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Emmanuel Levinas’s Messianism and the World to Come: A Gnostic-Philosophical Reading of Tractate Sanhedrin 96b–99a

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In this essay I address Emmanuel Levinas’s\(^1\) notion of “messianism,” as it is presented in his long commentary on six pages from Tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud: \(bSanh\) 96b–99a.\(^2\) I maintain that Levinas commented on these talmudic pages for a specific purpose: to complete his critique of the phenomenological notion of “world,” substituting for it a religious notion of the “world to come” by which we can determine the ethical parameter to live “in this world.” I assume that Levinas’s reading has been heavily influenced by gnostic-philosophical notions derived from his previous monumental philosophical monograph, *Totality and Infinity*.\(^3\) As a consequence, I also assume that Levinas’s reading might have succeeded in addressing, in religious terms, the question of a “difficult freedom,” just as the title of his commentary anticipates. Instead, he produced a hermeneutically imbalanced commentary on some very famous talmudic pages. More specifically, I maintain that Levinas provides a strict selection of the talmudic portions to comment on, whereas he neglects important, specific theological-political presuppositions and eventually imposes a normalized—if not generic—notion of “religion” that is finally “supplemented,” in Derrida’s sense, by a set of metaphysical notions.\(^4\)

In order to prove this, my paper is divided in four sections, as follows: a first exposition of Levinas’s gnostic-philosophical presuppositions, a general appreciation of his commentary on the Talmud, the examination of a specific portion of his commentary on “messianism,” and finally the exposition of the “supplementary” nature of Levinas’s argumentation.

LEVINAS’S “GNOSTIC”-PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE TO HUSSERL’S NOTION OF “WORLD”

Levinas’s reading of Tractate Sanhedrin follows shortly after the publication of his monumental philosophical monograph *Totality and Infinity*, eloquently subtitled *An Essay on Exteriority*. This monograph was written in 1961, more than thirteen years after Levinas’s post-phenomenological inquiries on time.\(^5\) Its aim was to criticize Husserl’s as well as Heidegger’s phenomenological
notions of “world” and “horizon.” Levinas founded his critique on a number of premises: (1) the rejection of Continental and specifically post-Romantic German ontology, (2) the evaluation of the notion of “infinite,” (3) the exaltation of the notion of “ethics,” and (4) the conception of “justice” as the most fundamental ontological attitude. With respect to this set of assumptions, Levinas designated with the term “exteriority” exactly a dimension of “reality” that would exceed the boundaries of German ontology and lay claim to a “righteous”—or “ethically” and “juridically” based—confrontation with “the Other,” whether the latter would be identified with “the others” as fellow human beings [autrui] or with God Himself [Autre], “the absolutely other is the Other [l’absolument Autre, c’est Autrui].”

Levinas assumes that the “alterity” of “the Other” [Autre] should be understood both as the alterity of “the others” [autrui] and as “alterity” of the Most High. Under this premise, he evidently measures the degree of “alterity” in terms of everyone’s “familiarity” with the “world,” which he inhabits in the midst of “things” that are held out to the grasp of the hand. The grade of “estrangement” is then measured upon the “intimacy” of “dwelling”: “To exist [exister] henceforth means to dwell [demeurer]. To dwell is not the simple fact of the anonymous reality of being cast into existence as a stone one casts behind oneself; it is a recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome.”

In the present circumstance, it is not possible to catalogue Levinas’s quite problematic use of spatial metaphors—such as “dwelling,” “habitation,” and “exteriority”—that render his efforts at “escaping” metaphysics problematic if not only tentative. It is sufficient to turn our attention to the ambiguous nature of “dwelling” in a “world”: on the one hand, the act of “dwelling” in a “world” constrains the individual within a “horizon” and fundamentally alienates him, by preventing him from ethically committing with “the others”; on the other hand, the act of “dwelling” permits everyone to possess the sufficient, minimal degree of intimacy and interiority that is needed for “escaping” the boundaries of the “horizon” and for ethically connecting with “the others.” Levinas here resolves this paradox by introducing an eschatological tone that emerges at the end of Totality and Infinity and opposes the “logic of violence that dominates the present.”

