home. Due to the encounter with the other, I am uneasy within my skin. The ultimate significance of this responsibility is to be robbed of one’s identity so as to render one’s soul-for-the-other.²⁶

Having stated these similarities between Levinas’ notion of martyrdom and the fundamentalist readiness to give his life for the divine truth, it is time to note some crucial differences as well. Whereas in Levinas the sacrifice concerns *only me* and is intended to do good to my fellow-beings, the extremist is prepared to sacrifice the life *of others* together with his own life. Or rather,

23 Compare the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiba by the Romans. He rendered his soul while reciting the Shema Jisrael: “You shall love the Lord your God.. with all your soul” (Deut 6:4), even if He takes thy soul (Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 61b).

24 Deut. 6:4.

25 *Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin* 74a.

26 Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu’être où au-delà de l’essence* (Paris, 1978), pp. 97–99; Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht 1991), pp. 77 ff.

his life is a sacrifice, whereas the lives of others are merely instrumental to his sacrifice, without constituting a sacrifice themselves. The notion of idolatry as the defilement of God's honour, which prompts him to martyrdom, denies the image of God in the other while claiming to uphold it. Hence in spite of the undeniable similarity in radical religious fervour between Levinas and fundamentalist extremism, there are two essential differences. Levinas takes martyrdom as a command that concerns only me. In addition to that, he concretizes the honour due to God by pointing to the face of the other. Thus in spite of the similar notions of election and surrender, Levinas represents the antithesis of the extremist fundamentalist option of self-sacrifice.

Turning once again to Levinas' hermeneutics, we might have the impression that here too, subjective perception is identified with divine revelation, as his hermeneutics knows of a rehabilitation of the subject. However, on closer scrutiny this does not seem to be the case. The ultimate significance of the text appeals to my subjectivity, but not on the level of my subjective interpretation. The appeal to the subject transcends my understanding of it. Moreover, this appeal does not give me any information about my fellow beings, whereas the fundamentalist seems to know all about all others, based upon his privileged revelation. According to him, all humanity is steeped into idolatry. Although both Levinas and the fundamentalist would agree that idolatry means being barred from hearing the divine call to responsibility, for Levinas I am in a way the only one in the world who runs the risk of being idolatrous. In fact, regarding the ethical responsibility of the other, I am totally agnostic. When holy texts describe awe and reverence as characteristics of the divine manifestation, according to Levinas I am the only one to take that as an appeal to me. Once more, I refer to the idiosyncratic way Levinas interprets the Talmud. According to him the Talmudic stories sometimes concern only me, namely when they describe the Messiah as responsible for the sick and as carrying the universe on his shoulders as a kind of ethical Atlas. The moment I would assume that someone else should do that instead of me, it would create an alibi for my responsibility. Incidentally, this is the main criticism levelled by Levinas against Christian theology, though supplemented by equally Christian notions where the appeal concerns me.²⁷ However, when the needy, the hungry and the poor are described, there is no possibility for me to identify with

27 Although Levinas rejects the Christian notion of incarnation, even this religious notion could be understood as appealing to my responsibility as I have demonstrated in "Asymmetrie, Messianismus, Inkarnation. Die Bedeutung von Emmanuel Levinas für die Christologie," in *Emmanuel Levinas – Eine Herausforderung für die christliche Theologie*, ed. Josef Wohlmüt (Paderborn, 1998), pp. 201–213.

them, as this would equally do away with my asymmetrical responsibility. The poor, the widow and the Son of man hidden in the hungry, the naked and the sick, and the prisoner are the others. In a certain sense this ethical significance is more universal than any other meaning of the text, for it is totally independent of culture, history and language. On the other hand, it is the most particular incommunicable significance as it concerns only me.

Is it fair to state against fundamentalism and in accordance with Levinas that we know nothing about other human beings and that all appeals to repentance concern only me?

Levinas quotes the Talmudic dictum that anyone who shows contempt for the Torah is an idolater. How does one show contempt for the Torah? One does so by stating that not all of the Torah has been revealed by God to Moses, but that something has been added by human hands, be it only one tittle of iota. The obvious meaning is that a historical approach toward the Torah should be rejected according to these Rabbis. The revelation is not a product of human imagination. However, Levinas is not satisfied with this explanation—although the fundamentalist is—and argues that reducing the face of the other as the privileged place of revelation to a mere phenomenon would deny transcendence. Still I cannot blame my fellow humans for that, only myself.

I will adduce another example: the Talmud states that the Bible should not be translated into Greek.²⁸ Again this may be taken as an expression of a religious conviction that the Hebrew language is not a mere cultural phenomenon, but the only really sacred language. In fact, the Talmudic position is slightly more complicated, as Greek is the only language in which the Torah was permitted to be translated, vide the Septuagint. Again for Levinas this double attitude towards the Greek language demonstrates the double role of philosophy. On the one hand, philosophy is the indispensable milieu for any thought to be expressed. Hence, the tendency to place an allegedly superior Jewish thought above Greek thought, considering them as mutually incompatible, is not the approach of Levinas. On the other hand, there is a threat in Greek philosophy as well. Philosophy is the eternal threat to place the universal above the individual and hence to absorb the ethical significance of the face of the other into the higher synthesis of politics and the state. This lasting significance of the particular, however, is not my face demanding recognition as being unique, but is the recognition of the face of the other that only I can discover.

In a certain sense, Jewish and Greek thought are no strangers to one another. When we take Jewish wisdom as ethical sensibility to asymmetrical responsibility and Greek thought not as cultural chauvinism, but rather as

28 Emmanuel Levinas, "La traduction de L'Écriture," in Levinas, *L'au-delà du verset*, p. 43 ff.

the necessity to express convictions in a universal language, it is clear that the Greek aspiration for universal knowledge is already in a hidden way tributary to the "Jewish" sensibility for the face of the other. What else would prompt the desire for universal language if not the face of the other that transcends all culture? It is this sense of universal ethics that characterizes the Talmudic approach to Scripture, Levinas maintains. In order to understand this bold claim we should realize that wherever the Talmud speaks about Israel and Jew, Levinas separates these notions from any specific ethnic identity, even if Israel is called to live to its vocation. Levinas understands the notions of Israel and Jew to refer to humankind, not in a descriptive way but as an indication of asymmetrical responsibility.

This may sound like a reassuring claim that Jewishness does not mean any inherent superiority. Still one should realize that the word Jew and Israel denote the ultimate universal significance of all of humanity. No historical analysis nor cultural relativism can do away with this claim, which can only be distinguished from fundamentalism for its ultimate respect for the other human being.

7 Conclusion

Our comparison between the ethical reading of the Talmud proposed by Levinas and the fundamentalist approach to Scripture has demonstrated a close affinity between the two. Both reject historical and philological tools in order to arrive at an immediate and unmediated understanding of the holy texts. Both claim that the holy text contains all for modern man. Both promote an individual and unqualified understanding of the text. Both do not seem to hesitate for the ultimate appeal of the holy text to the reader to self-sacrifice. On closer scrutiny, however, Levinas points to the ultimate significance of the face of the other transcending all boundaries of religion and culture. In contrast, fundamentalism draws strict boundaries between the true believers and the adherents of other religions, the rest of mankind, all of them steeped into idolatry. It is clear then that Levinas' hermeneutics of the Talmud cannot be understood as fundamentalist. Still, a certain uneasiness over the close similarities in spite of all the differences might be appropriate.