The Meaning of Scriptures in the Thought of Emmanuel Lévinas

Hanoch Ben-Pazi
Bar Ilan University

This essay will deal with the status of the Scriptures in the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas and will explore the way in which the paradoxical nature of the Jewish relationship to the Scriptures both generates and enables the exegesis found in the Talmud.¹ Lévinas does not question the essential nature of the Scriptures, nor the way to relate to them from a religious standpoint. His choice is rather to analyze the manner in which the Talmud understands the holiness of the text from a theoretical and ethical perspective. Ultimately, it is this insight that renders Lévinas’ philosophical analysis of the Bible and Talmud so significant, for the very tension that arises from a straightforward reading of the text, on the one hand, and the Sages’ reading on the other creates Jewish tradition as we know it. However, Lévinas’ approach provides an additional layer to this analysis in that it determines the field of play in which biblical exegesis takes place—that is, the field of ethics—and thus establishes the ethical norm as the most important parameter for interpretation.²

The Bible is one of the foundational texts of Christian Western civilization, as Lévinas points out: “The Bible, including the Old Testament is for me a human fact, of the human order, and entirely universal.”³ However, for the Jewish tradition, it consists only of those texts that achieved canonical status and were decreed “Holy Scriptures” by the Sages of the mishnaic and talmudic periods. Herein lies a paradoxical element: the biblical text is the authoritative source of religious practice for the Sages for all time, yet at the same time, these holy texts only achieved their status by the decision of the Sages themselves:

The Jewish vision of the world is expressed in the Bible, but in the Bible as reflected by rabbinic literature, of which the Talmud and its commentators constitute the leading part…The biblical canon as we know it today was shaped and passed down under the authority of this tradition. Christianity itself, after all, had received the Old Testament from the hands of the Pharisees.⁴

In this statement, Lévinas does not mean to abrogate the meaning of the text and transfer all the gravity to rabbinic exegesis. Frequently, there is a gap between the simple and immediate meaning of the biblical text and its interpretation to the point of creating a “permanent dissonance.”⁵ However, Lévinas’ first rule of reading is to retain this dissonance, for it highlights the numerous and varied readings that are suggested for the biblical text. This method of reading enables the text to reach new horizons: “I have

insisted more than once that the talmudic spirit goes radically beyond the letter of the Scriptures. Its spirit was nonetheless formed in the very letters it goes beyond, so as to reestablish, despite apparent violations, the permanent meaning within these letters. The distinction between the sanctified canon and the Oral Torah that reads it is what preserves the vitality of the text. Thus, according to Lévinas, the learner is provided an opportunity to empower the text to depart from being “that which was said” and to become “the saying” (the living word), which is the method of reading and study of the “Oral Torah.”

Lévinas’ approach to the Bible must be examined on three levels: the philosophical-hermeneutic, the traditional-religious, and the historical. In all three fields of discourse, there have been attempts by commentators and academic scholars to identify and label the cause or causes which make certain books or texts sanctified. Our main focus will be on philosophical analysis and on Lévinas' philosophical commentary on the rabbinic interpretations of the established and sanctified status of the biblical text.

The Enigmatic Text: Biblical Texts Render the Hands Impure

Perhaps the most paradoxical element in the description of the sanctity of the biblical text is the criterion that is used by the Sages: “All holy [biblical] texts render the hands impure” (Mishnah Tractate Yadayim, 3:5-6). This is truly an enigmatic statement, even for a technical-halakhic criterion. What is so surprising about this statement is that it is the sole criterion mentioned in rabbinic literature that defines what constitutes a sanctified text. The halakhic and metaphorical link between holy books and ritual impurity of the hands arouses wonder and curiosity. The commentaries have surely provided a concrete explanation of this rule, but the language used by the Mishnah is still surprising. It is as if the one who studies this mishnah is being directed to stop and notice these words that have received so much emphasis by virtue of their being so controversial. The controversies involve such issues as which books are to be included in the biblical canon, who has the authority to establish the canon, and lastly—and not to be minimized—the criticism of the Sages for choosing this criterion and not another.

While at the end of the essay I will suggest an explanation for this enigmatic formulation, at this stage it will serve as an appropriate and intriguing portal through which the concept of “Scripture” and the way in which Lévinas relates to it can be analyzed in general terms.