This notion of “logic” is to be understood here in its strongest sense as a reference to Hegelian “science of logic,” which in turn is conceived as a sort of philosophical commentary on the Gospel of John and its assumption that
“history” eminently is the development of God’s “Word” [Logos] in space and time. In concert with Hegel, Levinas also exhibits in *Totality and Infinity* similar tones and argumentations. More specifically, he constantly maintains a theological undertone when playing with the keystones of the Hebrew Scripture: God’s revelation as “Word,” the Revelation of God’s “Visage,” the commandment “Do not murder,” and so on. There is little doubt that *Totality and Infinity* is a philosophical paraphrase of Hebrew Scripture, especially the books of Genesis and Exodus, where the divine enters impetuously into the human “world” and fundamentally dismisses its authorities and anthropological boundaries.

Levinas here assumes a genuinely “gnostic” attitude and maintains that the “world”—together with its tools, finalities, and horizons—is deeply alien to the ethical-juridical dimension of the “divine”; therefore, Levinas concludes that the world’s normative validity shall be “suspended,” or “put into brackets,” by the transcendent impetuosity of the divine. This act of “suspension” is obviously reminiscent of Husserl’s notion of *epoché*, but is produced again by emphasizing the act of “dwelling” in someone’s “own” home, where one retires from the anonymity of the “world,” its horrifying “neutrality,” or its indifference to the divine sense for justice. Therefore, the individual who decides to “dwell” in his “own” home enters his interiority and suspends—or delays—his “enjoyment” of the “world.”

This important variation of Husserl’s phenomenological notion of “suspension” determines, in Levinas’s eyes, the discovery of the existence of “consciousness” as the most intimate and retired dimension of the self. And yet this also involves the suspension of “violence”—inherently connected to the commitment with the world, its ontological injustice, and ethical ambiguity. In this regard, the “introversion” into the self at the expense of someone’s commitment into the world truly is a messianic act. Exactly how, Levinas himself will not fail to emphasize, a few years after publishing *Totality and Infinity*, in his commentary on Tractate *Sanhedrin*. And yet Levinas’s ethical metaphysics neither adheres to neoplatonic assumptions nor rejects the “inner logic” of late post-Romantic German philosophy in principle. The assumptions of *Totality and Infinity* are rather more refined. Levinas mobilizes a large set of “Hebrew” concepts against unethical “desolation”—a blank vacuity void from human presence—which would be the ultimate outcome from a strict ontological thought: “the Being of the existent is a Logos that is the word of no one.”

The introduction of these “Hebrew” concepts involves Husserl’s notion of “world” as well as Heidegger’s notion of “ontology.” More specifically,
Levinas rejects the phenomenological assumption of “world,” in so far as it claims that the given “horizon” is epistemologically exhaustive and maintains that there is “nothing” beyond the events by which phenomena appear in the world. At the same time, Levinas rejects Heidegger’s onto-theology that is implicit in his translucent event of “truth”—either *aletheia* or *Unverborgenheit*—and maintains that the “nothingness” beyond the “horizon” is not “the Being” [*Sein*] veiled by the realm of “the beings” [*die Seinende*]; this “nothingness” rather is the emergence of the “Visage”—an event that is ontologically and ethically challenging: “the Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.”

The emergence of the “Face” [*Visage*] calls the individual to a number of ethical and ontological challenges that Levinas enumerates in *Totality and Infinity* in terms of a specific “philosophical anthropology”: eros, love, friendship, family bounds, and so on. The dimension of “justice” is frequently evoked as a sort of “metaphysical quality,” but it is not really appreciated in its social and political specificities. These are indeed much more taken into account in Levinas’s later commentary on Tractate *Sanhedrin*. Its speculative relevance had already been anticipated in a short quotation in *Totality and Infinity*, while mentioning the importance of “feeding” anyone, regardless of his ethical, juridical, and social affiliation. It is this sense for justice that Levinas attributes to Tractate *Sanhedrin* and that might have fascinated him while finishing *Totality and Infinity* and persuaded him of the necessity of writing a commentary on this text.

Is it possible that Tractate *Sanhedrin* might offer an insight into a “world-to-come” essentially different and distant from the many flaws of “this world”? What was then “messianism” for Levinas?

**LEVINAS’S READING OF TRACTICE SANHEDRIN 99B–99A**

Levinas’s interest in Tractate *Sanhedrin* had never been occasional. Over a period of years Levinas commented four times on it on four different occasions and in four different contexts.

