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Introduction

In Praise of the Exile

It is a great achievement that Emmanuel Levinas placed at the center of his thought mercy and love for the stranger and the widow as well as love of one's neighbor, which is different from the knowledge of one's neighbor. Purely Greek thought never succeeded in developing this thought, which has its source in the world of Israel. A "dreadful realist," who lived through the Shoah, Levinas unmasked an "essentially hypocritical civilization" with its "underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets."[1] His project was to reunite the truth and the good. Jewish thought and life are the pre-philosophical inspirations that led to a complex thought that was formulated by Levinas in the Greek philosophical language. The relationship between the Jewish tradition and Levinas's philosophical writings is not one between a proto-text and a pheno-text, or a subtext and a text, which would make Levinas an esoteric writer, but one between an inspiring primordial word and its logical formulation. As David Banon has convincingly shown, theologoumena of Jewish texts are reinterpreted in a philosophical manner. Levinas offers a radical, ethical interpretation of Judaism that is seen as a source of meaning. His philosophy contests a philosophy of immanence that neutralizes transcendence of the Other and of the good: Revelation is defined as the marvel of discourse, the contact with exteriority that orients the I to the Other. The *mitzva*, the commandment, "Thou shall not kill" becomes a central philosophical concept. Instead of the I as the self-controlled *res cogitans*, Levinas discusses the alternative of becoming other to yourself through the

1 TeI, p. 9; TI, p. 24. The characterization of Levinas's thinking as "dreadful realism" is from Stéphane Mosès, *Au-delà de la guerre. Trois études sur Levinas (*Paris, Tel Aviv: Editions de l'éclat, 2004), p. 7.

acceptance of an ethical way of life before understanding.[2] Levinas's two types of writing run parallel. They are published by different publishing houses, but Levinas's Jewish writing on revelation is clearly linked to his surprise of phenomenology by the "epiphany" of the Other. This is not a religious turn in phenomenology, but the use of religious concepts as revelation and commandment in a philosophical way. Marie-Anne Lescourret has observed that the connection between the Jewish and the philosophical sources of Levinas's oeuvre does not always justify Levinas's own will to publish his different texts separately.[3] There is no dichotomy or opposition between both types of writings. In fact, the Jewish writings are far from being Levinas's minor contribution: Together with the philosophical writings, they form a diptych. The philosopher and the Jew who thinks are one, just as the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen cannot be separated from the author of the "Religion of Reason." Levinas has a double allegiance – to Athens and to Jerusalem. I would not insist on this point if some interpreters of Levinas's philosophy did not tend to minimize or even deny any correlation between the Jewish and the philosophical writings. During the Levinas Congress in Jerusalem in January 2006, however, lecturers manifested a real interest in the relationship between Levinas's Jewish writings and his philosophy. One of the questions was: In what way is Levinas's philosophical discourse on a non-eudaimonic ethics related to his Jewish writings? This is the central question of the present work.

Levinas discusses the discovery of the Other in the self. He analyzes the wonderful event of the surprise of totality by what is "beyond," by the always-disturbing alterity. His focus is upon the Other, from whom the I receives its orientation and justification. The Other leads to a breach in the totalizing tendency of the same; he causes the decentralization and de-nucleation of the I. The address of the same by the Other provokes the metamorphosis of the I into a "Here I am" (Gen. 22:1), a "one-for-the-Other," who is more concerned with the death of the Other than with his own death. Levinas used to say that (my) being-to-death is not the question; the spirituality of the I would lie in remedying the material need of the Other. The I is called upon; he is even elected to

2 D. Banon, "Levinas, penseur juif ou juif qui pense," *Noésis*, 3 (1999), Internet edition (2004), pp. 1–20.

3 See M.-A. Lescourret, "Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995): un philosophe du XXe siècle," *Cités*, 25 (2006), p. 18.

care for the Other's life and well being. He receives his/her uniqueness from the appeal that stems from the Other's face. In confrontation with the Other, the I becomes other to himself.

Levinas's consciousness of his own otherness as a Jew in French society was probably not without link with his positive evaluation of the undeniable alterity of the other man. Every human being has a "surplus" that cannot be absorbed in sameness. Levinas highlighted that in the relationship between the same and the Other, the Other is beyond one's comprehension, beyond one's grasp. Whereas Western philosophy suppressed the Other, Levinas developed a thinking in which the self, out of respect for the Other, is not anymore self-conscious and self-possessed, but decentered, oriented to the Other. In Levinas's view, not only philosophy but also Judaism contributes to Western civilization.