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6 Ibid., 39-40.
7 In this regard, it is interesting to reflect on Lévinas’ essay on Spinoza and the Bible, in which he laments the fact that Spinoza was insufficiently schooled in the Talmud. If he had been, he would have changed his view on the Jewish contribution to the world. See Lévinas, “Have you Redread Baruch?,” Difficult Freedom, 158-169; see Hent de Vries, “Lévinas, Spinoza, and the Theologico-political Meaning of Scripture” in Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, (New York: Fordham University Press 2006), 232–248.
8 Lévinas, Nine Talmudic Readings, 39. See also Lévinas’ essay “The Spinoza Case” in Difficult Freedom, 107 and his essay dedicated to Rosenzweig: Lévinas, “Between Two Worlds” in Difficult Freedom,181-201. It would seem that this approach could be seen as a continuation of Rashi’s commentary on the Talmud, who sees his own work as such. See Yona Frankel, Rashi’s Commentary to the Talmud, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975).
10 It is important to stress that the differentiation between the “Torah” “Prophets” and “Writings” does not appear in Lévinas. For him, the term “Scriptures” in its religious sense refers to the entire Bible, and in his philosophical writing it denotes an even broader concept.
The Immanence of Holiness

Is the sanctity of the biblical text connected to the fact that it conveys a divine revelation? Is the text itself a source of divine revelation? Or is it perhaps that its uniqueness and sanctity are connected to the way in which it is regarded or to the inspiration it engenders among those who study and meditate on it? It would appear that one central theme emerges from these questions, which touches upon the immanence of the sanctity of the texts and the sanctified relationship to them: do believers attribute immanent holiness to the holy books? Is that sanctity an essential part of the book or its content, or does the sanctified relationship describe its effect upon its readers? Lévinas answers all these questions by strongly rejecting the idea of the immanent sanctity of the books themselves, calling it “idolatry of the Torah.” There are ways of attributing sanctity to the biblical books which result in their desecration and humiliation. Lévinas breaks away from the idea of immanence, according to which the holiness emanates or is found in the book as written object. For him, sanctity is situated in the physical act of the reader being aroused by the texts while reading them, and as we will see, the concept of revelation in the holy books can only occur in the process of reading them.

In order to redirect the discussion from attributing immanent sanctity to a book to its acquiring sanctity through being read, Lévinas distinguishes between two expressions of holiness: “holy” (sacré), which conveys the idea of immanent-independent holiness, and “sanctified” (saint), which is the way in which a person can make things holy. It may be said that these two expressions represent two ways of relating to the books of the Bible. The first is to relate to them as independent holy entities, as sources of religious authority and as writings which convey an experience of revelation. The second, which is opposed to the first, understands holiness as something which describes or interprets the way in which people relate to the Holy Scriptures. Lévinas rejects the concept of immanent sanctity of the biblical texts. The Bible can never be read standing alone; rather, it is always subject to the meaning derived from the reading or the various readings it possesses. Lévinas does examine the idea of revelation that defines the Holy Scriptures, but for him, the revelation is not to be found in the texts or in their content, but in the reading they arouse. Revelation can be the inspiration, stimulated through learning and reading the Bible with many readers and readings and with the limitless levels of commentary and treatment that it receives. From here, it emerges that hermeneutic discourse has great import for the religious

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14 This is a central discussion in Lévinas’ talmudic reading in “Contempt of the Torah as Idolatry” in In the Time of the Nations, trans. Michael B. Smith, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 55-75.

15 On this point, Lévinas’ distances himself from Otto’s approach to the concept of the holy; see Rudolph Otto on the holy.


significance that Lévinas attributes to the Bible. His analysis reminds us that the book is not only a textbook or a useful tool, but it is “the mode of our existence.”

**The Ethical Responsibility of the Commentator**

First and foremost, Lévinas’ approach to the Bible is based on his hermeneutic approach, which locates commentary in the realm of ethics. Ethics, for Lévinas, is the field in which biblical commentary flourishes, and it must be the end purpose of all commentary while at the same time providing effective tools for the exegetical process.

It is a given that engaging in textual commentary presents a variety of objectives for the commentators. There are those who attempt to find the meaning of the text by means of following the intention of the author and his *sitz im leben*; there are those who try to determine the intention of the work itself, beyond the considerations of the current author who created it; and there are others who try to create a dialogic meeting place between the reader and the author by means of his creation. Lévinas’ hermeneutic approach is directed to the activity that takes place from the text and beyond it, to the vitality and the responsibility produced in the reader in the wake of his confrontation with the text. The text, which seemingly constrains the saying within what was said and which seems as if it kills the vitality contained in the living and noble discourse before it was inscribed in ink, can advance and become living, animated discourse. The prospect of restoring life to the dead letters is found in outward movement, which moves from “the said” to “the saying” before it is uttered. At that moment, it becomes clear that ethics is not to be seen as a restraint that is placed upon the reader and the commentator, but as a liberating force which involves responsibility.

How can the text go beyond itself? This is not accomplished by the text alone, but rather by its readers. It is a process conditioned on their sense of ethical responsibility. It depends on the relationship of the readers to the text and on their calling to others. When the reader stands not just across from the text but also faces other readers, the text receives new vitality that goes beyond the hermeneutics of the text and faces the other and the others. What we have is not a solitary encounter between the reader and a text, but rather an encounter which emerges from the text. One can appreciate this idea more fully if one thinks of the difference between the responsibility of the reader towards the text and the responsibility that he has when he is asked to explain it to others.