It is difficult to determine the reasons for such an interest with respect to other talmudic tractates. At first, one could maintain that Tractate *Sanhedrin* is a famous and well-studied talmudic text, and it would then be surprising if Levinas had not studied it intensively together with “Monsieur Chouchani” (a mysterious, still unidentified talmudic genius, who used to live as a tramp
and who introduced Levinas to Talmud in a series of private lessons, from 1947 to 1951). Besides, Tractate Sanhedrin speaks about “justice” both in abstract and practical terms; indeed, it prescribes what crimes have to be punished with the death penalty but it also examines the ways by which to deliver it upon wrongdoers. Finally, Tractate Sanhedrin also includes a famous section on “messianism” that is not to be found elsewhere in rabbinic literature. Before examining the congruence of these pages with Levinas’s philosophical investigations, it is necessary to provide readers with a brief description of the talmudic section examined in his “messianic” texts.

From a formal point of view, the talmudic section from Tractate Sanhedrin 96b–99a is a long nonjuridical, narrative appendix (haggadah) that is annexed to the previous discussion on the institution of prophecy, on the correct punishment for a false prophet, and specifically on the opinion that the son of the wicked Haman might teach Scripture. These six pages are written exclusively in Hebrew—with the exception of the first two lines written in Aramaic (bSanh 96b)—and therefore should be accounted as an early, possibly Palestinian external source [baraita] that had been discarded from the Palestinian Talmud for probable reasons of “political prudence” toward the Roman government, whereas it was included in the Babylonian Talmud due to the relatively more relaxed religious policy in the Sassanid Persia. Therefore, these six pages devoted to messianism are an exceptional document that has possibly been redacted in several layers and finally organized into a discrete number of topics: (1) the generation of the Messiah (bSanh 97a), (2) the notion of “truth” (bSanh 97a), (3) a first investigation on the time of the messianic advent (bSanh 97a–b), (4) the notion of the “righteous ones” in every generation (bSanh 97b), (5) the notion of “repentance” (bSanh 97b–98a), (6) a second investigation on the time of the messianic advent (bSanh 98a), (7) the times before the messianic advent (bSanh 98b), (8) the identity of the Messiah (bSanh 98b), and (9) the duration of messianic times (bSanh 99a).

Levinas’s reading of these very complex pages is quite selective. Levinas completely neglected the historical reasons for redacting these pages, their linguistic and theoretical nature as well as most of the topics already reported above. Levinas has rather focused his attention especially on four themes: (1) the duration of messianic times (bSanh 99a), (2) the notion of “repentance” (bSanh 97b–98a), (3) the time before the messianic advent (bSanh 98b), and (4) the identity of the Messiah (bSanh 98b), as it can be summarized in the following chart.
Levinas expounds these four selected topics more than once in a non-linear perspective and appears to discourse several times on the same issue, as if he were digging deeper in search of an ethical-philosophical meaning of the text. In particular, Levinas proposes a different segmentation of the text according to six paragraphs that rearrange the whole narrative section: (1) the notion of messianism, (2) the ethical conditions for the messianic advent, (3) the contradictions of messianism, (4) the overcoming of messianism, (5) the question about the identity of the Messiah, and (6) the correlation between messianism and universalism.

It is evident that Levinas’s rearrangement of the textual material does not follow the thematic sequence of the original text. At first one could object that a nonjuridical, narrative text can easily be dismounted and rearranged differently; thus, one could even maintain that Levinas has indeed clarified the thematic consistency of a long talmudic section that would hardly have been expounded otherwise.

On the contrary, my argument is that Levinas has deliberately imposed a philosophical reading with a specific purpose: mobilizing a supposedly “Hebrew” concept of “world” over against a phenomenological-ontological one. In other terms, Levinas intended to employ the talmudic notion of “the world to come” as a correction to the phenomenological notion of “world.” More specifically, my assumption is that Levinas is interested in Tractate Sanhedrin especially because of his need for a speculative alternative to post-Romantic German phenomenology. The break of the phenomenological notion of “world” in Totality and Infinity had implied the necessity of coming to terms with the eschatological notion of “the world to come” because the
latter would oppose the former in many respects: (1) the nature of an eschatological event would oppose the ontological uniformity of the ordinary “world,” (2) the messianic claim for absolute justice would oppose Western, ethically neutral societies, and finally (3) the emergence of a personal intimacy with “ethics” would oppose the contemporary anonymity of social and political practices.

