Revelation and Idolatry: Holy Law and Holy Terror

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For Alain Badiou, the contemporary French philosopher of the radical Left, a subject is what is summoned into being by a response of persistent fidelity to an eternally enduring “truth event,” which breaks disruptively, unpredictably, into the given in all of its irreducible, incommunicable singularity, beyond all law, consensus, and conventional understanding. Badiou has argued that ethics is not the singular revelation of truth, but an ongoing process, that is, the process of remaining faithful to that truth. As Terry Eagleton summarizes, “It is a question of ‘persevering in the disruption,’ a phrase which clips together both innovation and continuity, visionary crisis and dogged consistency, or what in Badiou’s language would be the ‘immortal’ and the ‘mortal’…. He wants, in short, to insert the eternal into time, negotiate the passage between truth event and everyday life, which is what we know as politics” (250). While Eagleton calls this politics, and Badiou calls it truth, Levinas calls it justice, and surely it is also a description of Revelation, that radical cut into the everyday by a transcendent call to a higher ethics.

In his discussion of three kinds of knowledge, Levinas describes “accepting the law before you know what the law is as a third option: not the one offered by philosophy, a knowledge you exercise before action, a consideration you gain, with a safe distance, in security, and then having known, acting, nor the second option, of acting in the dark, impulsively, without knowledge, or naively, like a child. The horizon of philosophy offers these two options, one the obverse of the other.” Levinas turns to another resource, religious, to discern a third option, loving the source of the law, accepting it as a responsibility that will widen into
GENRE

horizons heretofore unknowable. And this option of accepting a potentially infinite responsibility leads him to invoke the Talmudic commentary on the gift of the Law: it is “as if God were tilting the mountain like a basin on top of the Israelites and telling them, you may either accept my law or I drop the mountain on you” (Levinas 1990, “Temptation”).

While Badiou has had no difficulty associating the truth-event with the advent of Christ -- he pursues the analysis in his book on St. Paul where, as one New Testament scholar has put it, Paul is virtually a Maoist -- he is notably less interested in the radical revelation that marks the Sinai event. And yet this revelation exemplifies his understanding: the narrative describes the creation of subjects who are asked to be faithful to the event -- and it gives dire warnings of pseudo-events, fake truths, false idols. I hardly need to rehearse the aura of the exceptional that fills the narrative of the Sinai revelation, the radical break from the ordinary, from life as they knew it -- with Moses leading them, not only out of Egypt, out of their habitual slavery, but also out of their camp in the wilderness to be suddenly subjected to a terrifying sound and light show:

now at daybreak on the third day there were peals of thunder on the mountain and lightning flashes, a dense cloud, and a loud trumpet blast, and inside the camp all the people trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the bottom of the mountain. The mountain of Sinai was entirely wrapped in smoke, because God had descended on it in the form of fire. Like smoke from a furnace …Louder and Louder grew the sound of the trumpet. Moses spoke, and God answered him with peals of thunder. (Ex 19:16-19, JB)

The form of fire is indistinct; the voice of thunder is unintelligible. This is not a deity who is easily reduced to a being, even a supreme one, nor for that matter, to any concept of being. The Truth as delivered has no place in the prior situation: under the terms that reigned prior to revelation, it would be unnameable, unintelligible. The demarcation of the place of the event also points clearly to its break with the prior situation: “God said to Moses, ‘Go down and warn this people not to pass beyond their bounds to come and look on God, or many of them will lose their lives…Mark out the limits of the mountain and declare it sacred’” (Ex. 19:21-24). In the philosopher’s language: “A truth punches a “hole” in knowledges, it is heterogeneous to them, but it is also the sole known source of new knowledges” (Badiou 70).

1All Bible translations are from The Jerusalem Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), abbreviated above as JB.
The atmosphere at Sinai trembles with something else besides the shock of newness -- with threat, even with violence -- but why? The people tremble before this God, begging Moses to intercede lest they die (Ex. 20:19). It seems that not only the message, but also the messenger is unbearable. Moses’ face is radiant from his encounter with God, and he must veil himself for others even to be able to withstand the sight of him. Only before God and before the elders, to whom he communicates this startling justice, is he unveiled.