**The Zone of Interpretation**

The discourse of commentary is created in the “zone of interpretation” of the text, that is, the space between what the text wants or intends to say (*vouloir dire*) and what the text is capable of saying (*pouvoir dire*). Seemingly, the text is the expression of what has already been said, of “the saying” that wanted to be expressed. But after the text has already been said and written down, it becomes an open text, subject to additional interpretations that were not evident at the outset. The commentators’ space is created by both a synchronic reading of the text and by means of its diachronic, developmental reading as well. From this point on, the zone of interpretation is open to an infinite number of interpretations and super-interpretations.

The “zone of interpretation” carries with it an ethical significance from a dual perspective: the one between reader and text, and the one between the reader and others. The first perspective is unique to the human aspect of the book, and it has within it the power to shock and arouse the individual. An

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encounter with a book can at times resemble an encounter with another person. The text has the potential to shock the self-centeredness of the reader and disrupt the closed circle of his understanding. It can surprise the “I” by appearing as the “Other” before him. The text, as a function of the “said,” can command the “I” and summon him to take responsibility. The moment of “hearing a voice” and being compelled to listen to the voice that comes from without usually occurs between people, but it can also occur during an encounter with the text. The reason for the uniqueness of the written word is embedded in the fact that included in the “said,” there is something of the “saying.” Standing in the presence of the silent text, one senses an ingredient that still preserves the original speech that was spoken before the text was written.

The second perspective of the zone of interpretation is the presence of the commentator among other people. The position of the reader is not only focused towards the saying that was already spoken, but also towards what can potentially still be said. The text not only preserves the past, but resonates with the “traces” of the past that is no longer. Nevertheless, the text has within it a unique power to stir the reader to new meanings which will exist in the future. The voice that he hears from the text brings him to echo living statements within the text, to bring out of the text all that can be said from now on. This unique potential of the text is derived from the ethical stance of the man who confronts others and stands before them. It would seem that reading a text from an ethical perspective is important to Lévinas in that it transforms the “shadow of reality” into something that will create new realities. The intention is not to present these new readings to their already-forgotten creator, nor to create intentions of the past that have long disappeared. The readings will vitalize the creation if they reach out to other people, both readers of the work and those who are stimulated by it.²¹

**The Faithful Betrayal of the Interpreter**

The paradox of the interpreter originates in the tension that exists between faithfulness and betrayal, and also in the question as to whether faithfulness to the text also constitutes faithfulness to the Other. In order to maintain the ethical movement of the commentary, the commentator must betray the text. The obligation to help that which was said to acquire new meaning obligates the interpreter to betray the spoken that preceded the meaning of the text. The way man uses language involves betrayal, because it requires him to say “the saying.” In the words of Lévinas, language describes “what is beyond being” in the language of “the being.” The betrayal requires that the saying be expressed through what already exists, in themes and terms, through symbols whose application imprints their meaning. Moreover, it forces that what is not said verbally to be expressed in words.²² Here interpretation betrays twice: it puts into words what had not been said in words, and it imprisons the “saying” in the “said,” perhaps in what was said thematically. The question as to whether it is possible to restrict the betrayal is an important one for philosophy, because philosophy’s objective is to express everything in precise terms. Thus, philosophy fulfills its objective while lacking sensitivity to the perspective that overwhelms reality, vitality, and meaning by means of words.²³

Based on this description, exegesis can be assessed both from the perspective of the “saying” and the perspective of the “said.” In everything that is connected to the “said” of the text, exegesis attempts to reinstate the text and even to restore it to the reader. In the realm of the “saying,” it is not enough to reconstruct the primordial text, or what preceded the text; the challenge is to vitalize it in the present.

²³ On the meaning of exegesis in light of the “broken tablets” and between the violence inflicted by the interpreter and the subservience of the Midrash, see C. Chalier, *Judaïsme et alterité*, (Paris: Lagrassé, 1982), 20–209.
The act of reading the text tries to transform the “said” into the “saying.”

The structure of the book, says Lévinas, conveys the deep idea that it “includes more than it is capable of.” The purpose of reading and interpretation is “illuminated by the thought which comes to it from outside or from the other end of the letters.”

**The Torah as an Anti-idolatrous Tract**

The hermeneutic discourse uncovers various elements of the written text: what preceded the writing, the act of writing itself, the act of reading, and the discussion that takes place between the readers of the text. In Gadamer’s words, hermeneutic discussion is relevant to every written text, but it intensifies when the topic of the research is “the holy writings.” The book, says Lévinas, is a unique element from the standpoint of phenomenology because it is an object, but not just an object: “I think that because of the great fear of everything that relates to books, the ontological relationship of that which is human in the book is not sufficiently appreciated, because the book is seen as a source of information or a ‘tool’ for learning, or an instructional text. But in fact, it is a mode of our existence.”