For brevity’s sake it is not possible to review each of these very important oppositions between “this world” and “the world to come” in Levinas’s commentary. Therefore it would be sufficient to take into account the most decisive one: the opposition between the anonymity of “this world” and the intimacy of “the world to come.” Levinas makes the notion of “messianism” coincidental with a specific condition of the self due to a particular interpretation of a short talmudic inquiry about the identity of the Messiah:

What is his [the Messiah’s] name? The House of Rabbi Shila said: His name is Shilo, since it is written: “until Shiloh will come” (Gen 49:10). The House of Rabbi Yannai said: His name is Yinnon, since it is written: “his name will endure for ever . . . his name is Yinnon” (Ps 72:17). The House of Rabbi Hanina said: His name is Hanina, since it is written: “where I will not give you Haninah [i.e., mercy]” (Jer 16:13). (bSanh 98b)

At first, Levinas admits that the question of the identity of the Messiah clearly has specific historical and cultural anti-Christian inclinations. Yet Levinas dismisses quite easily these historical implications and emphasizes that these answers imply that “the pupil-teacher relationship” has a messianic value. Accordingly, he comments on them and comes to this surprising conclusion:

I venture to propose an interpretation of this text that is less special. . . . The Messiah is the Prince who governs in a way that no longer alienates the sovereignty of Israel. He is the absolute interiority of government. Is there a more radical interiority that the one in which the Self [moi] commends itself? Non-strangeness, *par excellence* is ipseity. The Messiah is the King who no longer commands form outside. . . . The Messiah is Myself [moi]; to be Myself is to be the Messiah.

This is probably one of the most eloquent passages that gives evidence of Levinas’s practical use of talmudic literature for philosophical purposes.
On the one hand, Levinas clearly intends to propose an “ethical” vision of the “world to come” that is inherently different from the ordinary “world,” which is circumscribed by anonymity and negligence. On the other hand, Levinas here manipulates the talmudic source—whose intentions probably are ironic with respect to Christianity and apologetical with respect to the rabbinic establishment—and rephrases it in strict philosophical-phenomenological terms. What is here relevant is that Levinas indulges in this “egocentric” interpretation of the messianic condition and at the same time ignores the obvious theological-political setting of this text, which is easily demonstrated by the first lines, written in Aramaic, from the talmudic passage:

Rav Nachman said to Rabbi Itzhaq: Have you heard when “the son of the fallen” [bar nafley] will come? Whence is [the expression] “the son of the fallen”? He said to him: Messiah. Do you call him, the Messiah, “the son of the fallen”? He said to him: isn’t it written: “Today I will raise up the tabernacle of David that has fallen [ha-nafelet]” (Amos 9:11)? (bSanh 96b–97a)

These few words in Aramaic do not only introduce the extraordinary talmudic discussion in Hebrew on “messianism,” but also provide the interpretative key to it by alluding to a number of theological presuppositions through a complex word play. Scholars usually agree that the Aramaic expression bar nafley [the son of the fallen] is indeed both a translation and an interpretation of the Greek expression uios nefelon [the son of clouds] that would allude to the cosmological advent of the eschatological figure of the “son of man” in the book of Daniel as well as to its rephrasing in the gospel of Matthew. 22 Rabbi Nachman might have been making a pun on the Greek description of Jesus as the Messiah and claiming for the intrinsic “Jewishness” of the Messiah himself: a descendent from the House of David who will restore the “tabernacle of David” or restore the theological-political prominence of Israel. And yet Levinas ignores these very important connotations.

As a consequence, the claim to be the Messiah in Levinas’s interpretation is deprived of its theological-political significance and is rather forced into a philosophical perspective: the “individualism” by which each prominent rabbi calls himself a Messiah and therefore exalts the ideals of rabbinic education is reinterpreted if not rephrased in terms of phenomenological “ipseity.”

