

CHAPTER NINE

ON SCRIPTURE,
OR IDOLATRY VERSUS TRUE RELIGION



Ancient Israel was often called away from idolatry. Perhaps no theme is more common in the Old Testament than that Israel must give up idolatry. Michael Fishbane has argued that the heart of Judaism is its rejection of idolatry and the worldview of idolatry, the rejection of “idolatrous metaphysics.”¹ We hear that theme much less in modern Israel. Usually when we hear someone speak of idolatry today, that person does so primarily in terms of materialism or something like it; we think our idolatry is primarily metaphorical. Real idolatry is something done only by other people—perhaps in ancient times, perhaps more primitive than we, at least more exotic. However, it is naive to assume that ancient Israel was susceptible to real idolatry and we are not. What idolatry is and how we avoid it remain questions, and they are as much questions for us as they were for ancient Israel.

If we look closely, we see that at least three things mark the difference between pure religion—in Latter-day Saint terms, Zion—and idolatry. First, pure religion is founding but ultimately not founded. It is originary in that those “within” it are constantly reborn, constantly re-originated. But pure religion has no *theos*, no metaphysical foundation.² If it did, it would have an idol rather than a God. The word *theos*

1. Michael Fishbane, “Israel and the ‘Mothers,’” in *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 49–63.

2. The Greek word *theos* has more than one meaning. I am not using the word here in the same way that I do in chapter 5 in this volume. There *theos* has the sense it has in the New Testament and the Septuagint: the God of Israel. I will explain the different, philosophical meaning that it has here.

is the Greek word for “god,” and it is the word that Aristotle uses for the ultimate being in his metaphysics, a usage determinative for the rest of the Western intellectual tradition. Traditional metaphysical systems, religious or not, each have something like the Aristotelean *theos* as their foundation or goal. Each assumes a *theos*, in Aristotle’s terms, as the basis for what-is, whether that *theos* is God or something else. In the terms of the twentieth-century German philosopher, Martin Heidegger,³ each is onto-theological. Given that traditional usage, I will use the word *theos* here to designate any such metaphysical being or any other being that performs the same structural function as Aristotle’s *theos*: the thing that accounts for or encompasses all other things.

In contrast, rather than a *theos* that acts as a foundation or goal, pure religion finds its origin in our relation to a beneficent, living Person rather than a metaphysical origin: the God of Israel. Thus, the religions that have their origin in the Bible, which of course includes the Latter-day Saints, are strictly speaking metaphysically a-theistic: their scriptures deny the unmoved and unmoving god (whether it is called *theos*, Law, or Reason), whatever their theologies might assert. Latter-day Saint doctrine, by asserting not only that God is a beneficent, living Person (a claim with which all Christians will agree), but also an embodied one (a claim that shocks most informed non-LDS Christians), insists on that denial. The Latter-day Saint claim implicitly denies any foundation, at least as that word is used in the tradition.

There is a sense in which God remains a foundation in Latter-day Saint thinking. We do, after all, refer to him as the Creator. However, the sense in which he is foundational is quite different for us than the sense of *foundation* in the onto-theological tradition. We believe that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a person—not a foundation, except to the degree that a person can be said to be a foundation (see 1 Corinthians 3:11). He is not, however, a metaphysical foundation.

3. For more on Heidegger, see chapter 2, note 62, in this volume.

For more than twenty-five thousand years, however, when Western thinkers have reflected on religion philosophically or theologically, they have often assumed that to speak of God is to speak in terms of a metaphysical foundation, in terms of a *theos*.⁴ The language of foundations and the *theos* are virtually everywhere in our culture, even in our discussions of our particular religious experiences, and Latter-day Saints have not been immune to that way of talking. Our thinking and speaking about our belief is sometimes not consonant with our belief itself. In spite of what we intend, the language we share with others and the assumptions common to that language infiltrate our discussions because they come to us naturally. They are the common sense of our culture and, so, something about which we give little thought—but we do not yet have another language to use. The question is, if we reject the assumption that we must speak of God as a metaphysical *theos*, what can we say of our relation to the person who is God? In other words, how can we make sense of the world and its Creator if we reject the philosophical understanding of the world and of its Creator as metaphysical foundation? What is the alternative to idolatry, given that our reflective religious language is permeated by traditional understanding? Where can we find a language suitable to our religious experience and understanding?