The centrality of the Torah in Judaism, and its centrality in the religious experience, is a profound statement in opposition to idolatry. The reason for this is simple, since the way one relates to the book places man in a situation where he approaches the book as an object that exists to be read. This necessary condition of the “book” indicates to the reader that the sanctity is not to be found in the Torah, but in reading it. Regarding the Torah as a book that is “read” immediately makes its participants readers or potential readers. From Lévinas’ perspective, the relationship to the Torah is like the relationship to God: “a book thus destined from the start for its Talmudic life.”

From this we learn that indeed there is a book called the Torah, it does have a dimension of holiness, and it affirms that its real life is found outside of it and beyond it. The living people who read and interpret it give it its life.

Nevertheless, the Torah is a book written with letters that are prohibited to touch. But it is this very fact enables its participants to become permanent interpreters of the text by means of fixed reading, interpretation or reinterpretation, or simply a way of learning. Reading the letters enables renewal, which is the true protection against idolatry. When Lévinas uses the expression “hearing the breath of the living God in them,” he directs us to God by means of reading beyond the letters, in the direction of infinity. This does not mean that God is embodied in the letters, but nevertheless, in some way, he is written in the letters. The life of the letters is found in the lines, between the lines, and in the exchange of ideas between the readers, where these letters come alive and are echoed in the book's precepts. All the possible readings, even the strange ones and even those which derive meaning from the shape of the letters, enable us to vitalize the text, to give it a voice and an echo.

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25 Lévinas, Beyond the Verse, 103.


27 Lévinas, In the Time of the Nations, 58.

28 A similar line of thinking can be identified in Gershom Scholem, despite the different mystical context adopted by Scholem which regards the Torah as a book open to infinite readings. See Scholem, Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance, (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 1976), 153-161.

29 Lévinas, In the Time of the Nations, 58.

30 Ibid., 59.

The “Saying” and the “Said” of the Bible

The complicated series of relationships between verbal speech and the written text is already reflected in the rabbinic terminology used to refer to the Bible, including the phrase “as it is said.” Does the written text direct us to a saying? Does the text continue to speak even after it is written down? Does the text direct us to its past history? Is “every written text preceded by verbal conversation?” Lévinas fears the potential limitation of the vitality contained in the letters. Will the letters be able to preserve their inner spirit? Will the living conversation continue in the written text? Is there something left that can still be said from the text that has already been said? Does the violence perpetrated by being written down leave a place for inspiration to emerge from the Scriptures? Is it possible to restore to a written text its voice that was silenced and forgotten? Can the reading of texts constitute a reverberation of the saying that is in the said?

This, for example, is the way Buber suggests that we read the Bible, not like an encounter with a normal text. The unique dialogic nature of the Holy Scriptures, which preserves their vitality, enables the text being read to turn to the living reader: “Are we speaking about a book? We are speaking about a voice. Do we say go read and learn? We rather say: Go and learn how to listen.” Rosenzweig, in addressing the same topic, describes the tension that exists between the text and the spoken word, between the written text and the biblical book: “All speech is oral. The book is only intended at the outset to be a tool to convey the spoken within the voice, song, and conversation.” The Bible is different in that a unique manner it succeeds in preserving the book’s ability to speak: “Its special content does not allow it to become all ‘written’ without residue. It follows logically that it should maintain its power of speech…since it contains within it the word of God and man’s word in his presence.” Rosenzweig and Buber represent a view that sees in the Bible an active experience of revelation. The biblical text is one that continues to speak; it speaks to the reader as if it is a revelation in the real time of the reader. The revelation in the text is not one that occurred in the past, but the text retells in the present of its past existence; it is a revelation that takes place in the immediate present.

However, while we find in Lévinas some similarity to Buber and Rosenzweig, we also find his unique aspects. If for Buber the reader is expected to echo in his mind what was already said by God or

32 There are innumerable similar examples, such as “R. Levi b. Hama says in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: A man should always incite the good impulse to fight against the evil impulse. For it is written: Tremble and sin not.” (Berakhot 5a)
33 Paul Ricouer, Du texte à l'action, 137-159.
34 Lévinas expands upon the essential distinction between the “saying”(le dire) and the “said” (le dit) in his writings. See Ben-Pazi, 76; Robert Tirvaudey, “Approches d’Emmanuel Lévinas: L’inspiration d’une écriture,” Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Etranger 195 (2005), 414-415.
the prophet, and for Rosenzweig the reader hears the word of God as it emanates from the book, then for Lévinas, the power of speech that remains in the book is alive and well as it speaks to the readers of the book and between them. Lévinas is critical of Buber’s stance, which sees the Bible as living speech that continues to speak and reveal itself by means of the biblical text. He is of the view that this kind of relationship to the Bible reflects a feeling of contact of with the past, as if the past is like the present. This approach to the Bible constitutes an attempt to engage in re-experiencing the past in the present, which is impossible. According to Lévinas, the vitality of the Bible does not stem from the living word it contains, in its dead letters, but in its active living speech and from the eternal interpretation of the Oral Torah, both of the Sages of the Talmud and the time-honored continuous exegetical tradition. So writes Lévinas in a biting criticism of Buber: “It is clear that Buber read the Bible as if he was receiving inspiration from the Holy Spirit itself.”