What are the consequences of this method by which nonphilosophical material is rephrased in philosophical terms?
LEVINAS’S TALMUDIC HERMENEUTICS AND HIS PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT

Levinas's talmudic hermeneutics seems to reflect the interpretative method that he was probably taught by “Monsieur Chouchani.” This implied a sort of thematic conflation of “legal” and “nonlegal” texts under the assumption that both juridical and narrative texts should be examined from the same points of view: as texts susceptible of being interpreted in “ethical”-“metaphysical” terms. In order to appreciate the impact of this hermeneutical method on the thematic and textual integrity of the Talmud, I will specifically focus on Levinas's treatment of the notion of “repentance.” Levinas's argumentation is very complex. For clarity’s sake I will first report the essential points of his interpretation. Only later do I analyze it in detail and expose its metaphysical and “supplementary” character.

First, Levinas describes the debate between two talmudic authorities, Samuel and Rav Hiyya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Johanan, on the notion of “repentance” and only then takes side with one of them (bSanh 99a):

For Samuel, on the other hand, something foreign to the moral individual exists, something which must first be suppressed before the messianic era can come. The Messiah is, first and foremost, this break. For the lucid conscience in control of its intentions, the coming of the Messiah carries an irrational element or at least something which does not depends on man, which comes from outside: the outcome of political contradictions. . . . It matters little whether this outside is the action of God or a political revolution that is distinct form morality.23

From the glosses on the importance of “ethics” and “self-commitment” with justice, it is quite evident that Levinas is hiding behind the words of Samuel and offering a specific critique, in talmudic terms, to the phenomenological notion of “world.” Levinas is maintaining here that the ordinary “world” cannot be the true source for “messianism” in so far as the latter implies a deep reconfiguration of morals and ethics. The “world” can provide only a sort of “socialist utopia,” as expressed in the words of Rav Hiyya bar Abba, but it cannot really launch an epoch-changing event like the messianic one. This is impossible for an essential reason: “messianism” implies an ethical as well as metaphysical break into the ontological “horizon” of the ordinary “world,” whereas any political utopia implies the belief that salvation can eventually originate from within the “world” itself.

Yet Levinas is not satisfied with this first examination of the dispute between Samuel and Rav Hiyya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Johanan.
Therefore, he examines also a similar discussion that takes place between Samuel and Rav, his usual opponent in the Talmud, on the notion of “repentance.” After examining several alternatives in identifying who is the individual who is said to be mourning for Israel (bSanh 97b–98a), Levinas summarizes the terms of this dispute as follows: “The two theses propounded by Rab and Samuel seem clearer: . . . either morality . . . will save the world or else what is needed is an objective event that surpasses morality and the individual’s good intentions.”

Levinas’s argumentation goes further by resuming an earlier discussion on “repentance” between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Jehoshua (bSanh 97b) in order to support his main assumption that messianism intrinsically involves an extramundane irruption of the divine into the human history. Therefore, Levinas assimilates the discussion between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Jehoshua to the two previous ones.

For now we can stop at this point of the discussion and proceed with a first evaluation of Levinas’s interpretation. As far as Levinas’s reading is fascinating, it imposes a subtle manipulation of the talmudic text, regardless of its original aims and composition. In the original text of Tractate Sanhedrin, the discussion on the notion of “repentance” is introduced in the middle of two larger textual sections on the time when the Messiah is going to come. The discussion on the notion of “repentance” (bSanh 97b–98a) specifically divides the first investigation on the time of the messianic advent (bSanh 97a–b) from the second one (bSanh 98a). The apparent reasons for this redactional choice are quite obvious: providing a two-step discussion on the same issue of the time of the messianic advent by inserting a new parameter—the moral quality of the individuals who will be living at the time of the messianic advent itself.

Yet Levinas’s treatment of these two discussions is much less philologically and hermeneutically accurate than would at first appear. My assumption is that Levinas manipulated the talmudic source and “supplemented” it with a specific “ethical” argumentation with particular consequences that imposed specific theological-political costs to his interpretation of the text. In order to appreciate this, it is necessary to resume Levinas’s interpretation and to compare it with the original talmudic source.