The revelation of the law is felt as a crisis: with the entry of the demand for justice, the world changes decisively. Furthermore, because the subject who is created by this event did not exist under the horizon of justice prior to it, that justice commands the hearer to a terrifying moment of decisiveness: will he accept this call to justice, or turn away? The first answer is univocal and affirmative: when Moses relates the words of God to the people “all the people said with one voice, “All that he has spoken we will do; we will obey.” (Ex 24:3, 7) In his comments on the revelation, Levinas has pointed out that

The term evoking obedience here [we will do] is anterior to that which expresses understanding [‘we will listen’] and in the eyes of the Talmudic scholars is taken to be the supreme merit of Israel, the ‘wisdom of an angel.’ …This obedience before understanding is against Kantian logic, for this biblical ethic cannot be reduced to a categorical imperative in which a universality is suddenly able to direct a will. It is an obedience, rather, which can be traced back to the love of one’s neighbor: …a love that is obeyed, that is, the responsibility for one’s neighbor. (Levinas 1986, “Revelation” 146-47)

The demand of Revelation, then, is not a list of rational universals -- rather it is a “love of God that is obeyed.”

Fidelity to this remarkable event proves to be difficult -- a “difficult freedom” as Levinas refers to it. The wrong paths soon beckon. Indeed, the difficulty of being faithful to the event --of being just -- preoccupies the biblical narrative both during and after the portrayal of the revelation, and that difficulty has also preoccupied subsequent human history: in this sense, the Revelation is indeed understood as not a single occasion, but a process, the process of struggling to remain faithful to the truth of the revelation, to be just. According to Badiou, there are three ways to betray the Event: disavowal, trying to follow old patterns as if nothing had happened; false imitation of the event of truth; and a direct “ontologization” of the event of truth, that is, its reduction to a new positive order of being. The Exodus narrative depicts the ancient Israelites betraying the revelation in every sense. They doubt the validity of event, murmuring “Is Yahweh with us or not?” (Ex 17:7) and disbelieving: “you have brought us
to this wilderness [not to emancipate us] but to starve this whole company to death!” (Ex 16:3). They give their allegiance to a pseudo-truth, and they reduce their emancipation to an order of being -- signaled by their creating an idol of gold: “They have been quick to leave the way I marked out for them; they have made themselves a calf of molten metal and worshipped it, ‘Here is your God, Israel, they have cried, ‘who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’” (Ex. 32:8-9). And the false order of being is offered up as the danger of idolatry, of evil: “you know how prone these people are to evil,” laments Aaron (Ex. 32:23).

When the revelation is betrayed in this way, it is destroyed. And when the people of Israel are unfaithful to the Event, it disappears for them. The narrative depicts this as the destruction of the tablets, the destruction of the laws of justice. The people cannot receive this law, are not qualified to receive it, so the law is thrown down and they are punished. Not qualified according to what? Is it according to the principle of justice that precedes the law, an “impossible justice” as Derrida has called it, that must be prior? According to that reading, the story would recount how, having violated justice, the people cannot have the law. But this reading quickly collapses before one of the most compelling aspects of this narrative: it is precisely the Law -- I repeat, the Law, and not a prior justice -- that they are violating. The law is “thou shalt not make a graven image” and they are worshipping idols at the very moment that the law prohibiting that is given, and so are not worthy to receive the law forbidding their worship of idols. How are we to understand this?