The nature of a book, even though it is made of physical material, enables and perhaps even dictates its being always “beyond itself,” always “beyond the verse.” Holiness is not a part of the book itself, but emanates from the relationship to it as an object that always exists beyond itself. It is possible that both the Bible and the Talmud should be viewed as texts that confront the reader and contain within them the call to their readers. This is the model of a text that is “beyond itself,” or in the words of Lévinas, “l’au-delà du verset.” The Talmud is interested in the existence of the text, but also in the existence of the reader. In this sense, the act of interpretation itself becomes an ethical deed for Lévinas.

The inspiration, which Lévinas refers to as the proper religious inspiration, is found in the approach to the Other. If so, then the general proposition is that the text of the Torah should not be viewed as a past historical event; an attitude preserves the Torah’s status as an object. The uniqueness of the Torah is the approach of man to man that it engenders—not a man facing a text, but one person facing another.

**Holiness: Ethical Guidelines for Studying the Scriptures**

The commitment to ethical interpretation in general, and to scriptural interpretation in particular, becomes for Lévinas a directive of interpretation, instructing us in the way to read and study the Bible. At this point, I would like to analyze two concrete examples of the ethical moment of the holiness of the Bible for Lévinas: the meaning of memory and universal commitment.

**The Aspect of Memory: The Ethical Significance of Memory**

The reading of the Bible is not a historical experience. Rather, the power the sanctified text offers is in the fact that it is an exceptional text, and therefore the meaning and the very existence of the text resides in the people who read it and interpret it. A midrash reads, “All the new insights that the experienced student will discover in the text were already imparted to Moses at Sinai (Leviticus Rabbah 32:1),” which Lévinas understands to mean that even the questions asked by schoolchildren to their teachers are part of what is called the Torah. These questions enable “revelation” in the fullness of life. The history of the Torah and tradition includes the prophecies, the arguments, the discussions, and the changes. All these meanderings of the Torah are its historical traces, but while the historical dimension exists, he does not describe the Torah as an accumulation of all the historical events and data it contains, of all that people have discovered in the Torah. The historical dimension is necessary in order to reveal what is beyond it, the voice of God, the voice that is beyond all of the complicated exterior of the Torah. The historical dimension continually reveals that there is a future to be recorded that is not ready for interpretation.

One of Lévinas' clearest expressions of the ahistorical dimension of the Torah is to be found in his writings on religious memory, or as he calls it, “beyond memory.” The significance of remembering the exodus from Egypt is in the ethical obligation to liberate all those in bondage: “Hear through the relative present, bold anticipations of an absolute future! Hear, in the present’s uncertainty, in Israel’s misery, Abraham, the father of human universality, hailed as such, invoked as such! But here is the interdict:... Do not constitute the future from ‘traces’ of memory.” To remember by not turning the past into the present means to face the future, and doing so also requires the ability to forget. Jacob changed his name to Israel. He had the ability to change his name from Jacob to Israel, just as Sarah had the ability to forget the name “Sarai” in order to realize the ethical implication of the name “Sarah.” The memory of the promises for the future, even of messianic hopes, also involves the ability to forget. Remembering is not an attempt to recreate or preserve the past, but to transport it as a hope for the future. To remember a text is to go beyond memory to the future, to what has not yet happened. Remembering the exodus from Egypt is transformed from a celebration of restoration to an ethical mission permanently affixed upon the future horizon.

If we accept that the basic purpose of writing the text down is to remember what was said, Lévinas will argue that this is not the ethical significance of memory. The written text remains only as a “trace” of the past in the present. These traces resonate by means of memory, which includes both what has been forgotten and what can be forgotten, in order not to be stuck in the past but to go beyond memory to what he calls “prophecy that is not just prophetic speech, but constitutes a mission for the future, an ethical command that comes from the future.”

Lévinas describes the traces by using the literary metaphor of the impression of footsteps in the sand, the impressions that remain after the waves and the wind have erased the actual footprints and only traces of footsteps are etched in the soft sand. Nevertheless, the traces of the footsteps are evidence of the transcendental. Based on this description, it can be said that the meaning of the book for Lévinas is different from its simple meaning. The book is not a product of writing in order to remember; it is precisely what is waiting to be written in real history.

The Universalism of the Scriptures

The second important perspective that I want to relate at this point is the universal human commitment of the Bible according to Lévinas. He writes that one of the most interesting things regarding the testimony of the Bible relates to the uncomplimentary manner in which the Jew is described in the Bible. The holy book does not attest to the special nature of the Jewish people, but rather to its being like all the nations, carrying with it a universal message. This is what Lévinas says about the meaning of the term “people of the book”: “The biblical teaching does not consist of praise for a model people. It consists of invectives. Israel's sole worth lies perhaps, in having chosen this book of anger and accusation for its message, having made this book its own. Israel is not a model people, but a free people. It is of course, like any people, filled with lust and tempted by carnal delights.”