Among others, the work of the contemporary French Lithuanian philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, provides some outlines of part of a philosophical answer. Levinas shows us much about our relations to one another, focusing for example, on the family as the model for

4. There are ways of reading pre-modern theology (and perhaps much modern theology) as escaping this criticism. For example, Catherine Pickstock makes an argument that the metaphysical/theological understanding of religion is a result of the thinking of the thirteenth-century thinker, Duns Scotus. See her *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 121–40. This means that prior to the thirteenth century, reflection on God is more or less nonmetaphysical. Pickstock's argument is an important one, but for reasons of brevity, I will continue the rhetorical device of assuming that theology has more or less consistently assumed a *theos*.

human being.⁵ I cannot accurately précis Levinas's work here,⁶ but among other things, in it we see how the other person gives the self itself, its ego. Levinas shows, convincingly I believe, that I am not, fundamentally, an entity existing on my own and beholden to no one. Rather, my very existence as an autonomous, self-aware entity is a response to my relation to another person or persons who initiated my response. And my continuation as a person, as a self, is based on my continuing relation to others. The result is that the self and the growth of the self—its repentance—have their origins from the other person.

But though the self and its repentance originate from the other person, the other person is no foundation in any usual sense of that term. And in the philosophical and theological sense of the term, the other person is no founder. The other is a person, a creator, not a thing, and the founding occurs in ethical demand, in the face-to-face of Joseph Smith before God, not in ontology. Persons, specifically other persons, rather than metaphysical or some other kind of principles, are fundamental. Persons can found us, but they are not themselves a foundation. They are living, continuing persons, not static, impersonal, dead foundations. As a consequence we could go so far as to say, shockingly, that in a strict philosophical sense, pure and true religion is nihilistic, but that is only to say that it is not idolatrous, having no onto-theological foundation. True religion posits no ultimate thing; instead it is response to an Ultimate Person.

Second, because pure religion is not metaphysically founded, because it has no *theos*, it recognizes no power before which it must bow—though it bows. True religion bows before ethical demand—the

5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), discusses the relevant points most directly—the section on fecundity comes immediately to mind—but *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), also has a number of important—though incredibly difficult—discussions of these points.

6. For an overview, see my “Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Twentieth-Century European Cultural Theorists*, Dictionary of Literary Biography, 2nd ser. (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Gale, 2004), 285–95. See also, Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1996), or Simonne Plourde, *Emmanuel Lévinas, altérité et responsabilité: Guide de lecture* (Paris: Cerf, 1996).

relation of one person to another rather than rules for moral conduct⁷—not superior and potentially threatening power.⁸ True religion is a-theistic in refusing to bow before the supposed power of the idolatrous god, the *theos* of traditional philosophy and theology, with its Santa-Claus promises and implicit threats.⁹ Instead it bows before the God it loves and respects.

A third difference between true and idolatrous religion, between Zion and “the world,” is that because the obedience of true religion is a matter of service rather than appeasement, true religion is, at one and the same time, both obedient and beyond any law. It is obedient to the ethical demand that occurs when the other person disrupts my totalizing, comprehending, dominating relation to the world. In other words, true religion occurs when I respond to the obligation I have to another person (including God) rather than to my reasoned and coherent understanding of that person.

If I respond to my understanding of the world and of the other person’s place in that world rather than to the other person herself, I do not respond to the other. I respond only to myself: I have come to an understanding of things and I respond to that understanding, *my understanding* rather than the other person whose life impinges on me. In contrast, ethical obligation requires that I respond to something that is other than myself, something I am unlikely fully to understand intellectually. I must respond to what is outside of myself, to what is beyond my ability to grasp, comprehend, and dominate (even intellectually) or thematize. Law is always at least a thematization of the ethical obligation I experience: to universalize what I learn in my relation to others is to make a theme of that relation. Therefore, as

7. This is the way that Levinas uses the term, and understanding him requires that we not forget that his use is not what we usually expect.

8. Though true religion sometimes uses the word *power*, I think that use refers not to the power found and feared in idolatrous religion, but to the power of the ethical command.

9. See Paul Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” in Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 58–98.

universalization, in principle law always occurs within my comprehension and even under my domination. As the product of human understanding, thematizing is something that human beings can in principle dominate.¹⁰

We cannot escape the thematizing of law if we continue to speak to one another, for example when we admonish another or apologize for our behavior. We should not escape it. Not only is it not wrong to thematize, it is essential that we do. Not only human justice, but also teaching, require thematizing, for example. Nevertheless, ultimately pure religion goes beyond any thematizing of the demands made upon me by the other person. Pure religion is beyond any mere law: “Therefore, my brothers, you too are dead to the law” (Romans 7:4). That is inconceivable within idolatry, and is nihilistic to those who insist that there must be a *theos*.