Are we seeing that at its inception, law includes enforcement? In Kant’s understanding of enforceability: there is no law that does not imply in itself, a priori, in the analytic structure of its concept, the possibility of being “enforced,” applied by force. In his Acts of Religion, Derrida endorses this sense: “there are, to be sure, laws (lois) that are not enforced, but there is no law (loi) without enforceability and no applicability or enforceability of the law (loi) without force, whether this force be direct or indirect, physical or symbolic, exterior or interior, brutal or subtly discursive -- even hermeneutic -- coercive or regulative, and so forth” (Derrida 233). Still, in the biblical scene of the giving of the law, the enforcement of the law is not a response that follows upon the heals of law-breaking; rather the enforcement is part of the law-giving. The law is broken even as it is given, and enforced even as it is given. Here, where justice is violated, the law is broken. There is no law without justice. A radical identity of the law and justice characterizes the revelation in the Hebrew Bible.
Because elsewhere the gap between justice and the law is so wide -- in Christian theology when it sees the Pharisaic law as inhibiting the realization of justice; in philosophy where from Plato on, law is formal while is justice substantive; in political theory, which includes those who endorse “procedural justice” when they abandon substantive justice -- this radical biblical vision, wherein the law is justice is surely unique.

The Pauline example of the truth event is a sudden conversion that renders the new subject non-existent before, but the Hebrew subject is more complex: first he declares fidelity to the event, faith to the revelation -- “all that he commands we will do, we will obey” -- and then, despite the intention of fidelity, despite these promises, he backslides, betraying the true event with a false one (idolatry), falling victim to a failure of courage: “because there were no graves in Egypt, did you take us to die in the wilderness?” (Ex. 14:11). Paul well understood this subject and classified it as death: “Though the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not, with the result that instead of doing the good thing I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want.” When I act against my will, then, it is not my true self doing it, but sin which lives in me” (Romans 7:18-20). In Pauline terms, this is not a subject; this is sin.

In the Exodus narrative, Moses is offered in contrast to this widespread response of betrayal; embodying unswerving fidelity and missionary zeal on behalf of the truth, he is a true revolutionary set in relief against the backsliding people who were also given but cannot bear the difficulty of the truth. Moses demands uncompromised fidelity to the Revelation, and only that fidelity can constitute the future community. Those who refuse become the enemy -- not only to God, but also to emancipation: “Gird on your sword, every man of you, and quarter the camp from gate to gate, killing one his brother, another his friends and another his neighbor” (Ex. 32:27). This corrupt social order, failing in the most fundamental way -- worshipping a false god, not the god who brought the people out of the house of slavery -- must be corrected, however brutally, for social justice to reign. And so the Marxist Badiou need not frame Paul as the first biblical revolutionary; he could have turned to Moses whose his priesthood of believers is formed at the cost of brothers and sons (Ex. 32:29). The Revelation starts, after all, a Revolution.

But Moses demands fidelity to what? When the law-giving is renewed, instead of the finger of God writing on the tablets, Moses does the writing, and the voice of God -- never reified in stone -- becomes the foundation of the oral
Law, with authority equal to the written one. What he says is what the rabbis puzzle over. And what is this law? There is only one God, only his Law, and only his Law is just. Without this condition -- obeying only one God -- there can be no justice, and no law. The biblical case defies the usual logic that would separate justice from law, the oft-noted importance of reserving a possibility of a justice that would exceed the law, contradict it, or even be indifferent to it. Here the justice so often believed to be beyond the law is also the justice of the law. When one understands how radical the biblical case described in Exodus is -- that justice is the law -- the anti-semitic charges of pharisaic legalism become ludicrous. If, as I am arguing, what the revelation offers is not merely a series of prescriptions, not "the yoke of law," what does it confer in this breach with the past, and what is asked of the new subject? In fact, there is hardly any positive "content" in the Revelation as such even in the Exodus narrative. And this is represented in one of its legacies: on the United States Supreme Court’s building where a frieze in the east portico depicts Moses, among other historical lawgivers, holding up two tablets, the tablets are blank. The entrance door to the building’s courtroom also has two tablets with the Roman numerals I through X on them, but no words. Levinas argues that in the living interpretation of the revelation, what is asked is not fidelity to any positive law, but to justice itself: again, the prior world is ruptured by the radical entry of the demand for justice. Just as the first “decalogue” (Ex. 20) rehearses the need for fidelity to the lawgiver and respect for the other, so the renewed “ten words” (Ex 34) concern remaining faithful -- the demand of allegiance, to remember allegiance, to commemorate allegiance -- with warnings and promised rewards. What is required is fidelity to the truth of revelation, to justice; hence, the warning is made again and again, in different ways, against false truth, against idolatry. “You shall bow down to no other God” (Ex 34:14), “you shall make yourself no gods of molten metal” (Ex 34:17); and you shall remember the feast of unleavened bread that commemorates the exodus from the prior condition; you shall dedicate your first-fruits to god, dedicate a day in every week to God, the festival of harvest, three more days a year -- that covers the “ten words” that are the terms of the covenant, all except for the last sublime metaphor for injustice: “you shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” What gives life cannot be used to deal death. Surely this image offers a love that is obeyed.