LEVINAS’S SUPPLEMENTING THE TALMUD

The most important difference between the original page and Levinas’s arrangement of this text is the segmentation of the textual material. The original passage from Tractate Sanhedrin offers a very specific sequence of the textual
portions on which Levinas comments: at first, the debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshuah (bSanh 97b) that anticipates the debate between Samuel and Rav (bSanh 97b–98a), and then—after a long cosmological section on the secular cycles of the messianic times (bSanh 98a–99a)—the debate between Samuel and Rav Hiyya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yohanan (bSanh 99a). This disposition follows both chronological and thematic criteria: on the one hand, it is clear that the Amoraic debate between Samuel and Rav (bSanh 97b–98a) resumes the Tannaitic debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Jehosuha (bSanh 97b); on the other hand, it is clear that the debate between Samuel and Rav (bSanh 99a) concludes the long narrative talmudic section on messianism (bSanh 96b–99a) and, more specifically, resumes the previous discussion on the notion of “repentance,” after a parenthetical discussion on the cosmological evidence of messianic times (bSanh 98a–99a).

Levinas apparently pays attention neither to the complex texture of these talmudic passages nor to the progression from the Tannaitic to the late Amoraic times. On the contrary, he deeply changes the order for reading in two ways: first, he analyzes the debate between Samuel and Rav Hiyya bar Abba (bSanh 99a) before the debate between Samuel and Rav (bSanh 97b–98a); he then encapsulates the early debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Jehoshua (bSanh 97b) within the larger frame of the two debates between Samuel and Rav Hiyya bar Abba, on the one hand, and between Samuel and Rav, on the other hand. The inversion of the talmudic material in Levinas’s commentary can easily be displayed in the following chart.

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<th>Development of the sugya</th>
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It is precisely this “dislocation” of the early Tannaitic debate that plays a very specific role in Levinas’s exegesis. Levinas moves aside the early debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Johoshua with a specific purpose: supplementing his argument about the indisputable extramundane nature of the messianic event. I emphasize here Derrida’s notion of “supplement” that designates, in deconstructive terms, an “inessential extra added to something complete in itself.”25 Accordingly, Levinas at first ignores, then dislocates, and finally resumes
the debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Jehoshua in order to reiterate an
exegetical point—the value of “repentance”—on which he had already com-
mented twice: once while reviewing the debate between Samuel and Rav Hiyya
bar Abba (bSanh 99a) and once while reviewing the debate between Samuel and
Rav (bSanh 97b–98a). What is relevant here is not the simple different disposi-
tion of textual material, rather the effect that Levinas intended to produce by
offering a different segmentation of the text. Levinas is not simply reading the
original text in reverse order; he is also imposing a hermeneutical dynamics into
it so that he can support his own reading of the notion of “repentance” as well as
prevent a specific accusation against his main assumption that messianism would
be the “outbreak”—if not an “evasion”—from the ordinary “world.”

This passage is very subtle. Let us view once again the structure of the
original talmudic text, Levinas’s commentary, and the “supplement” that he
finds for his interpretation.

At first, the original talmudic text offers a progressive line of thoughts
that goes as follows in three fundamental steps:

(1) the Tannaitic debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshuah (bSanh
97b) introduces the alternative between a conditioned and uncondi-
tioned salvation by the Messiah: Rabbi Eliezer maintains that salva-
tion will depend on an economical exchange of good deeds, a sort of
metaphysical do ut des; on the contrary, Rabbi Johoshua believes in a
sort of divine “grace” that will save everyone, regardless of his crimes.

(2) These opinions are then expanded into the later Amoraic debate
between Samuel and Rav (bSanh 97b–98a), who respectively argue
for an unconditioned messianic advent as an “external event” and for
a conditioned event that fundamentally depends on a specific moral,
social, and political commitment of the individuals.

(3) After a digression on the cosmological cycles of messianic times
(bSanh 98a–99a), the previous discussions culminate in the debate
between Samuel and Rav Hiyya bar Abba (bSanh 99a) on the very
nature of the messianic advent: Samuel thinks of the messianic
advent as the irruption of “the Other,” whereas Rav insists on the
moral, social, and political presuppositions to this event. A short
sacerdotal coda to the discussion ends the six pages on messianism
with an eloquent invocation to Paradise and the Garden of Eden.

Levinas rejects this original arrangement of the text, as already remarked.
He starts his commentary from the very last lines of the text on the
Emmanuel Levinas’s Messianism and the World to Come

metaphysical mystery of the end of times, but he is mostly troubled by the possibility that these “messianic texts” might resemble some form of Christianity: “The commentator [the Maharsha] was probably shocked by the idea of redemption which is obtained by the sole effect of suffering and without any positive virtue being required, something that reeks of Christianity [a un fort relent chrétien].”