Of course, the nihilism of being without foundation and beyond the law has nothing at all to do with a nihilism that rejects law of any kind and opts for chaos. As mentioned, an ethical demand can occur only where there is also a thematizing of that demand. It may be impossible for me to experience the ethical obligation and, at the same time, not to thematize that obligation in consciousness. Consequently, ethical demand may never be separable from law—so much so that the law is essential to the demand; the law is a blessing, an appearance of the command of God, though not the same as that command. The ethical demand, God’s ongoing command—its *appearing* rather than its *appearance*—always exceeds any thematizing in which it occurs. No law captures the ethical demand that it thematizes. In true religion the moral law is not that by which humans become calculable. Instead, it is that in which we fulfill the ethical obligation that confronts us, an ethical obligation that always exceeds and makes possible any moral law in which it is necessarily embodied.

10. Of course, the irony with which the atonement deals is that we do not dominate the law and, in fact, find ourselves spiritually incapable of doing so: “What I would, that I do not” (Romans 7:15).

But if no law is sufficient, if true religion cannot be reduced to a law, what remains for us to do? To quote someone now defunct, “What will become of us?” How do we speak of this description of our being, of fundamental ethics, of Zion, of the fact that we are *already* in Zion? How do we speak of nonidolatrous, in other words, true, religion? And where do we find such a speaking?

At first glance, it seems that the failure of philosophy and its issuance in the nihilism of onto-theology—its reliance on the idol of the *theos*, which turns out to be nothing and nothingness—means that we cannot expect philosophy to take account of its failure and to remedy itself. As often conceived, philosophy is incapable of saying what needs to be said. In fact, as traditionally conceived, philosophy is essentially totalizing. As it is often taught, I find it difficult to doubt that philosophy is ultimately bankrupt.

But that is not to say that all philosophers or philosophies have been totalizers. In general, great philosophers are great precisely because their work did not and, for the most part, still does not fit within the traditional, totalizing conception of philosophy.¹¹ The tradition tames the great philosophers for its own totalizing use, but the tamed philosopher is not the great philosopher. There may be other possibilities for philosophy than those of the tradition. Perhaps Heidegger or Ludwig Wittgenstein provides the beginnings of an alternative. Perhaps some of the work of Edmond Jabès, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Levinas, or others points in the direction of an alternative. Perhaps a fresh reading of Plato or Aristotle or Augustine will teach us much. Or perhaps a careful return to our own tradition—which includes and overlays the philosophical tradition—will do the job.

Thus, though it is not clear what we are to do philosophically in face of the totalitarian character of traditional philosophy, it is clear that, in some sense, philosophy will probably remain. In his discussion of this

11. Though I have used Aristotle as a bogeyman earlier, I think what I say here applies at least as much to him as to any other philosopher.

point Levinas insists that a role for philosophy remains, a role that does not rely on the merely deconstructive or rhetorical.¹² In spite of his criticisms of philosophy, Levinas consciously remains a philosopher. The bankruptcy of philosophy is not a given, however common it may be.

But whatever we eventually decide about philosophy, Levinas shows us that when we see the priority of ethics to ontology—in LDS terms, when we genuinely come to believe that persons are prior to principles—then from the beginning, our question is not “What is it?” (as philosophy has traditionally asked), but “What must be done?” There are ostensibly any number of ways one could take up this question. Perhaps, as Levinas, Derrida, Luce Irigaray, and others indicate, some of these ways are philosophical. But, however other many ways there might be, I believe that sacred scripture is such a speaking. In fact, I think it is the most important of such ways because it is the “most ethical,” asking us to listen not only to others, but to *the* Other Person. Scripture is a speaking that has the virtue of being considerably more accessible to most of us than the work of writers like Heidegger, Derrida, and Levinas—and it is always better written.

As much as I am enamored of contemporary philosophy, as much as I find contemporary Continental philosophy not only interesting and useful but morally compelling, I nonetheless find scripture more appealing and more accessible than contemporary philosophy, and more morally compelling. But more than that, I find scripture more genuinely revelatory. Paul Ricoeur notes that the philosopher can be no preacher,¹³ and Heidegger has made a similar point.¹⁴ The philosopher must wait for the prophet. Heidegger and Derrida may help us wait for the prophets.¹⁵ Levinas may announce the necessity of the

12. Cf. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 182–83.

13. Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” 30.