This book discusses Levinas's Jewish thinking and discusses the relationship between his philosophical and his Jewish thinking. There is ample evidence to suggest that Levinas's metaphysics and his Jewish essays are closely interconnected. Susan Handelman has rightly noted that all of Levinas's key philosophical ideas are found in his Jewish writings.[4] Although the Jewish writings greatly differ from the professional ones, both have much in common. From Levinas's perspective, both Judaism and ethical metaphysics express a beyond, an *au-delà*, which transforms the I into an animated, lively being. The beyond (in Greek: *epekeina*), challenges the I to live his existence as coexistence. In both the "confessional" writings and the "professional" writings, Levinas sheds light on the loftiness of a "holy" existence, an existence in humble service of the Other. Many terms and ideas of Levinas's philosophy return in his Jewish writings. Moreover, the philosophical writings contain terms that are well known in the Jewish heritage, such as the word "God," the declaration "Here I am" or the command "Thou shalt not murder" (Deut. 5:17). This can hardly be accidental, yet, in scholarship the relationship between both types of Levinas's writing has been insufficiently investigated.

Robert Gibbs has observed that the Jewish dimension of Levinas's thought has been largely ignored, or honored by a mention and then

4 S. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 270.

ignored.[5] While it is true that Levinas did not consider himself a Jewish theologian, he was a Jewish thinker whose texts on Judaism and Talmud run parallel with his philosophical works. This aspect of Levinas's thinking has not received appropriate attention. In their studies of Judaism, scholars such as Shmuel Wygoda, Catherine Chalier or David Banon revealed the importance of Levinas's thought for the understanding of Judaism today. One has indeed to assign to Levinas an eminent place in the pantheon of contemporary Jewish thinkers.[6] It is all the more noteworthy that no monograph has been produced on Levinas's Jewish texts and their relevance for the Jewish and the non-Jewish world alike. This is surprising, since in both types of his writings Levinas's aim is to point to real human transcendence, to an *über*, a beyond, in the ethical relationship to the non-assumable Other. The study of Levinas's Jewish texts is worthy of further investigation, not only in order to know his Jewish worldview but also in order to shed light upon his philosophical thoughts as such.

This study highlights the relevance of Levinas's Jewish thought for the reading of his professional work, as well as the traces of his philosophical thought in his Jewish writings. Levinas wants to surprise philosophical "Greek" thinking by confronting it with "Hebrew" thinking – the prophetic concern for the stranger, the widow and the orphan. Philosophical thinking and revelation are not without link. Philosophy has to take into account faith, and Levinas's entire enterprise is the "Greek" philosophical translation of something that Greece did not know. Parallel to the Other, who is not to be neutralized in the wholeness and closedness of the same, God cannot be contained in knowledge, the heteronomy cannot be absorbed by the autonomy. Totality is ruptured by infinity that cannot be assimilated. In Levinas's non onto-theological language God is not a "being," or "the supreme being." Rather, his discourse is towards God, *à-Dieu*, in the direction of a utopia of a heterotopy that nevertheless asks to be topically realized. The speech *à-Dieu* is intimately connected to the greeting of the other human being. Levinas's speech about God is therefore not a speech about a hyperousiological entity that whispers

5 R. Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 10.

6 C. Chalier, *Judaïsme et altérité* (Collections Les Dix Paroles) (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982); D. Banon, *La lecture infinie. Les voies de l'interprétation midrachique. Préface d'Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987).

in a person's ear: "Thou shall not kill." He rather connects "God" to the endless call of the Other, to the high demand of the Other, that is succinctly summarized in the words: "Thou shalt not kill."

The reflection on this doable command, which is not only negative, and asks for respect of the Other, has not been the first occupation of Western philosophy. Levinas, in contrast to any egological thinking, desires to present ethics as first philosophy. The reflection on *"na'ase ve-nishm'a"* (we shall do and hear; Ex. 24:7) as the obedience to a humanizing command before reflection, is for him *prima philosophia*. The "Hebrew," i.e., Jewish dimension in Levinas's "Greek," philosophical thinking, cannot be denied. This does not make Levinas's philosophy a "religious philosophy," or a "Jewish philosophy," yet, what is eminently present in the Jewish world nourishes and inspires Levinas's ethical metaphysics. There are two ways to ethics: one starting from the human freedom, the other starting from one's obligation. Levinas clearly opted for the second, the Jewish one. It was this approach to ethics that he tried to formulate in philosophical terms. The subject is commanded not to be indifferent; his non-attention to the Other is a kind of murder. In the proximity of the I to the Other, however, God comes to the mind.