Then how is it possible to understand the universal meaning of the Bible? Lévinas' complicated answer creates an appreciation for the particularistic dimension of the Jewish people, alongside its

40 Lévinas, In the Time of the Nations, 85-86.
41 The concept of ‘traces’ is a very significant one for Lévinas, which denotes an impression from the past which is impossible to remember in the present. See Zev Levi, The Other and Otherness, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), 36-51.
43 Lévinas, Difficult Freedom, 135.
universal responsibility: “A society that seeks intimacy…stands at the outset in the presence of all of mankind or opens itself up to all of mankind.”44 Were the ethical meaning of the Bible limited to those who are members of the covenant, it would lose its morality. Does the Bible itself pass the test of the universal command, which is required for any ethical definition?

In an essay called “For a Place in the Bible,” Lévinas describes the imaginary conversation in the Talmud between Esther and the Sages, in which she requests that the scroll that bears her name be included in the biblical canon. According to the midrash, the answer of the Sages is negative, for “you will stir up violent against is among the nations.” Her answer reveals the principle of universal responsibility: “I am already recorded in the annals of the kings of Medea and Persia.” That is to say, she argues that her book is not only a particularistic nationalistic tract; but rather has universal ramifications. That it is a book with universal implications is one of the criteria for its inclusion in the canon: “The Talmud sages were of the view our national history is not assured a place in the sanctified Bible.”45 Esther’s significance and that of the Bible in general lie in the fact that they carry a universal message. The validity of the covenant is important when it faces the entire world and not only members of the community, a community which does not withdraw into itself.

However, we cannot be satisfied with the universal meaning of the Scriptures, nor their general universalistic interpretation. They must be transformed into an assignment; as it is written in Deuteronomy, “Explain it distinctly.” There is a standing directive, a mission, not from the distant past but in all times and all the time, to translate the Hebrew way of thinking into universal terms: “We have not yet completed the translation of the Bible. It has yet to be translated into all the seventy languages of mankind (the seventieth still remains). We have also not completed the translation of the Talmud. We have barely begun. And as far as the Talmud is concerned, the task is complicated!”46 The Torah’s advance beyond the limited particularistic national space is not to be accomplished by means of the written text itself, but by virtue of the meaning with which it is endowed. The obligation to translate the Torah for the whole world, both its primary meaning and all its attendant meanings, is nothing but an expression of the obligation to provide a universal meaning to what is liable to be regarded as particularistic. A reading such as this requires one to return to the text for a second and third time, to the broad vistas that the text can open.47 The interpretive horizons of the text can be found in the readiness to go beyond it, in the reading that takes place in the conversation between the readers. This is known as “infinite textology,” and the text that seems fixed emerges as a guarantor for change and infinite freedom.

The Scriptures Render the Hands Impure

The clearest example of Lévinas’ philosophical method of interpreting the meaning of the Scriptures can be found in his explanation of the phrase “the Scriptures render the hands impure.”48 This

44 Lévinas, Beyond the Verse, 75.
45 Lévinas, In the Time of the Nations, 24.
47 Lévinas, In the Time of the Nations, 79.
48 Lévinas devotes two talmudic readings to a discussion of the criterion that the Scriptures render the hands impure: “For a Place in the Bible” and “The Translation of the Scripture.” The talmudic discussion in both places deals with the question of the inclusion of the Book of Esther in the biblical canon. Rabbinic literature records here questions relating to the canonicity of a number of Biblical books. Lévinas deals with the conceptual issues that relate to the holiness of the Scriptures. As he points out, neither questions of faith (as in Ecclesiastes) not erotic content (as in the Song of Songs) could prevent the inclusion of the Book of Esther, but rather the question of the legitimacy of
formulation is the focus of the Sages’ discussion that defines what is to be included in the “holy books” and what is not.\(^49\) Ostensibly, we are speaking about setting the halakhic criteria for the canonization of the books.\(^50\) However, the import of this halakhic criterion for establishing the sanctity of the text—namely, its ability to render something ritually impure—is formulated in a way that transforms the holy books into sources of contamination.\(^51\) Lévinas uses this criterion to point out the concern that the text not turn from a holy text into an object that is not open to a living being between its interpreters. Lévinas’ choice of interpretation is prominent against the backdrop of other attempts to explain it, on the parts of both traditional commentary and the academic study of rabbinic literature. Historical research sees this criterion as evidence of early power struggles among the Jewish people, between the priestly and scholarly elites.\(^52\) One can also find among biblical scholars the historical possibility that we are not dealing with a criterion, but rather with an actual description. Because the holy texts were those that were read publicly, it was difficult to preserve their ritually pure status.\(^53\) The study of religion has enabled us to understand anew the paradox of this notion of the threat of holiness. There is a close connection between impurity as something to be avoided and holiness as something of which one has to be careful.\(^54\) The holy is not only a place one longs for, but it is also a dangerous place. The greater the sanctity, the greater is the need to exercise caution.