14. See, for example, Martin Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” in *The Piety of Thinking*, trans. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 5–21.

15. Marlène Zarader, *La Dette Impensée: Heidegger et l’Héritage Hébraïque* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), does an excellent job of showing how Heidegger’s work depends, probably without him being conscious of it, on his understanding of the Bible and of prophecy.

prophet. I believe these thinkers have helped me hear the prophets' voices. But they can do no more than that. They cannot even be John the Baptist for us, announcing the prophet. Only in the living prophets and in scripture can I find the announcement, the call, of what philosophy has helped me wait for. In spite of the possibility that, turned against itself, philosophy may be able to say something about Zion, I believe that only in the prophets will we be returned to what is beyond philosophy, namely to Zion.

But though many, if not most, Latter-day Saints are committed to the idea that scripture is more important and more revelatory than philosophy, it is also true that our mental commitment runs aground on our everyday practices. We know what it means to take philosophy seriously. We do not usually know what it means to take the scriptures seriously.

We usually read scripture as if it were naive philosophy and ontology, looking for the principle of principles, for the *theos* that stands behind what we are reading, asking constantly the question, "What is it?"—even when we want to ask the question, "What must be done?" We are taught to read scripture that way from our births, both inside and outside the church. That way of reading scripture is something we share with many, especially the majority of those in the evangelical, charismatic, and other conservative Christian traditions. Like the image of good traditional philosophers, those who read the scriptures in this way take the gospel to be a set of doctrinal propositions that one is to learn, and they take the scriptures to be a record of those principles and propositions behind which the "theological" gospel hides. When we read scripture this way, it is as if we assume that God is simply a poor writer—or that he chooses poor mouthpieces—and finds himself unable to lay out clearly and distinctly, in an ordered fashion, the principles he wants to teach us. With amazing hubris, we assume it is our job to do the work he was unable to do, the work of making everything clear, distinct, and orderly.

But scripture need not be read that way. In the New Testament, the word *gospel* refers much more to the proclamation of the gospel than to the content of that proclamation, though the content is certainly not irrelevant. Nothing can be proclaimed if the act of proclaiming has no content. Levinas explains this by distinguishing between the saying and the said: the saying is the event; the said is the objectification of the event of saying, its transcription, whether in writing, memory, or a recording. There can be no saying without a resultant said, but it is a mistake to think that the two are the same. A parent's command, "Do the dishes," can vary wildly in meaning. It could be a gentle reminder or a stern warning. It could, however, be part of a joke. Even if we were to transcribe more of the context of that command, it would be possible to understand it in at least somewhat different ways, and we would fail to capture aspects that the child hearing the command would have known in the moment of the event. The said reflects but does not capture the saying. The saying is in the said only as a trace, as something we can hear, but never see because when we try to look directly at it, we see only its after-image. Similarly, there could be no proclamation of the gospel if there were not a content of the gospel. However, as used in the New Testament and, therefore, as it also informs our later uses, the word *gospel* puts its emphasis on the saying, not the said. What is most important is the preaching, the call to repentance which is in the scriptures as a trace. Reading the scriptures requires likening them to ourselves, because it requires us to read them as a saying—an event in which we are addressed—rather than a said. If we read the scriptures as scriptures, the written record becomes an address, the preaching of the gospel.

When the scriptures proclaim, they disrupt what we are, what we have made ourselves. They invite our response, our repentance. As saying, scripture speaks the ethical rupture of my constant though implicit claim to autonomy. Scripture ruptures the interiority I prize so much, my consciousness and self-consciousness. Scripture disrupts the natural and necessary movement of consciousness into itself and

its principles, into its understanding, and it does so by calling me outside of myself. Scripture calls me out of the solipsistic universe toward which I tend in reason, and in doing so it calls me to my obligation to the Divine and to my fellows. It disrupts my focus on principle by pointing out that my field of vision, as *my* field, excludes the other person, something that is not mine in that field. The speaking of scripture opens me to that rupture of my solipsism and, so, to the understanding, as King Benjamin says, “That [I] must repent of [my] sins and forsake them, and humble [myself] before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive [me]” (Mosiah 4:10).