In addition, Levinas's thinking on Judaism implies that one speaks differently about God, not as a *Ding an sich*, a being or a super-being, but as a high demand coming from the Other's face, as a trace in the Other's face that is immediately effaced and can never be retraced. The word God has not as its denotation some hyperousiological entity; it refers to what remains always exterior to my horizons, to the infinite rupturing of my totality. The other than other, not present in the other person, leaves his trace in the other person's solicitation. The other than other, *epekeina teis ousias*, in the successful formulation of Jean-Luc Marion "not contaminated by being," even prior to the ethical obligation to the Other,[7] breaks up and rends my horizon, fills me with the dynamics of concrete concern for the fellow human being. In my responsibility, I am a "martyr" in the etymological sense of the word, bearing witness to the infinite that ruptures my totality and disrupts the horizon of my knowledge, my wishes, my needs or expectations. Levinas argues, also in his Jewish writings, that God is not present, nor is He absent. God is not

7 GCM, p. 69; DVI, 1992, p. 115: "Dieu n'est pas simplement le 'premier autrui', ou 'autrui par excellence' ou 'l'absolument autrui' mais autre qu'autrui, autre autrement, autre d'altérité préalable à l'altérité d'autrui, à l'astreinte éthique au prochain [...]."

to be described in a negative theology. As *Illeity*, He-hood with which fusion is excluded, He leaves His trace in the traumatic opening of the self towards the Other, in the fracturing of the cogito. In his philosophical writings, Levinas raises the problem of thematization; the Other cannot be conceptualized. In a parallel way, the Jewish writings avoid a speech on God that describes His nature. In both writings, the unity of the ego is shattered.

In Levinas's view, philosophy is not *ancilla religionis*, a humble servant to a religion, which offers answers for everything and consolation for everybody.[8] Nor is revelation "*aufgehoben*," taken into account and neutralized in philosophy. There is no divorce between revelation and philosophy: There is even a new union and dialogue. However, the term "God" is used not for pious purposes, or in an ontological discourse: God is linked to "difficult freedom," a demanding "religion for adults." Religion itself is interestingly defined in a nondenominational manner as the relationship between the same and the Other without totality. Levinas does not oppose God and philosophy, he does not reduce philosophy to God or God to philosophy. He is not interested in glorifying a conflict. He thinks of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the personal God of the Bible, in a philosophical manner, without reducing Him to the God of reason.[9]

Given Levinas's attention to the ethical demand as well as the extraordinary position of the word "God" and the rupturing of the I in all of his writings, one cannot confine himself to the study of one set of his writings without considering the other set. But what is the exact relationship between philosophy and religious thinking? Levinas perceives Judaism as the prototype of a disturbance in the I that does not allow the withdrawal from responsibility for the Other. In this sense, Judaism is the "Other" of philosophy, educating toward the realization of a "difficult freedom." Judaism asks for the conversion of the imperialist subject into a responsible being. It is a disorder and trouble in the I, that makes me sensitive to the misery of the Other, a traumatic experience that makes the human being human. This worry in the I comes from the

8 Philo Judaeus of Alexandria described human wisdom/philosophy, as the handmaid of the Torah, of divine wisdom. See R. Jospe, *What is Jewish Philosophy* (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 1988), p. 13.

9 R. A. Cohen, "God in Levinas," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2,1 (1992), pp. 201–204.

Other and transforms the I in a "created" being. The "created" I is at a distance from the totalizing I that is characterized by the *conatus essendi*, the natural perseverance in one's own being. In writing about "creation," Levinas is sensitive to what remains outside the all-illuminating light of philosophy and is not "represented," to what cannot be seen and to what is nonetheless the meaning of all that "is."

Judaism, insofar as it is the possibility of speaking to the Other, functions in Levinas's Jewish writings as the paradigmatic lifestyle in which there is an extraordinary attention to the Other, to the weak, the oppressed and persecuted, to the outsiders and the defeated. Judaism as challenge for the human being is an invitation to listen to what is always exterior to totality, to what cannot be synthesized in the I, to what is ungraspable and not to be represented. Judaism in its highest manifestation as difficult freedom is the message of the poor Other, who dislocates the self, the message of the I as "host"[10] and even as "hostage."[11] The Jewish experience of the Other, whose tears are counted, precedes and informs Levinas's philosophy. As Roger Burggraeve has rightly remarked, Levinas's Jewish pre-philosophical experiences enliven his philosophical thinking.[12] Yet, there is more. The evidence which I gathered reveals that Levinas's Jewish thinking is relevant for his philosophical thought as such.

