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

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2 Emmanuel Levinas, Quatre Lectures Talmudiques (Paris, 1968).
that render the hands impure"), on the translation of the Bible, on the con-
tempt 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 audi-
ence, but also in view of philosophical debates. Those acquainted with these
lectures know that they treat the relation between the subject and the politi-
cal 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 summa-
rize 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 lec-
tures. 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, free-
dom, time, and rationality. In fact, Levinas is not alone in his staunch rejec-
tion 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 move-
ment (§ 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