It follows that scripture can and should be read ethically—as a saying in which I encounter my obligation to others and God—rather than philosophically. Scripture reading can be the response to the saying of the ethical rupture, rather than the thematizing said of principle and ontology. To use Levinas’s language because it is useful, scripture reading and study can be an encounter with the unsaying saying of the other person, rather than the said of the same.

Unlike most of what is done in philosophy, scripture does not demand violence in response to violence, though it often reveals violence. Scripture does not take up philosophy against itself, so unlike the current criticisms of philosophy, including my own, scripture is not guilty of parricide. When not taken up as a defective or naive form of philosophy, scripture engenders. It replaces murder and scapegoating (the desire that everything be totalized in some static Parmenidean One Thing) with the call for fecundity: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28). When read as ethical demand, scripture disrupts my interiority with exteriority. It disrupts the universal and the merely moral (using Nietzsche’s sense of that word),¹⁶ the desire for the *theos*. In doing so, scripture opens the

16. Nietzsche was certainly no Christian. Nevertheless, no one was more aware of the limits and defects of conventional, merely rote Christianity than he. So, his work, though no guide for life, can help us see the problems to which the gospel is an answer. In Romans Paul teaches that the law by itself is dead, and he urges us to find newness of life by accepting the Holy Spirit, the origin of the law. Nietzsche shows us that religion

ethical demand and makes generation and continued life possible as well as necessary. In scripture and with the prophets, I stand before the other person, exposed and called upon prior to being anything at all. In fact, whatever I am is a consequence of my position before the other person. The ethical response to the ethical demand is the desire for the other person rather than for the *theos*, which dissimulates and displaces the other person, as in idolatry. Desire for the other person and the concomitant rupture of interiority by the other person are what philosophy has called community. They are what the scriptures call Zion. Zion is always already here; it is already amongst us—within us—though not our creation:

And when he was questioned by the Pharisees concerning when the kingdom of God is to come, he answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with careful watching, neither will they say ‘Look here!’ or ‘There!’ For behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:20–21)

For the most part, philosophy demands that we watch carefully. Sometimes it demands nothing else. Usually it *can* demand nothing else. Philosophy is primarily, but perhaps not necessarily, oriented toward vision and the unifying perspective of vision. That is what the said requires, the seeing of reading. In contrast, scripture speaks the a priori character of Zion and its demand for our ethical response. It speaks and asks us to listen, to hearken. Scripture calls us back to the Zion in which we are constituted; it calls us to a continuation of that Zion.

It is possible to end this discussion here, with an abstract, philosophical appeal to the nonphilosophical. But surely that self-deconstructing appeal is insufficient. So as a gesture, but no more than a gesture, in the direction of allowing scripture to speak the ethical

as mere convention is dead and dangerous to our souls, a point very similar to, if not the same as, Paul’s. But Nietzsche, though raised in a Christian family, was unable to see the possibility of life by the Spirit and, so, could recommend nothing better than an aesthetic life.

demand, let me outline “disruptive” readings of two scriptural stories, attempting to show some of the ways in which I hear the other person exceeding principle and mere being in these stories. I have fuller expositions of these stories in another place awaiting completion.¹⁷ But these outlines should serve to show some of what I find in an ethical rather than philosophical reading of scripture. Because they are outlines, these readings will ignore the attention to textual details that scripture calls for. They will remain philosophical in spite of themselves. But I think they will be enough to show that an ethical reading of scripture is possible. I hope they will at least indicate that such a reading can be fruitful.

The first story is that of the creation, a story that focuses explicitly on ethical relation rather than ontology. First notice Genesis 1:1, 26; and 3:22 (compare Moses 2:1, 26; 3:28; and Abraham 4–5):

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1)

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. (Genesis 1:26)

And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil. (Genesis 3:22)

God’s oneness is the unity of Zion, a unity of multiple individuals who remain individual in their unity. God’s unity is not the unity of an overarching, metaphysical *theos*, for, as Latter-day Saints have pointed

17. For a more complete, but still incomplete, reading of the first of these stories, see my “Adam and Eve—Community: Reading Genesis 2–3,” *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 1/1 (2003): 2–14; http://www.philosophyandscripture.org/Archives/Issue1-1/James_Faulconer/james_faulconer.html (accessed 8 May 2009). A fuller version of the Abraham and Isaac story can be found in James E. Faulconer, “The Past and Future Community: Abraham and Isaac; Sarah and Rebekah, . . .” *Levinas Studies: An Annual Review* 3 (2008): 79–100. In addition, I have a similar reading of a third story, that of Moses and Israel. It can be found in “Philosophy and Transcendence: Religion and the Possibility of Justice,” in *Transcendence in Religion and Philosophy*, ed. James E. Faulconer (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 70–84.

out for years, God is spoken of in the multiple, not the singular. He is not alone in any sense.