Levinas has seen this revolutionary aspect of the revelation, and has turned away from the modernist understanding of the subject as autonomous and solip-
sistic and instead understood him as constituted by its responsibility for another, by justice. In doing so, Levinas has not only delineated an understanding of the subject that is preeminently social, but also political -- despite the frequent charge against him that his ethics lacks a politics. But political, up to a point -- the limit is Levinas’ palpable suspicion of the political, per se. Levinas’ distrust of the state is the distrust of someone who, having endured the state crimes of the Nazi’s, has every reason to be wary: “The police official does not have time to ask himself where the Good is and where the Evil; he belongs to the established power. He belongs to the State, which has entrusted him with duties. He does not engage in metaphysics; he engages in police work” (“Judaism” 110). He fears that if in order to fight evil, we adopt the tactics of politics, we would find ourselves in the service of the state, instead of the service of justice. “How can we engage responsibly in political action when we cannot be sure about the nature of evil, about what is evil?” Interpreting the rabbis, he writes that “unquestionably violent action against Evil is necessary. And we shall soon see that this violence takes on all the appearances of political action” (“Judaism” 109). But he sees the rabbis seeking deeper understanding, insisting on the necessary prior question, how do you recognize evil? For Levinas, here “lies the difference between a police action at the service of the established State and true revolutionary action” (“Judaism” 110). In biblical terms, serving the State is necessarily serving an idol -- serving anything but divine justice is. Furthermore, in the Bible idolatry is repeatedly associated with servility. With stunning simplicity, the Decalogue establishes the logic between deliverance from slavery and idolatry: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the House of slavery. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” Hereafter, justice is explicitly the opposite of the state of servitude. Milton’s contemporaries understood the bondage of the nation, the bondage of the will, and the bondage of the heart to be all “idolatrous.” For Milton, the only way out of the house of slavery, in all these senses, is the radical rejection of idolatry, a subject that preoccupies him from the “Nativity Ode” to Samson Agonistes, as well as throughout his polemical prose and his doctrinal theology. He depicts his Samson as such a true revolutionary: one who eradicates idolatry, tearing
down the Temple of Dagon and his worshippers. This depiction of violence has troubled many readers -- one has even compared him to a suicide bomber\(^2\) -- but for Milton, what is at stake is not a multicultural vision of multiple truths; like his biblical source, he believes that there is falsehood, evil, idolatry, and truth, justice, the divine.

Ethical thought has two approaches that are imprecated in one another: one focuses on the problem of evil, of how to recognize it and how to defeat it. Another focuses on the problem of good, of how to recognize it and to cultivate it. Again, not separable, and yet these are different emphases and they often presuppose different anthropologies and even different understandings of evil. Levinas has been critiqued for the impotence of his ethics of the other before true evil. How can I bear responsibility for the other if the other is a monster? How would I be able to discern its monstrosity? How be able to defeat it, if I am responsible. Before these difficulties, he offers his ethic of the priority of the other, his understanding of justice. And for him, the evil of self-interest, of instrumentality, is not so far afield from the positive evil of a Hitler. As Adorno has shown, the evil of instrumentality can become the holocaust.

When Levinas explicitly distinguishes between the heirs of Abraham, the universal family of humanity, and the State, he does so nervously, knowing that this will make some readers unhappy, adding, “it is suggested by the text. Let not the worshippers of the State, who proscribe the survival of Jewish particularism, be angered!”