Therefore, he inverts the order of reading the long talmudic text and begins with the discussion between Samuel and Rav Hiyya bar Abba (bSanh 99a), passing then to the discussion between Samuel and Rav (bSanh 97b–98a), and finally ending with the Tannaitic debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Jehoshua (bSanh 97b).

It is exactly at this point that Levinas exhibits the logic of the “supplement.” This fundamentally consists of holding two contradictory assumptions at the same time and yet maintaining that the one actually sustains, or supplements, the other one.

On the one hand, Levinas claims that the debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Jehoshua should not be interpreted in terms of a divine “grace”: “Precisely, because evil is not simply a ‘backsliding,’ but a profound illness in being, it is the sick person who is first and principal worker of his own healing. This is a unique logic [singulière logique], and the opposite of the logic of grace. I can save you on condition that you return unto me.”

On the other hand, Levinas claims that the debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Jehoshua does actually support a “gracious” form of salvation although this divine intervention is rather described as “brutal”—somehow spelled out in “uncivilized terms”: “Rabbi Joshua’s final argument consists in brutally [brutalement] affirming the deliverance of the world by a fixed date, whether or not men deserve such deliverance.”

This little linguistic detail is particularly relevant because it actually exposes the logic of “supplement” at work here. Levinas intends to keep away from any interpretation of the text that might suggest some theological congruity between Judaism and Christianity, but he cannot help remarking twice—on the basis of two simultaneous discussions—that the messianic advent breaks up the ordinary “horizon” of the “world.” The logic of “supplement” can be seen at work especially when Levinas implicitly applies to these texts his notion of “religion,” as he elaborated on it in his Totality and Infinity: “We propose to call ‘religion’ the bond [lien] that is established between the same [Même] and the other [Autre] without constituting a totality. . . . For the relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results
in no community of concept or totality—a relation without relation [relation sans relation]—we reserve the term religion.”30

The logic of “supplement” exactly intervenes in order to prevent the reader from understanding this phenomenologically neutral definition of “religion” in Christian terms. Levinas intends to avoid the suspicion that this powerful vision of “grace” might be misunderstood as a Christian belief. Particularly eloquent is the empirical, almost trivial expression that he uses: “something that reeks of Christianity [a un fort relent chrétien].”31 This little slip of the pen lowers the religious debate to the level of dispute between Judaism and Christianity, betraying the suspicion that Levinas’s notion of “religion” intends to be not only “phenomenologically” but also “morally” if not even “physiologically” pure from contaminations—from something that actually “reeks” as a popular form of religion.

What are the consequences of this kind of reading? The particular segmentation that Levinas imposes on the talmudic text and especially his interest in avoiding any “contamination” with a popular understanding of the notion of “repentance” have specific costs: the suppression of theological-political nuances in favor of a “metaphysical” appreciation of the notion of “messianism.” This “philosophical reduction” is not infrequent in Levinas’s commentaries on the Talmud and reflects both the hermeneutical method taught by “Monsieur Chouchani” and his own commitment to reviewing phenomenology. Just as his Totality and Infinity appears as a philosophical rephrasing of the biblical books of Genesis and Exodus, so does his commentary on Tractate Sanhedrin appear as a “philosophical reduction” of traditionally Jewish literature and specifically of the religious doctrine of messianism. Levinas’s neglect of the theological-political connotations of this text might then appear inadequate if not paradoxical, but it is rather the consequence of philosophical and phenomenological approach to the text.

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NOTES

1. Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) was an important French philosopher of Lithuanian origins. Most of his philosophical work, written in French, was inspired by Edmund
Husserl’s phenomenology, Martin Heidegger’s “existentialism,” and, later, by rabbinic literature—especially the Talmud. Levinas’s philosophical education began at Strasbourg University in 1924, where he knew the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot and later became one of the very first French intellectuals to have studied Husserl and Heidegger. After World War II, he began teaching at the University of Poitiers in 1961, at the Nanterre campus of the University of Paris in 1967, and at the Sorbonne in 1973, from which he retired in 1979. Scholarship on Levinas is immense and, as maintained by Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, it virtually divides into three “waves”: (1) a “traditional” one, mostly represented by “phenomenological” commentaries on *Totality and Infinity*; (2) a “deconstructive” one, mostly represented by Derrida’s reception of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* and its followers; (3) a sociopolitical one, represented by most recent scholarship. On this, see P. Atterton and M. Calarco, eds., *Radicalizing Levinas* (New York: SUNY Press, 2010). For a recent general exposition of Levinas’s thought, see M. L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).