Latter-day Saints often use the language of the tradition to speak of God, as well as the assumptions of the philosophical/theological tradition to understand the scriptures. Therefore, they often assume, although usually only implicitly and unconsciously, either that God is the principle of principles or that he exists in virtue of his compliance with such a principle or set of principles. But because this assumption is a postulation of the *theos*, in making it, we implicitly deny God's multiplicity and the possibility of divine togetherness. In other words, the assumption denies Zion because it takes God to be ultimately alone. However, in spite of that, the Latter-day Saint God is everywhere implicated in multiplicity. As so implicated, the one God cannot be the principle of principles. As those who accuse the Latter-day Saints of heresy recognize quickly, a God who cannot avoid multiplicity breaks the bond between unity and being, destroying recourse to God as *theos*. If traditional belief is the standard, we are heretics and should be happy to be heretics. Being called a heretic by those who have false beliefs is not a problem. However, that heresy is not only a revealed truth and, so a better standard, it is also a philosophical advantage.

As both one and multiple, God can be the Other of ethical relation, for every ethical relation implies not the I and Thou of Martin Buber, but the Thou and we.¹⁸ Truth is reason—measure, account—and “I’ve a Mother there”—and a Brother, and brothers and sisters. The creation story, beginning in Genesis 1 and ending with Genesis 4:1, is the story of multiplicity and the other person, the story of a living and loving parent who creates, never from some null point, never alone. It is not a philosophical story of how a Parmenidean One generated the many.

18. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 68–69, 155. Levinas is deeply indebted to Buber, but nevertheless critical. He criticizes Buber in several essays. For an example, see Emmanuel Levinas, “Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge,” in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 17–35.

The multiplicity of the Other is recapitulated in the story of Adam and Eve. Genesis 2:18 (Moses 3:18; Abraham 5:14) literally speaks of Woman as “the one who stands over against—across from—Adam,” though our translation of the Hebrew is “help meet,” in other words the appropriate helper. But Woman is an appropriate help to Man, not by being another hand, or an extra arm, or an additional set of eyes; Woman is not an addition to Man, not an ordinary supplement, if a supplement at all. She is neither his subordinate nor his alter ego. She cannot be reduced either to him or to some third term that encapsulates them both. Woman is the appropriate helper to Man by standing opposite him, making ethical relation possible by being another to whom he can be related and, in doing so, giving Man his identity. If we read imaginatively, we can see that Woman is not simply an extension of Man, she is “the mother of *all* living” (Genesis 3:20; compare Moses 4:26). In fact, in the Genesis version of the story, as long as Woman can be thought of as an extension of Man, she remains uncreated; she has no name. She is named only when she has ceased to be such an extension. Neither she nor he was fully a person until the fall was accomplished. Their lives together as independent beings standing opposite one another makes their lives as human beings possible. Together, as those standing “across from” one another, rather than as mirror images of each other, they make the lives of others possible, as we see in Genesis 4:1 (compare Moses 5:2). The first thing that the Bible tells us after it tells us of the expulsion from the garden is “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain.” Fecundity, sexuality, fraternity and sorority—Zion—are functions of alterity, not functions of identity and sameness.

Note also that the knowledge which Man and Woman gain in the creation story is explicitly ethical knowledge, knowledge-with rather than knowledge-about. We see this illustrated in the way in which Man comes to know of his need for Woman: He does not know that he needs another person because God tells him that he does; he does not come to conclude that he needs a partner by logical deduction. His

knowledge of Woman's necessity is not propositional. Man comes to know that need, a need beyond simple want or lack, only through his relation to the Divine and through the experience engendered in that experience. He learns of the need for Woman by assisting in the creation of animals and discovering that there is nothing that is paired with him, nothing opposite him, no appropriate helper: "And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him" (Genesis 2:18–23; compare Moses 3:18–23 and Abraham 5:14–21).