Levinas has taught us that the other person is to be respected as Other. His contribution to dialogical philosophy consists of highlighting the alterity in the Other.[13] This otherness is an absolute heterogeneity that cannot be absorbed in the sameness and forbids any fusion, which is only confusion. The Other is an interruption in the horizon of the same, in which one anticipates and normalizes; he or she is a novelty and a surprise, putting an end to the old, reducing games of the same. In

10 TeI, p. 334, TI, p. 299.

11 AE, p. 177; OB, p. 112.

12 R. Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love. Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights* (Marquette Studies in Philosophy, no. 29), Jeffrey Bloechl (trans.) (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), p. 21. The term "pre-philosophical experiences" stems from Alphonse De Waelhens.

13 This undeniable alterity is smilingly illustrated in the Jim Davis cartoon on Garfield, who steals a fish at the fish store and brings it to the table of his master Jon. Upon Jon's remark: "What did you drag that fish in for?" Garfield smashes the fish in Jon's face and thinks: "When a cat presents you with a dead, smelly thing, it's an expression of love, you twit."

this sense, the Other brings the I out of the prison of himself, not by his own forces, but summoned by the urgent demand of the Other. The Other in the appearance of the stranger, the beggar and the poor, and all the politically, economically and socially weak, constitutes a challenge for the collective I that has the choice between a return to the same in identitarian obsession, or a courageous exodus out of the I without return to a "fatherland." The Other is never a pure *phainomenon*, but rather a call, an authoritatively speaking voice that asks for an exile out of myself. He/she brings with him/her the challenge of the exile, also in the homeland. The idea of the exile is therefore a positive idea. The I is "created" when becoming different from himself in "hospitality," in the welcoming of the face of the Other. In Levinas's Jewish thought, Abraham became the first follower of the Other, because he knew how to welcome three unknown people, three Others, who were totally other. Abraham changed his usual way of doing things; he felt himself called upon to welcome them in his tent. Levinas's Jewish thinking is a praise to the exile out of the same.

In all of his books, the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel reads Levinas from below, from the neglected people, from the Indians and the Asiatic people. When he asked Levinas what to do with all those oppressed millions, Levinas replied that Dussel would have to think about that. Dussel took this word as adagio for his life, interpreting the Levinasian ethical Desire in terms of solidarity. True, Levinas did not only write about being a "suffering servant," he also pointed to the importance of states, courts and armies. Yet, systems and institutions will have to be permanently changed in favor of the Other. Justice is never just enough; ethics should inform politics. The social engagement for the oppressed is one of the inevitable consequences of Levinas's thought. The Other is and remains the enemy of the will of power, the radical enemy of any totality. Solidarity with him means that one is the friend of the enemies of totality.[14]

In Levinas's Jewish thinking, there is special attention to the violence and drunkenness inherent in religions, stemming from the absorption of the human being in the Divine. Unmasking different kinds of religious

14 Political solidarity towards the other man is needed. Yet, solidarity of the individual towards the Other also remains important, even if the social structures are fundamentally just. Levinas loved "la petite bonté" about which Vassili Grossman wrote in his "Vie et destin."

enthusiasm, Levinas writes about the movement of welcoming the Other, which calls a halt to violence. This Other is – using Freud's term – *unheimlich*, not to be considered as part of my home; he is always an *exces*, something uncanny and strange that escapes my grasp.[15] Welcoming the Other means for the existent an "excendence," an exit out of the being, towards the Good beyond being.[16] The movement of the exile out of oneself is a most un-Heideggerian movement. It is the anti-Odysseus movement of Abraham that implies not being rooted, but being transplanted in the realm of the Other.

In a way, for Levinas, the Jew is the placeholder for all the displaced, the outcast, the "too much" of society, the dispersed and the exiled. Not at home, anti-identitarian, the "juifs" (Jews) in the sense of Lyotard,[17] as bearers of the Law, are the contrary of the same, the contrary of the Nietzschean will to power and of the warrior ideology that detests asceticism. They are the opposite of a *force qui va* with all its violence, the contrary of those who have a home, a "*Heimat*." The "juifs" are the non-place, the nomadic existents of the Jewish writer Edmond Jabès,[18] on a journey, wanderers, as ones permanently not yet arrived. The "juifs" distance themselves from the one and for all accomplishment of the infinite in the finite and recall the disproportionality of the infinite in the finite. They dynamically represent a protest against the fullness of redemption here and now, because they remain in hope for the wholly other that is yet to come. They are set apart to witness this distance. The Jew is far from history as *Heilsgeschichte*: Redemption is always not yet. He distances himself from all too clear "plans" of God, that some pretend to know better than all the others. Foremost, the Jew is not subsumable into a system; he/she remains outside, in the margin, rupturing totality.

Consequently, Levinas developed thoughts about Jewish existence as a way of breaking out of the closed circle of the self. The way of breaking the bonds of the self-enclosure of the same is by listening to the call of the Other, who remains always Other, not to be synthesized.