5. I am referring here to Levinas’s short text, *The Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987 [1948]), in which he turns his attention to an ontology—later called “transcendence” or “metaphysics”—that no longer conforms to the guidelines of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s post-Romantic phenomenology and opens to a different “existential analytics.”


7. Levinas, TI, 39.

8. Ibid., 156.


10. Levinas, TI, 177.


13. Levinas, TI, 299.

14. Ibid., 79.

15. There is indeed a short talmudic quotation in *Totality and Infinity* (201): “to leave men without food is a fault that no circumstances attenuates; the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary does not apply here,’ says Rabbi Yochanan.” Levinas claims this quotation is from *bSanh* 104b, but there is no evidence that such a passage actually exists. Rabbi Eliezer Chrysler (in the talmudic portal *Kollel Iyun ha-Daf*) has recently suggested that Levinas’s quotation was apparently an elaboration of different statements from the folios 103b–104a of Tractate *Sanhedrin*: namely, Rabbi Yohannan’s ruling that inadvertently failing to feed anyone who is in need shall be accounted as a deliberate negligence (*bSanh* 103b) and the *Gemara* support of this view on account of Rav Yehudah in the name of Rav (in *bSanh* 104a). Levinas’s inaccuracy in reporting the quotation from the Talmud should not be judged lightly but rather be accounted as a sign of his talmudic hermeneutics, fundamentally based on the “elaboration” of textual passages rather on their actual “interpretation.” The consequence of this hermeneutical approach will be evident in the following pages.

16. Levinas will comment on *bSanh* 96b–99a (the text analyzed presently here) in the 1963 text *Difficult Freedom*; on *bSanh* 36b–37a in the 1968 *Four Talmudic Readings*; on *bSanh* 67a–68a in the 1977 text *From the Sacred to the Saint*; and in 1988 on *bSanh* 99a–b in his *The Hour of the Nations*.


18. The Aramaic commentary on the mishnaic ruling against a false prophet (*mSanh* 11:5ss) is to be found in the folios *bSanh* 89a–96b. The “little Apocalypse” (G. Stemberger) on “messianic times” is joined after the juridical discussion on the Mishnah.

20. Levinas, DF, 85.

21. Ibid., 89.

22. The Aramaic expression *bar nafley* probably reflects the Greek expression *uìos nefelon* [son of clouds] that would be a deformation or possibly an abridgment of the Greek verse *uìos tou anthropou ewróthēn epi ton nefelon tou ou̇rou̇* [the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky] from the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 24:30) that in turn is an elaboration on the book of Daniel (Dan 7:13). This would imply that Rav Nachman—provided that he is the author of this expression—was aware that the Gospel of Matthew had described Jesus as “the son of man coming on the clouds of the sky.” With respect to this, Rav Nachman’s Aramaic version, *bar nafley*, would provide both the purpose of referring polemically to Jesus and the effort of associating the Messiah with David, who will raise the House of Israel. For a classical identification of these congruences, see H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch. Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, (Munich: Beck, 1956), vol. 2, 956–59; see also C. A. Newsom, *Daniel: A Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2014), 246.


24. Ibid., 72.


26. Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Edeles (later called Maharsha, the acronym for *Morenu Ha-Rav Shmuel Edeles* [Our Master Rabbi Shmuel Edeles], 1555–1631 c.e.) belongs to the first generation of the *Abaronim* [the last ones, from the sixteenth century c.e. on] of the commentators on the Talmud. He was a prominent commentator on the Talmud in Lubin and other Polish cities. His *Hiddushey Maharsha* [Edeles’ Novellae] are usually published in every edition of the Talmud. See D. Bonami, “The Theological Ideas in the Hiddushey Aggadot of Maharsha” (PhD diss., Jewish Theological Seminary, 1976).

27. Levinas, DF, 70.

28. Ibid., 75.

29. Ibid., 77.

30. Levinas, TI, 40 and 80.

31. Levinas, DF, 70. See above.