Likewise, having eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—having the knowledge of the Gods (explicitly ethical knowledge)—Adam and Eve are like the Gods at the same time that they are set across from them: "Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:22; compare Moses 4:28). Divine knowledge makes Adam and Eve in the image of the Gods at the same time that it makes the Gods truly Other. The story of Adam and Eve is the story of the necessity of the other person—a sexed other—with whom one can stand before God, as a god, in ethical labor and ethical knowledge. It is a story that undoes philosophical knowledge in favor of personal and even sexual knowledge.¹⁹ It is a story that demands ethical response. The story of Adam and Eve disrupts our totalizing knowledge of each other and of God and demands, instead, that we hear the ethical demand.

The question of the story is not, "*What* art thou?" (as much philosophy and all psychology supposes), but "*Where* art thou?" (Genesis 3:9; Moses 4:15). And the "where" of this question supposes neither a geographic position nor a Heideggerian site in being. Instead it asks about the ethical where: standing before me, face-to-face, God asks "Where are you?" The question of the story of Adam and Eve is explicitly the question of ethics—of relation to the Other—not ontology.

Man's answer to the question, however, is not straightforward (as Abraham's will later be). Rather than "Here am I" (compare

19. See Genesis 4:1 and Moses 5:2 where *know* is no euphemism.

Genesis 22:1), Man responds with an excuse for hiding: “I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Genesis 3:10; compare Moses 4:16). Guilt and shame come because the possibility of community is also the possibility of alienation. In this case, by choosing knowledge—ethical knowledge—Man and Woman have chosen both. They have chosen alienation from God because only in doing so is human community possible.

There is separation, difference between each and between each and God, and that separation is necessary if the otherness of either of them, or of God, is to have meaning. Man and Woman must be separated from the Divine if they are to image the Divine, but separation necessarily carries with it the possibility of alienation. However, they also learn that their separation from one another, their difference, is the ground of human and divine community. Without that, community would not be possible. If our imaging of God did not include our otherness, we could only be like him; we could not be individuals. But if we could not be individuals, then we would not be like him. We could not be at all. Thus, though the absolute, transcendent otherness of God would make human being impossible; otherness is nevertheless necessary, namely the otherness of persons, both divine and human.

After revealing themselves to God in response to his call, Woman is told that the consequence of her knowledge of good and evil is pain, and Man is told that the consequence of his knowledge is labor. But these are not two distinct things. The fact that the pain of childbirth is, in English, called *labor* is helpful. The words are also closely related in Hebrew. Thus God does not say essentially different things to Man and Woman. What he says to one he says to both.

The pain of childbirth is a particularly appropriate beginning. For both creation and relation are represented in it. Knowledge, the knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge that brings mortality, makes pain—the pain of bringing forth community—possible. To escape that pain would be to cease to be human. And, implicitly, the escape from pain is impossible even for God. Being in relation to us,

he cannot escape the pain that is necessarily part of having created us. God too must weep (see John 11:35 and Moses 7:29–31).

Labor too is an essential part of human-being. Man and Woman were required to dress the garden and keep it (Genesis 2:15; compare Moses 3:15), but they were not able to do so meaningfully. True, they could work in it, but their work would have been unconscious and self-gratifying toil. True labor is done only in relation to another (and it must include the otherness and depth of the other). Only in labor rather than toil can one have human being. The Hebrew word for work, *avodah*, can equally well be translated “service.” As is pain, labor is concomitant with creation and required by relation.

The first part of Genesis 4:1, “Adam knew Eve his wife,” is a summary of the creation of humans, the final act of the creation story: they have received knowledge by which they can be in relation to one another, and through those relations they can be fruitful. Implicit in all of this is the grounding in the Divine: “I have gotten a man from the Lord” (Genesis 4:1; compare Moses 5:2). The story of creation in Genesis lays the foundation for an understanding of the relationship of humans in community by pointing to Man and Woman as unique individuals bound to each other, and *in virtue of what it means to be human*, to all others. To be human is to be in community, though not always the community of God.

From this theme springs a major theme of biblical writers, namely the return to true community.²⁰ In order for such a return to occur, humans must recognize themselves as created in the express image of God: unique, potentially fruitful, knowing good from evil by intimate association, and capable of action. Perhaps more than anything else, they must recognize themselves as bound to each other by their being, by the pain and labor—each both positive and negative—of human relation.

20. Cf. Isaiah and his call to come forth from physical and spiritual Babylon so Israel can return to their calling as the people of God.