15 Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life. Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), has developed this idea.

16 DlE, p. 99; EE, DEE, foreword.

17 See J.-F. Lyotard, *Heidegger et "les juifs"* (Débats) (Paris: Galilée, 1988).

18 For a comparison between Levinas and the Egyptian Jewish poet Jabès, see G.D. Mole, *Lévinas, Blanchot, Jabès. Figures of Estrangement* (Gainesville, Fl.: University of Florida, 1997).

The obedience to the Other's call is far from enslaving (as is frequently thought). On the contrary, it sets free the "I" in a "difficult freedom." In an anti-totalizing move, Abraham sets off from Ur never to return; he does not go back to what once was; he listens to a voice, which opens a future unknown, unseen and not foreseeable. He goes to utopia, to the *non locus*, to what has never been there. He goes towards what is absent and still approachable. Levinas's Jewish thought testifies to this positive absence.

In the entire corpus of Levinas's Jewish writings, Judaism appears as an exemplary non-belonging to any totality. It is a non-affiliation, because it is a belonging to every human being and to the entire world. This non-affiliation does not stem from a remoteness, it flows from a closeness to the concrete Other. In the twentieth century that saw totalitarianisms and the Holocaust, Levinas reinterprets Judaism as a rupture of totality, a profound solidarity with the excluded, an engagement to feed the hungry. In Jewish life, attested to in the Bible and the literature of the Sages, the psyche of the I is defined as "the other in the same."[19] Judaism is suspicious of the ideological, nationalist and imperialist totalities that endanger the human being. It is togetherness with the innocent victim, proximity, to be "persecuted" by the Other. Judaism in Levinas's eyes is far from exclusivism, fanaticism, authoritarianism or sectarism. It is care for the life of the Other.

The exile from the I takes place in the establishing of a web of relationships. To realize the exodus from the obsession of the self means to be linked to the Other who is present, and to all the Others who are absent. This being linked to the community and the world as the marvelous possibility of orientation to the Other (instead of being ideologically cut off from the world) is what links Levinas's philosophy to the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt, who highlighted that through the representation of others and their opinions, the I makes itself present.[20] However, Arendt wrote about civil rights in the modern state, whereas Levinas's discourse is on the rights of the other man, prior to any state.

Let me come back to Levinas's peculiar talk on God and religious life: In the philosophical landscape of France, Levinas was one of the

19 OB, p. 112; AE, p. 177.

20 See Annabel Herzog, "Hannah Arendt's Concept of Responsibility," *Studies in Social and Political Thought*, 10 (2004), pp. 39–56, p. 52.

few philosophers who was not afraid to use the word "God." In all of his writings, he linked the term to what unsettles the settled I and brings it out of himself in an unending movement toward the Other, without any possibility of withdrawing. "God" is what makes possible the exodus of the I out of the sameness as the land of slavery. It is the address not of a person or an absolute "out there," but of the fellow human being, whose transcendence is experienced as a surprise and trauma in the self-enclosed I. The term "God" has a very logical place in Levinas's thinking: It is what shatters the own certitudes, challenging the self-enclosed Jonah in all of us. The term is coterminous with an eternal withdrawal and a never-present future. God is far from the Greek unmoved mover: The term rather refers to the Place of displacement, to what can never be reduced to a *Heimat*. In Jewish thinking, God is called "the Place," *ha-maqom*, because in every place He is accompanying the one-for-the-Other. God's trace is in the demanding face of the Other.

In Levinas's perspective, to be religious equals to open yourself to the Other, to become sensitive to the other human being, without any possibility of a retreat into yourself. It comes to the point of being vulnerable and exposed, to the point of substitution. To be religious is to be like Judah who substitutes himself for Benjamin, to know yourself as the brother of other human beings. A religious person would be the one who is summoned by the Other and awakened to what transcends the phenomenal. "Religious" is the one called upon by the Other against his own totalizing tendencies. The eminently religious act consists of the welcoming of the Other, who modifies the same.

In Levinas's unusual view, religion appears to be nothing less than the challenge to permanently change, to become responsive. Confronted with the Other, the same is challenged to open up its time to the Other, to be there as a *Dasein*, but now destined to serve the Other, who is always unforeseeable and not to be enclosed in my horizon. The call of the Other is from high; it is an urgent call for my engagement and for my leaving the order of the proper. In a time that Marx, Nietzsche and Freud buried God, after Nietzsche's solemn declaration of the "death of God," Levinas again spoke about God, or better, *à-Dieu*, towards Him. God returns in Levinas's thought, but in a quite different way than before. From the other man's face stems a divine command beyond the *Seyn*, so that the Other is not part of my *be-greifen*, reducible to one's own closed circle. In relation to the Other and in respect to his/her irreducibility, one is "religious."