But Lévinas prefers an anecdotal approach, found in rabbinic literature, that views the enactment as a “rabbinic decree” intended to offer a local response to a custom that was common in the Land of Israel in the Second Temple period and afterwards. This custom was to conceal the terumah (the heave-offering) and preserve it in a holy place along with the “holy books.” The formal prohibition was enacted out of fear of damage from rodent infestation, and the rabbis were in no way concerned with the way in which the decree was presented or its possible metaphorical ramifications.\(^55\) The great fear of the Sages for the holy texts was predicated on the fear that they would be vulnerable to rodent damage, but the damage might not be restricted to rodents. It may also extend to academics and interpreters who approach attributing holiness to historical-national events and whether these events should be commemorated for in perpetuity.

\(^49\) This phrase is found in Mishnah Yadayim 3:5, TB Megillah 7a, and TB Shabbat 14b.


\(^52\) This position is strengthened by the fact that the Book of Ezra that was deposited in the Temple courtyard—that is, the copy of the Torah in the possession of the priests—was not subject to the status of impurity decreed by the Sages, but retained the definition of a sanctified text. This expression is the subject of variant readings in the Tosefta as to whether the reading should be the book of Ezra or the book of the ‘Azara. See Tosefta Kelim 5:8; See also Goodman, “Sacred Scripture and Defiling the Hands,” 102.

\(^53\) And so Haran describes it: “The conclusion we have arrived at proves that this ruling that the Scriptures render the hands impure, is not solely an issue of ritual and has nothing to do with the canonization of the Bible” (Haran, The Biblical Collection, 275). This view requires further examination in light of rabbinic sources. (See ibid., 264-274).


\(^55\) See Rashi, Shabbat 14a.
the text with a desire to chew it up; Lévinas thus wonders “whether the rodents mentioned by the commentators are the rats of zoology.”

The rodents that damage the biblical scrolls become a metaphor for the erosion of the biblical text, the improper tampering with the text. One’s hands can touch in a careless manner, and in the course of their movement, they can touch a scroll harshly. However, according to Lévinas, there are also “hands” whose intent and purpose is to brutalize the text: readers who approach the text and relate to the verses as objects and “objectify” the Bible. Treating the words instrumentally as entities to be deciphered prevents them from developing new meanings. The erosion is caused by touching the words without an intermediary, without the covering of all that has been acquired through the diverse and indefinite tradition through which the inspiration and the vitality of the Bible occurs. The hidden impurity in the text is not due to its sanctified perspective, but rather because a too-direct approach to the text can impoverish it of its meaning and vitality. In this context, Lévinas asks if scientific research does not cause the dilution of interpretive horizons of the text: “One may indeed wonder whether the modern world, in its moral disequilibrium, is not suffering the consequences of that direct textual approach whose very scientific directness strips and impoverishes the Scriptures.” It is self-evident that this novel interpretation moves from the literal meaning of the talmudic passage to a hidden possibility it contains. For this reason, he admits that in this understanding of the text, “nakedness is not nakedness, the covering is not a covering, the hand is not a hand, the rat is not a rat.”

It is possible to view the modern motivation for “directness” in a positive light, as expressing a hermeneutical attempt for a direct and immediate confrontation with reality and the concepts as they are—unadorned. But the meaning of this motivation, as can be seen from the play on words on the French word compréhension, is to grab an object with your hands. Approaching a text as if it is an object to be grabbed makes it into a dead object, and it prevents the text from breathing the air it needs to live, the reading and interpretation that give it life. Limiting the interpretive spectrum does not leave the text space to live as a subject, which is not totally understood and even eludes understanding. On the other hand, a reading which enables the text to be vital is a reading in which the saying in the said text reverberates and enables an endless number of interpretations.

In light of the above, one can go a step further and participate in the attempt to solve the riddle of the paradoxical expression “the Scriptures render the hands impure.” According to Lévinas’ interpretation, the holy scrolls are a source of impurity because they are already “dead.” Their ritual impurity is embedded in the basic principle of impurity, contact with a corpse. Using the terminology of the laws of impurity, one could propose that the scriptural scrolls contain second-level impurity because they have come in contact with a world that is already dead, a world of religious revelation of the dead past. The gesture to take hold of them in one’s hand is what renders one impure, since it is an action which seeks to return to the past, to restore what has died and cannot be restored, and to transform the present into the past. Lévinas sees impurity and death as interconnected because of the danger of profanation and loss of all meaning that death carries with it:

Why would contact with the dead render one impure? In Judaism, death is indeed a principle of impurity. It is even called the principle of principles, or according to a colorful but strictly technical expression, the grandfather of impurity: all spiritual impurity derives from contact with the dead. A mythological belief, you will say, and with the help of ethnography you will find it in other creeds.