There is more in the family of Abraham than in the promises of the State. It is important to give, of course, but everything depends on how it is done. It is not through the State and through the political advances of humanity that the person shall be fulfilled, which of course, does not free the State from instituting the conditions necessary to this fulfillment. But it is the family of Abraham that sets the norms. (“Judaism” 99-100)

\(^2\) See John Carey, #?. Miltonists are deeply engaged in the agon of how to read *Samson Agonistes*. Joseph Wittreich is considerably less inflammatory, but clearly sides with those who believe the violence of Samson is disturbing, even disturbing enough to undermine the heroism of Samson. In stark contrast, Mary Anne Radzinowicz sees Samson engaging in an exemplary process of enlightenment, showing the reader the way as he gains understanding of how God makes his presence known in the heart. David Loewenstein argues against the regeneration of Samson, insisting that *Samson Agonistes* centers on an impulse to devastate one’s enemies by means of a spectacular act; rather than muting the devastation depicted in the Book of Judges, Milton’s account heightens it; see Loewenstein *Representing* (2001) and “*Samson*” (2006). Loewenstein understands the iconoclastic ending as a violent clash between God and Dagon, a “theomachic confrontation,” as Michael Lieb describes it. Lieb agrees that *Samson Agonistes* is not only “a work of harsh and uncompromising violence,” but indeed, “a work that exults in violence while it gives expression to profound and deeply disturbing elements of vehemence and rage” (186).
Privileging the “children of Abraham” over the State, Levinas takes pains to qualify that community as not a blood-group (this is not “petit-bourgeois racism and particularism”; “Judaism” 113). So who are the heirs of Abraham? “Those to whom their ancestor bequeathed a difficult tradition of duties toward the other man, which one is never done with, an order from which one is never free… So defined, the heirs of Abraham are of all nations: any man truly man is no doubt of the line of Abraham” (my italics; “Judaism” 99-100).

What, then, is the relation of theology to politics? Of revelation to revolution? To approach this question, I want to turn, not to the constitution of the subject (Badiou’s preoccupation) or to the constitution of the community (Paul’s preoccupation), because in the end these entities may be less effective for achieving their political ends than these leaders imagine. Instead, I want to turn to the question of justice, for it seems to me that this is both the vital political and ethical concern.

In his work on justice, Derrida elaborates an aporia: the instability of the “distinction between justice and law, between justice (infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule and foreign to symmetry, heterogeneous and heterotropic) on the one hand, and, on the other, the exercise of justice as law, legitimacy or legality, a stabilizable, statutory, and calculable apparatus [dispositif], a system of regulated and coded prescriptions” (250). He adds, “Everything would be simple if this distinction between justice and law were a true distinction, an opposition the functioning of which was logically regulated and masterable. But it turns out that law claims to exercise itself in the name of justice and that justice demands for itself that it be established in the name of a law that must be put to work (constituted and applied) by force “enforced” (250-1).

Again, what is radical in the biblical instance described in Exodus is that this justice that typically shows itself as prior to the law also inheres in the law, constituting the law. Without this condition -- obeying only one God -- there can be no justice, and no law. And the law is: only one God, only his law, only his law is just. The biblical case is radical in another sense: the force of the law is executed, in this narrative, on those who are in the very process of receiving it. They are accountable to the law, must answer to the law, but are not yet under the law. This radical understanding of the institution of law—that authority and justice are both outside and inside the law—makes it utterly impossible to reject. This law can and is broken; but it cannot be refused. The option of living within this law or not is not offered. It comes into being in a condition of complete
inevitability. While political theory may call this totalitarianism, Judaism has called it revelation. The radical identity of the law and justice that characterizes revelation in the Hebrew Bible is only enabled by its transcendence: only a just God could know justice. Once it is given, there is no way to be outside of this divine justice. Anything else is false, an idol, a fake.