Levinas's God is therefore universal, connected to everybody, to all mankind, to each and every person. By the infinite call of the Other, the individual is judged according to his/her acts. In this ethical context, speaking *à-Dieu* becomes meaningful. This does not mean that Levinas, in his thinking, is too guilt ridden, as Daniel Sibony has maintained.[21] Neither is Levinas's God a grocery-God, without love, who would call for another, loving God. The acceptance of such a substitutive God frequently required – according to a widespread prejudice – the fulfillment, the *Aufhebung* of the Law. Levinas's God, on the contrary, is a loving God, who is at the same time a demanding God, caring for the poor and the homeless, whose gaze demands a gift.[22] This gift offering or present is generosity, above all reckoning and comparing: The I gives everything, becoming a pure gift for the Other. This pure welcoming asks, however, for organization, which can potentially oppress the Other, but also guarantees the rights of the other man. Peace is higher than truth, proximity higher than knowledge; at the same time, peace and proximity ask for truth and knowledge that remain under the scepter of ethics.

Levinas's God is thus the infinite, as justice never "there," "utopian" in the etymological sense of the word, without place, ever to come, not now. With this God, Levinas strives for justice in a never-ending dynamic. As the holy Other, *ha-Qadosh barukh hu* (the Holy, blessed/saluted be He), He remains "separated," not assumable. God is never reached, but approached in our proximity to the Other. "Where did we see you naked and hungry?" people will ask according to Matthew 25, a text to which Levinas himself referred. And he comments:[23] People are surprised that they abandoned and persecuted God. But God answers them that they did so when they closed their doors to the poor and left God outside. Everyone knows exactly where and when they met God who was naked

21 E. Meir, "La philosophie de Lévinas, sacrificielle et naïve? S'agit-il d'un drame? A propos d'un ouvrage récent de Daniel Sibony," in: *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* (2001), Tome 81, no. 1, pp. 63–79.

22 In what one calls today in Germany the "Monotheismusstreit," one opposes monotheistic thought to polytheism with its myths, in which there would be less intolerance. The names of Hans Blumenberg and Jan Assmann are frequently mentioned in this debate as protagonists. One may ask if monotheism with a loving and demanding God is not preferable over gods, who bring to human beings satisfaction without demands. In Levinas's thinking, the Other gives no satisfaction, he is separated from the I, resists bulimic tendencies, and the Laws stems from his lofty face, from a height.

23 ITN, pp. 161–162; AHN, p. 190.

and hungry, when one refuses or agrees to feed the hungry and to clothe the naked.

Levinas's God is far from the big eye that sees everything and therefore is able to see what human beings in an all-embracing gaze cannot see. God is not the eye that sees and is itself unseen, a kind of Gyges. He is not the providence that foresees all. He is rather the unforeseeable, the invisible that is to be approached and not seen in proximity to the Other. The other man is in this way the "apple of His eye," demanding respect and love. The more I realize justice, the more I feel that I am far from reaching Him, as the always escaping, as the Unique who never comes onto my horizon, who always surprises my limited scope. "God" is the unlimited in my limited world, the infinity in my finite enclosedness, the possibility of transcending myself by going out to the Other. "God" is not omniscient; he is coterminous with this I-do-not-know-what, that brings me beyond the possibilities of myself into the realm of the non-I, into my own impossibility. "God" is linked to the always exterior, to the non-representable call that brings me out of myself, like death, but now in a positive way. "God" is not contaminated by being; He "is" not; He is otherwise than being, which is not being otherwise. God's name, which is not to be pronounced, points to His transcendence. This does not mean that He is indifferent, but that He is only approachable in the never-satisfied "Desire" for justice. He is the hidden one, who gives human beings full responsibility. The *Illeity* or He-hood of the beyond being leaves his traces, but not as a prey leaves traces for the hunter.[24] The traces of the infinite are not the vestiges of His presence, and one may not reconstruct His presence from the command that is heard in the present.[25] His absence is positive because it allows the human being to orient himself to the Other.

Levinas's use of the term "God" raises the question of whether Levinas does not sacrifice himself on the altar of morality with its obligations and laws. Does Levinas lose his life in order to win it; does he give up the ego in order to dedicate himself sacrificially to the Other? I do not think so. The ego in Levinas is not given up; it is only oriented to the Other. The ego does not turn into *'olah*, a holocaust, a burning offer, satisfying

24 EI, pp. 106–107; EeI, pp. 102; OB, pp. 12–13; AE, pp. 27–28.

25 For the theme of the trace, see Z. Levy, "Der Begriff der Spur bei E. Lévinas und J. Derrida. Einflüsse und Rückwirkungen," in *Prima Philosophia*, Band 4/Heft 2, ed. Sabine S. Gehlhaar (Cuxhaven: T. Junghans, 1991), pp. 149–163.

