PART VI

IMPERIALISM, REVOLUTION, AND COMMUNITY
What does it mean to “comment” on scripture? Most often (although it is seldom said), it means *paraphrasing* scripture, and paraphrasing in turn means not merely the restatement of the scriptural text in other words, but its wholesale transformation into a different discursive register. The concrete, graphic, ineluctably imagistic language of the Bible, for instance, has, for millennia, been painstakingly paraphrased as abstract theological and moral propositions; while the Bible’s ancient historical narratives (which incessantly blur the borders between “fiction” and “history”) have, since at least the nineteenth century, been paraphrased as modern historical narratives (which depend precisely on keeping those borders intact). In recent decades, however, the discursive horizons of biblical scholarship have expanded, impelled in no small part by the opening up of biblical studies to literary studies, and this expansion has made previously unimaginable forms of biblical commentary possible.

Although she herself does not describe it as such, Regina Schwartz’s “Revelation and Revolution: Law, Justice, and Politics in the Hebrew Bible” amounts to a *philosophical* commentary on the Sinai narrative of the Book of Exodus. The particular brand of philosophy that resources and contours Schwartz’s paraphrastic retelling of the Sinai story is that of modern (or, if you prefer, postmodern) French philosophy, specifically that of Alain Badiou and Emmanuel Levinas. Badiou writes hauntingly of singular “truth events” that erupt unpredictably into the realm of the mundane, demanding an enduring ethical response and calling new subjects and communities into being. For Schwartz, Sinai is such an event, a narrative imbued with “the aura of the exceptional,” signaling a “radical break from the ordinary.” What is encountered at Sinai is “unintelligible, unnameable, unthinkable,” yet it demands an uncompromising ethical obedience—obedience not to a set of universal imperatives, however, but to an uncategorizable love of God and neighbor. Schwartz further fleshes out this ethical fidelity through appeal to Levinas’s concept of a radical justice irreducible to law. In redescribing the Sinai event in categories culled from contemporary