If the biblical name for justice is revelation, then the biblical name for injustice is idolatry. The command that signals this radical entry of the law and of justice is clear: not to make idols. What does this preoccupation with idolatry mean? Biblical idolatry, *avodah zara*, is not only the strange object of worship, but a strange manner of worshipping. Possessing is a strange manner of worship, one typically attended by violence. When we imagine that we possess God, we can use him as a legitimating instrument for our violence. Such a God can authorize the slaughter of our enemies. Conversely, when we imagine that God possesses us, we can explain the terrors of history as his righteous wrath for our infidelity. The violence of possession proliferates: as God possesses us, so we possess land and men possess women, and all of this ownership leads to anxiety over the borders of possession and inevitable violence. I have been suspicious about the adequacy of narratives about God, not only because such narratives tend to be projections of human life, human desire, human possession, and human violence but also because of the idolatry of any such description. To speak of representation as idolatry is not new: it is several thousand years old. But to speak of the idol, not as a visual representation, a statue, a painting, but a verbal one, a narrative, seems to still be somewhat controversial. And yet it is our narrative idolatries that hold us in their grip and so demand critique.

But idolatry is meant in another, although related, sense, not only as possession, control, or the effort to submit the ineffable to instrumental use. The commandment against idols at the revelation signals that only the genuine article will do, the one true god who has the true law and true justice, and all else are not admissible. Simply put, justice can broke no compromise. This is not the same as denying other idols due to a logic of scarcity, not an exclusivism that forbids a multicultural approach to worship, for instance. To the contrary, this is a claim for revelation that is generous. The difference is between the false universalism that excludes any outside of its purview -- the logic that “all men are brothers” which reduces the non-brother to inhuman -- and a universalism that endlessly proliferates, without excluding.
Levinas has shown how the pact that began as particular to Israel is opened up until it becomes universal ("The Pact"). The pact of Exodus is revisited (among other places) in Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 7. Deuteronomy describes the recommendations for a ceremony that is to take place upon the Israelites entry into the Promised Land (of course, after Moses’ death). “And on the day you pass over the Jordan…you shall set up large stones, and plaster them with plaster; and you shall write upo them all the words of this law…And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall lift up no iron tool upon them.” “and you shall write upon the stones all the words of this law “very plainly” (ba’er hetev) Deut 27. And then Joshua describes: “And then Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, “an altar of unhewn stones, upon which no man has lifted an iron tool...and there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote upon the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written.” Who receives this law? all of Israel indeed, but all of Israel. “And all Israel, sojourner as well as homeborn, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark -- and he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law.”

When the Mishnah deals with this story, it specifies the blessings and curses that are read: “They turned their faces toward Mt. Gerizim and began with the blessing: Blessed be the man that maketh not a graven or molten image. And both these and these answered Amen... And afterward they brought the stones and built the altar and plastered it with plaster. And they wrote there all the word of the Law in seventy languages, as it is written ‘very plainly.’” As Levinas notes, what had begun as a particular, concrete community is now universalized: the law is written in seventy languages -- that law they was broken by some is now given to all. The justice that marks the Hebraic revelation, is, in the tradition, universal.\(^3\)

Much contemporary political theory takes refuge in the notion that it is law -- and not justice -- that can offer a true universal. After all, they say, substantive justice is particular, contingent, culturally specific. And because my notion of

\(^3\) Even without this hermeneutic move, rabbinic Judaism had developed a universal law in the Noachide code, the seven laws given to all mankind that include the positive command to establish courts of law.
justice is so different from that which emerges in another culture, we must adju-
dicate our differences through law. Thank goodness for law, for procedures, for
offering us a formal universal. Stuart Hampshire has offered a clear expression
of this: “…fairness in procedure is an invariable value, a constant in human
nature...Because there will always be conflicts between conceptions of the good,
moral conflicts, both in the soul and in the city, there is everywhere a well-rec-
ognized need for procedures of confliction resolution…This is the place of a
common rationality of method” (4-5). The contract is a constraining effort to
impose peace on this warring state of nature. But in Exodus, law is not making
the claim of being a universal procedure, a dead letter; rather, law is offered as
universal justice. Here, again, the Bible distinguishes between a true universal
-- the reign of justice -- and a false one, of procedure. The true one is most rad-
cially realized in the image of the interiorized covenant, written on the heart:

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with
the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of
Egypt, because they broke my covenant...This is the covenant I will make with the
house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord, I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No
longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” (Jer. 31:31).