God. In positive terms: For Levinas, ethics does ask for the fortification of the I in order to become a present and to be present for the Other. Levinas's philosophy is ontology in the service of ethics. This present of the I, the gift, is not a gift angle, it is the humanization and ennoblement of the I, without destruction of it. No deadly sacrifice has to be made, not of the self and not of the Other. What is asked for is consecration, the I becoming holy, i.e., out of himself/herself in answerability. Levinas thinks that, in the episode of the binding of Isaac, Abraham returns to ethics, the sacrifice is definitely called off.[26] He does not write about sacrificing, but rather about *qorban* as the possibility of coming near.[27] *Qorban* is not the killing of the I or the non-I. It is taking a Law upon my shoulders, the rare but lofty possibility of an exile that brings the I to its kernel as I-for-the-Other. Rereading Levinas's texts, one may discern a clear thread running throughout his whole oeuvre: Not the I is central, but the Other, and in no instance in which God or religion is mentioned is this perspective lost.

In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas maintained that biblical and philosophical thinking are not contradictory. The texts of the great philosophers and their interpretations are very close to the Bible and its multiple interpretations. Levinas is aware that the concreteness of the biblical texts is far from the abstract philosophical discourse. He never used biblical verses as an argument in his philosophical discourse. Yet, for him, the God of the Bible remains for philosophy the criterion of the spirit. He explicitly states that philosophy is not the place of the original significance of human existence. Judaism as pre-philosophical experience or, better, as pre-philosophical being affected by the Other, greatly influenced his philosophy.

The existing scholarly works on Levinas have not sufficiently investigated what is the exact nature of the relationship between Judaism and philosophy in his writings. An early attempt to show connections between the Jewish and the philosophical writings is to be found in Fabio

26 This explanation is near to Buber's explanation of the meaning of the *aqeida*, the episode of the binding of Isaac. See E. Meir, "Buber's Dialogical Interpretation of the Binding of Isaac – between Kierkegaard and Hasidism," in M. Hallamish, H. Kasher, Y. Silman (eds.), *The Faith of Abraham. In the Light of Interpretation Throughout the Ages* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), pp. 281–293. [Hebrew]

27 Buber and Rosenzweig, too, understood *qorban* as coming near, being in proximity, *qirva.*

Ciaramelli's article on this theme.[28] Jacob Meskin interestingly pleads for an inclusive and integrative view on Levinas's writings.[29] He proposes to understand Levinas's project as a whole. Both parts of Levinas's writings, he writes, are equally significant; they are interconnected and one part sheds light upon the other. Levinas's philosophy would reveal the influence of Jewish ideas and without the discussion of these ideas that resonate in his philosophy one would offer an inadequate or distorted picture of it. On the other hand, the Jewish writings reveal the influence of philosophical notions. Meskin concludes that "philosophy is our endless attempt to sound the depths of our human openness and directedness toward the other person, a pre-philosophical and extra-philosophical moment of *imitatio dei* that exceeds what philosophy can grasp." As far as I am concerned, I do not think that Levinas's philosophy, even partially "depends" upon Judaism, but as a philosopher he criticized the closedness of philosophy and this criticism is certainly not alien to the open-endedness that characterizes Jewish tradition that permanently discusses a non-graspable "beyond," which gives meaning to what is. Anyhow, a thorough treatment of the complex relationship between Levinas's philosophical writings and his reflections on Judaism has not been undertaken until now. One thing is certain: There are clear affinities between Levinas's Jewish and his philosophical thinking. Whereas Heidegger excluded faith from thinking, Levinas brings both together. The experience of the meeting with the Other, who is always at a distance, is the experience of the absolute (in the etymological meaning), of the separated, of the holy. *Qedusha*, holiness, is my answer to the not absorbable Other, to what commands a halt. Very much as in Franz Rosenzweig's thought, faith is seen by Levinas as a source of thinking. Tertullian contrasted Jerusalem with Athens, Levinas connects faith and intellect. His Jewish thinking is less "fides quaerens intellectum" as Anselm formulated, than a sustained non-dogmatic and non-ideological and, in this sense, non-theological thinking that recognizes the human Desire for transcendence in humanizing experiences, even when described in an eminently religious language. Levinas does not rigorously separate faith and reason as Kant wanted. In his thought there is no

28 Fabio Ciaramelli, "Le rôle du judaïsme dans l'oeuvre de Lévinas," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 81 (1983), pp. 580–599.