The second story I would like briefly to consider is also the story of ethical response and the relation to other persons. It is the story of Abraham and Isaac. That story begins when Abram is set apart from his country, his kindred, and his father's house—in an order the reverse of geographic order (Genesis 12:1). Chronologically and geographically, one must leave one's father's house first, then one's kindred, and finally one's country. However, Genesis reverses that order. Abram's leave-taking is not merely a chronological and geographic leave-taking. He takes his leave spiritually. Given that he is defined by country, kindred, and father, Abram becomes other than himself and other than his family. Why? In order to make family and Zion possible. Abram's blessing has its origin in his otherness rather than in his identity.

However, having been cut off from his family, having become other, as I read the story, Abram searches for a *theos*. He seeks to create Zion himself, to force it. He thinks of the promised seed as something he can bring about, so he agrees to create that promised posterity with Hagar. In doing so, he implicitly assumes that the other person is not really other: one son is as good as another; for the purposes of the blessing that has become abstract, one wife is as good as another. The otherness of Abram's promise is totalizable by his will; he believes that the future promised in the original disruption is to be brought about by totalizing, by taking control, by his will.

In spite of Abram's attempts to control, his search for the community founded on a *theos* is interrupted. First it is interrupted by his forced dismissal of Ishmael and Hagar. Then, after the covenant marked by his name change, Abraham's attempt to control is interrupted by a call that implicitly asks, as Adam was asked, where he is, a call that erupts in the command to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1). However, unlike Adam, Abraham responds to this interruptive call with "Here I am"—"Behold me here" or "Ready."

Within the space opened by God's call, Abraham is finally able to be separated from his son, and his son is finally able to be separated

from him. The totality that Abraham has willed is finally broken. The binding of the sacrifice, the binding that separates father and son at the altar on Moriah, separates Isaac from Abraham. The community can no longer be the product of Abraham's endeavor because the means of that production is no longer his. It has been taken away by the command to sacrifice his son. Isaac is now genuinely an *other* person to him, given by God in the disruption of Abraham's security. Isaac is an other whose existence before Abraham makes an ethical demand on Abraham. Isaac is one to whom Abraham must respond as another person rather than as a possession. Isaac is one whom, in Abraham's confrontation with the dizzying command of the Divine Other, Abraham is called to serve. In separating father and son, the sacrificial binding binds father to son in Zion.

With the turn toward the ram in the thicket, the promise of posterity can be fulfilled; in that turn it *is* fulfilled. Thus, as soon as the sacrifice is over, the text tells of the birth of Isaac's wife, Rebekah, the other person who marks the beginning of Abraham's posterity (Genesis 22:20–24). Though Abraham's trial begins with him alone, speaking not even to his wife, this second separation, the one that occurs through the binding and turning from sacrifice—separation from both wife and son as individuals rather than extensions of himself—results in the binding and the binding of Zion. Through Rebekah, not one of Abraham's possessions, the second separation results in the fruitfulness of Abraham's covenant. That binding, Zion, is a binding of individuals who stand “over against” each other as do Adam and Eve.

The binding of the sacrificial victim at Moriah results in the binding of Zion, but this binding is not the application of a universal principle. As Søren Kierkegaard argues in *Fear and Trembling*,²¹ Abraham's response defies all merely universal principles. Instead, it is the ethical response to the other person that makes possible continued relation to the other person, the continuation of otherness and response. In the beginning, Abram's response is the welcome of the power of the

21. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

Divine Other. In the end, Abraham's response is the welcome of the filial other and the Divine Other himself.

Though both these stories are stories of unity, they both warn us against looking for the unity of Zion in unity of being, in a totality. In a certain sense, both tell the same story, the story of our fruitful separation (difference), from each other and from God, in Zion. Both are stories of welcoming the other in a relation that seals individuals to each other as individuals. Both call us to our lives before each other. Both make the ethical demand. Both deconstruct totality in favor of Zion.

Both these stories do what I believe all scripture does. They do not describe the life that is required, nor do they give us its principles. Scripture is not guilty of idolatry, though as readers of scripture we often are. Rather than doing philosophy, these stories call to us and disrupt the lazy and unethical comfort of our being-at-home with ourselves and our present situation. In them we hear that Zion is not to be found by looking because it is already here, though we often cannot see it. As I assume do also other scriptural stories, the stories of Adam and Eve and of Abraham and Isaac call us back to where we already are so we can be there for the first time and so we can continue to be there, constantly reborn into Zion.