In Derrida’s own version of this interiorized justice, this transcendence made
immanent, he understands a paradox: “the inaccessible transcendence of the law
[loi], before which and prior to which man stands fast, only appears infinitely
transcendent and thus theological to the extent that, nearest to him, it depends
only on him, on the performative act by which he institutes it: …The law is tran-
scendent and theological, and so always to come, always promised, because it is
immanent, finite, and thus already past” (270). This internalization of justice
is not the same as the incarnation, as the Logos of Christianity. Levinas distin-
guishes them by means of the Law: “God is real and concrete not through incar-
nation but through Law” (“Loving” 145). Indeed, for Judaism, “it is precisely a
word, not incarnate, from God that ensures a living God among us” (“Loving”
144). Because so much of humankind is unjust, the just man will suffer. But in
the end, the “God Who hides His face and abandons the just man, this distant
God, comes from within,” from the intimacy of one’s conscience and the moral
law. “This is the specifically Jewish sense of suffering that at no stage assumes
the value of a mystical atonement for the sins of the world” (“Loving” 143).
Levinas offers us a radical corrective to the procedural justice embraced by so much political theory. “Justice cannot be reduced to the order it institutes or restores, nor to a system whose rationality commands, without difference, men and gods, revealing itself in human legislation like the structures of space in the theorems of geometricians, a justice that a Montesquieu calls the “logos of Jupiter,” recuperating religion within this metaphor, but effacing precisely transcendence. In the justice of the Rabbis, difference [between man and God] retains its meaning. Ethics is not simply the corollary of the religious but is, of itself, the element in which religious transcendence receives its original meaning” (“Revelation” 113).

In the book of Amos, we are shown the force of this transcendent justice:

The Lord roars from Zion,  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;  
the pastures of the shepherds mourn,  
and the top of Carmel withers. (1:2)

And as the word of the Lord makes the mountains wither, so a famine of the word of the Lord -- of justice -- will bring desperation.

Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord God,  
“When I will send a famine on the land;  
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,  
but of hearing the words of the Lord.  
They shall wander from sea to sea,  
And from north to east;  
They shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord,  
But they shall not find it. (8:11)

The word of the Lord is life-giving; take it away, and Israel dies, thirsting for the revelation of justice.

The biblical Amos also takes pains to separate religious ritual from keeping the law of social justice. One does not suffice for the other; in fact the hypocrisy of imagining that it could is offensive to God: “they lay themselves down beside every altar upon garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined” (Amos 2:8). If the ritual law is only that, and not also the law of justice, it is despicable:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assembles. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your sons: to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let
Here again, justice is not imagined as controlling a primordial war for scarce goods; this justice is ever-flowing abundance. In these ways, the Bible distinguishes between a false universal and a true one: the first is a demand of obedience to an empty law, including an arbitrary exclusivity that even enjoins destroying others in the name of God. The second is a demand for universal justice that knows no compromise. Idolatry can be read in both ways: under the reign of exclusivism “other gods” are regarded as threatening because the option of multiple notions of the Good threaten the community. Under the reign of universal justice, “other gods” signal a threat to justice itself: in this sense, if the biblical name for injustice is idolatry, the biblical name for justice is God. That is why the first patriarch referred to God as “the Judge of all the Earth.”