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56 Lévinas, In the Time of the Nations, 23.
57 This matter adds another level of meaning if one considers the different dimensions of language in Lévinas, as was mentioned earlier.
58 Lévinas, In the Time of the Nations, 24.
59 Ibid., 25.
60 See Lévinas’ critique of Spinoza in “Have You Reread Baruch?” in Difficult Freedom, 111-119.
In the Jewish tradition however, the impurity of the dead does not refer to the realm of the sacred and the profane. Contact with the dead is not violation of a taboo. Death is the source of impurity because it threatens to take away all meaning from life, even when one has philosophically triumphed over death. For with each new contact with death, all meaning immediately risks being reduced to absurdity.\(^{61}\)

The nexus between impurity and death is not based on the absence of life, but rather on the fact that it had life which is now gone. The conception behind the definition of the holy writ is that it describes a great life that has vanished and conveys a feeling of mourning over the historical past which is no longer, similar to the feeling towards the living that have passed away. A relationship such as this to the religious world of revelation that was and is no longer is a relationship that renders the hands impure, for it is tantamount to touching the “dead,” the dead past. This idea is essentially stated explicitly in the Mishnah in Tractate Yadayim (4:6):

The Sadducees say: We denounce you, Pharisees! For you say that Holy Scriptures render the hands impure, but the books of Homer do not render the hands impure. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said "And is this alone all we have [to object to] over Pharisees? For they also say that the bones of a donkey are pure, but the bones of Yochanan the high priest are impure. They [the Sadducees] said to him, 'In accordance with their love is their impurity.

From the Mishnah it would seem that the ambivalent relationship to the Scriptures is ensconced in the fact that they are loved, since they were holy in their lives, and they are a source of impurity in their death. Therefore, anyone who touches them becomes impure. This line of interpretation gives a simple metaphorical meaning to the expression “the Scriptures render the hands impure”: a historical revelation that has passed and is no longer in the living present. Nevertheless, from Lévinas’ perspective, this reading, in which the past remains in the past and does not re-present the past, enables it to live. That is the paradox of the Scriptures – that they are holy and render impure. According to Lévinas’ position, one must ask what is the attitude of the readers: if one reads the holy books as if the letters are dead and as if the book is what is important, then for him the book becomes a source of impurity, as if it had been alive and died. But if he reads them as if the dead letters enable life, then he does not become impure.

The explanation that connects impurity and the book, and life and death, brings the discussion back to the hermeneutical context, to the uniqueness of the book as object in Lévinas’ thought, or as Catherine Chalier calls it, “the ontology of the book.”\(^{62}\) The uniqueness of the book-object is that it does not stand by itself. Thus, it consists of dead letters, a text enveloped in a deep sleep. The readers of the book are part of the book because they are its “life.” It is within the power of the readers and their understandings to awaken the book from its sleep and infuse life and meaning into the dead letters: “For Lévinas, to arouse new life in books is to locate anew the path to inner meaning which was considered ludicrous by history, of an inner meaning that frequently was the only barrier against barbarism.”\(^{63}\)

**To Stretch the Strings on the Viola**

The effort to think about the Scriptures in the philosophical-hermeneutical realm is a complicated one, since it moves between two fields of discourse, between the traditional talmudic and the general philosophic. Lévinas’ interpretive motivation moves us from the religious field to the field of ethics even when he seeks religious meaning in the ethical discussion.

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\(^{61}\) Lévinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 123.


\(^{63}\) Ibid., 21.
THE MEANING OF SCRIPTURES IN THE THOUGHT OF EMMANUEL LÉVINAS

BEN-PAZI

The effort to place Lévinas in the field of religion using the models of the study of religion indicate exactly his conscious distancing from traditional religious discourse. Lévinas utilizes talmudic language in order to construct a model of the holiness of the Scriptures outside of them, in the living perspective of the texts—that is to say, the reader and the readings of the text. The enigma connected with the principle that sanctifies the text, and the different ways that the Sages describe the holy text, find their resolution in a new reading of the tradition in the philosophical discourse. The divine meaning of the text, the meaning of its appearance as “Torah from Heaven,” conveys according to Lévinas the intrusion of the infinite into the “being” by means of the appearance of the “Other” and the ethical command. The objectification of the book finds its uniqueness in the fact that it symbolizes its opening up to interpretive perspectives and to the intended reader. Jewish culture as the culture of the book directs man to the transcendent dimensions of “being”—facing the Other. Lévinas seeks to change the perspective from the unclean text to the pure man, from dead letters to living conversation—the language of ethics, of facing the Other. As was described earlier, reading the text of the Scriptures is surprisingly not reading the text itself, but in the approach of “one for the Other.” It is not the viola but rather the music that one plays on it which attains eternal significance precisely through the temporality of the music. The same applies to the text. The text derives its significance not from its fixed dimension, but from the temporal nature of its reading— all of its readings: “The text is stretched on the tradition like the strings of the viola!”

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