29 J. Meskin, "Toward a New Understanding of the Work of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Modern Judaism*, 20 (2000), pp. 78–102.

harmonization of faith and reason, nor is there a contradiction between "fides" and "intellectus." He is certainly not one of the numerous modern intellectual contemptors of faith who proclaim that God is dead. Against the modern intellectual despisers of religion, he negates that God is dead and associates the Higher Order with the never-ending claim for justice. His is an intellectual reflection on an experience in which a humanizing transcendence, a going beyond one's possibilities is central. The marvel of the speech as the relationship of the one to the Other without totality, is the wonder of an "a-theism," a being separated from God, which is at the same time a belief in the One who demands the unity of mankind. Levinas leaves a philosophy that seeks to return to the familiar ground of the same and that reduces the Other (*autre*) to Being (*être*). His ethical metaphysics runs parallel with his thinking about Abraham, who "leaves his country forever to go to a still unknown land and forbids his servant to take even his son back to this point of departure."[30]

My argument in the present book is that Levinas translates the message of Jerusalem in the terms of Athens. This does not mean that he formulates the terms of the religious discourse into those of a secular, rational discourse for all mankind. Levinas is not an apologetic thinker. He rather reflects upon a life that is exemplary, universal, and as such important for philosophy itself. In a time of fundamentalist fanaticism and terror, this is a move that may point to the most vital forces hidden in a tradition that initially saw itself not at all as "religious."

Levinas does not merely repeat tradition, he lives and interprets it. He sets his own accents and believes that he touches the quintessence of Judaism. In all his writings, Abraham functions as the prototype of the one who welcomes the Other without returning to the enclosed circle of the self. Without even *wanting* to welcome, he welcomes in order to welcome. Abraham creates a space of *désinteréssement* in the interested life. He does good in order to do good, not because it is good "for him." It is good *tout court*. His being awakened by the Other and his subsequent attachment to the Other break the natural attachment to the being. Open to the unplanned, Abraham has that *supplément d'âme* which is always beyond what we are obliged to do according to what we are required by the Law. This *supplément d'âme* is the supplementary soul which the Jew receives on the Sabbath as a time which he devotes *à-Dieu* to others. It is the divine present in every human being who is open to it.

30 EDE, p. 191.

In a way, Levinas enlarges the closed circle of Judaism and opens up Judaism to the world, without losing the singularity of the Jewish people as a specific way of welcoming the Other. On the contrary, Judaism is a singularity that the world at large needs.

In the following I try to shed light on the nature of Levinas's Jewish thinking, by comparing this thought with his philosophical thought, by comparing him with other Jewish thinkers and by discussing some specific Jewish themes.

"Hebrew" and "Greek" represent in Levinas's thinking two different modes of thought: the universal discourse of Athens and the Jewish way of thinking, as eminently present in the Bible and in the Sages, in Midrash and Talmud. I contend that the two parts of Levinas's work, the "Jewish" one and the "Greek" one, enrich each other and that Levinas was a great "translator," who connected the Saying of ethics with the said of philosophy. Every translation is a treason, but nevertheless a necessity. For Levinas, there is interaction between his philosophy as "love of wisdom" and the "wisdom of love," the wisdom of responsibility, attested to in Jewish sources.[31] "Love of wisdom" should not exclude any form of wisdom. The thirty-two Talmudic lectures certainly contain wisdom in that they discuss many philosophical problems. A series of questions will have to be answered. What is the nature of the interaction between the two parts of Levinas's work? How to define the relationship between religion and philosophy in his thought? Has Levinas theologized phenomenology? What is the relationship between his pre-philosophical experience and his philosophical conceptual thinking, between autonomy and radical heteronomy? Does he translate Hebrew into Greek or is it the other way around? Does he think that there are untranslatable elements in Judaism, refractory to light, and, if so, how do these elements relate to the general world and to philosophy? What is the exact relationship between recognition/ethics and cognition? Between the *cogito* and my being responsible in a pre-original relationship? Between philosophy and the appeal of the Other as the beginning of all wisdom? How does one formulate something that is not adequately expressible in the logical terms of reason, and how does one formulate otherness in terms of sameness? How to think the signifyingness or the "Saying" which brings all meanings and all "said" into being, but which itself cannot be

31 As for the relationship between "the love of wisdom" and "the wisdom of love," see TeI, p. IV; BV, pp. 200–201; ADV, pp. 233–234; PP, pp. 345–346.

thematized or objectivized? Is Levinas's God the traditional God of the Jews? I will now turn to these questions, paying special attention to the process of translation in Levinas's Hebrew writings.