But justice is not achieved; we are not there yet. Its violation led to the breaking of the law, a graphic depiction of the impossibility of justice. What Genesis Rabbah says about the justice of God makes this clear: When Abraham addressed his plea to God, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly? The meaning of his words was: If You desire the world to continue there cannot be strict justice; if you insist on strict justice, the world cannot endure (Gen R. xxxix. 6). The failure of justice, the hidden face of God, is both part of the suffering of Judaism and the threat to the entire creation. As Levinas writes, in Volozhiner’s Nefesh ha’Hayyim (The Soul of Life), published posthumously in 1824, man has a partnership in the creation. For “through God’s will, man’s acts, words, and thoughts… condition or disturb or block the association of God with the world.” God needed man to give life to the beings of the world, to sustain them, “and thereby bring them into existence” (“Prayer” 230). How is this participation in the sustenance of the world achieved? Through each act of justice: this is “participation” in divinity, but not in the Augustinian sense. “Let nobody in Israel—God forbid!”, wrote Volozhiner, ask himself:

what am I, and what can my humble acts achieve in the world? Let him rather understand this, that he may know it and fix it in his thoughts: not one detail of his acts, of his words and of his thoughts is ever lost. Each one leads back to its origin where it takes effect in the height of heights… The man of intelligence who understands this in its truth will be fearful at heart and will tremble as he thinks how far his bad acts reach and what corruption and destruction even a small misdeed can cause. (cited in Levinas 1989, “Prayer” 230-231).
“In this way,” writes Levinas, “man becomes, in turn, the soul of the world, as if God’s creative word had been entrusted to him to dispose of as he liked, to let it ring out, or to interrupt it.”

This responsibility, with God, for the beings of the world, is for Volozhiner the meaning of Gen 1:27 which describes man as being made in the image of God. Man is not in the image of God as possessor of the earth, as sovereign with dominion over it -- as in Gregory of Nyssa -- but as responsible for keeping the created order, for bearing responsibility for the other, in a word, for justice. As Levinas remarks with wonder, “the contribution of the readers, listeners and pupils to the open-ended work of the Revelation is so essential to it that I was recently able to read…that the slightest question put to the schoolmaster by a novice constitutes an ineluctable articulation of the Revelation which was heard at Sinai” (“Revelation” 195).

In “Loving the Torah more than God,” Levinas engages an anonymous text that offers itself as a document written during the final hours of the Warsaw Ghetto resistance by one “Yossel, son of Yossel” (“Loving” 143). Doubts flow from his agony: “What can this suffering of the innocents mean? Is it not proof of a world without God, where only man measures Good and Evil?” But these “murmurings’ do not issue in any idolatry or atheism; they take a very different turn from the generation lost in the wilderness. Instead of betraying the revelation in the midst of this horror, “Yossel, son of Yossel experiences the certainly of God with a new force, beneath an empty sky.” This is not paradox nor blind faith, nor has despair driven him to irrationality. Levinas reads the empty sky as the opportunity for a full conscience: “if he is so alone, it is in order to take upon his shoulders the whole of God’s responsibilities.” An absent God becomes most immanent internally. God is no protector or savior, but is internalized as a moral principle that guides action. Humanity must create a just world. The Godless are redefined as those who do not have this. “The condition of the victims in a disordered world --that is to say, in a world where good does not triumph -- is that of suffering.” He quotes Yossel: “I am happy to belong to the most unhappy people on earth, for whom the Torah represents all that is most lofty and beautiful in law and morality….Now I know that you are really my God, for you could not be the God of those whose actions represent the most horrible expression of a militant absence of God.” Empty sky, full conscience. Levinas understands the wellsprings of Yossel’s “confidence that does not rely
on the triumph of any institution: it is the internal evidence of morality supplied by the Torah” (“Loving” 144).

If the Revelation offers the gift of justice, neither Levinas nor the Hebrew Bible ever underestimate how difficult this gift of justice is. If the Bible portrays humanity as persistently failing, and, the human history of agony confirms that failure, it also insists that the radical entry of justice into the world cannot be compromised with cheap solutions -- what it calls idolatry. What the gift of justice does is present one with the harsh reality that only acts of justice performed by the subject, and only by him, can help to create a just world and only this can relieve despair. There is no other way out -- no imputed righteousness, as in Luther. And this, ironically, also makes the transcendent demand of justice a human responsibility: while Revelation is a radical rupture into the status quo, it does not offer a miraculous solution to human pain.

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