

# WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL

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We have only the following account of Paul's famous conversion on the road to Damascus in the Acts of the Apostles:

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they had heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9: 3-9)

Alain Badiou notes that after the event of Damascus, Paul turns away from any authority other than the Voice that personally called upon him to become a subject.<sup>1</sup> But what exactly does that Voice say? Although it speaks to him, it does not transmit specific directives or a particular interpretation of the gospel. Instead, it initiates an unscripted "conversion experience" that follows its own course, one that differs from both Moses and the Hebrew prophets, all of whom are conceived as mouthpieces for the speech of God.

What is the significance in Paul's writing of this fidelity to the Voice — the Voice that interpellates Paul on the road to Damascus, but also the inner voice of the Christian liberated from the law, the voice of freedom? In Paul's discourse, the Voice is opposed to Greek wisdom and to Jewish signs and aligned with the mysterious "demonstration" of the spirit: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block [*skandalon*] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1: 22-24).

While the Voice has an authority that supercedes prophecy and reason, it is itself strangely inarticulate. Consider this curious passage from the second letter to the Corinthians, where Paul speaks in the third person of his interpellation by the Voice: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen

years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise...and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Cor. 12: 2-4). He does not hear — or at least cannot convey — *what* the Voice says to him, but only *the fact that* it calls upon him. What I want to consider here is the status of this authority of the Voice in Paul’s discourse and its relation to the problem of faith. What is at stake in Paul’s insistence that the Jews open their ears to a Voice beyond the Law? And why is the Jewish tradition unable or unwilling to hear this voice?

Emmanuel Levinas, in an essay entitled “The Pact,” comments on a passage from the Babylonian Talmud concerning the handing down of the Law to the people of Israel. In this passage, the rabbis note that in the scene of law-giving reported in Deuteronomy, the Israelites are commanded not only to obey each individual interdiction of the Law, but also to uphold “all the words of this Law” (Deut. 27: 26). The Law is to be taken in its entirety in its general spirit.<sup>2</sup> But why, Levinas asks, does the Law demand both a particular and a general form? He writes:

Can the adherence to the Law as a whole, to its general tenor, be distinguished from the ‘yes’ which is said to the particular laws it spells out? Naturally, there has to be a general commitment. The spirit in which a piece of legislation is made has to be understood....For there to be true inner adherence, this process of generalization is indispensable. But why is it necessary to distinguish between this knowledge of the general spirit, and the knowledge of its particular forms of expression? Because we cannot understand the spirit of any legislation without acknowledging the laws it contains. These are two distinct procedures, and the distinction is justified from several particular points of view. Everyone responds to the attempt to encapsulate Judaism in a few ‘spiritual’ principles. Everyone is seduced by what might be called the *angelic essence of the Torah*, to which many verses and commandments can be reduced. This ‘internalization’ of the Law enchants our liberal souls and we are inclined to reject anything which seems to resist the ‘rationality’ or the ‘morality’ of the Torah. (219; emphasis added)

Although Paul’s name never appears here, the passage seems to engage with Paul’s polemic not only in questioning the reduction of the law to its “spirit,” but also in its affirmation of the very reasoning that Paul criticizes under the joint headings of “Greek wisdom” and “Jewish signs.”<sup>3</sup> Crucial to Levinas’ reading, however, is an inattention to anything like the Voice. He notes that “Judaism has always been aware...of elements within it which can not be immediately internalized. Alongside the *mishpatim*, the laws we call [sic] all recognize as just, there are the *hukkim*, those unjustifiable laws in which Satan delights when he mocks the Torah” (219). Despite the absurdity of the ritual of the red heifer, the arcane alimentary prohibitions, and even the act of circumcision, Levinas argues that we cannot dismiss these sometimes incomprehensible adherences as unnecessary or irrelevant compared to the general adherence to the “spirit” of the law. The letter of the law offers a necessary check to what he calls the “angelic essence” of the Law, its purely spiritual dimension.

Levinas then reads the biblical story of Jacob's struggle with the Angel as a cautionary tale about the dangers of succumbing too readily to the "angelism" of the Law. He writes: "There is a constant struggle within us between our two adherences; to the spirit and to what is known as the letter. Both are equally indispensable, which is why two separate acts are discerned in the acceptance of the Torah. Jacob's struggle with the Angel has the same meaning: the overcoming, in the existence of Israel, of the angelism or other-worldliness of pure interiority. Look at the effort with which this victory is won! But is it really won? There is no victor. And when the Angel's clasp is released it is Jacob's religion which remains, a little bruised." The Angel represents "spirit," but also the lure of "pure interiority," an identification with the Law in which it would cease to be Other. Thus it is important to Levinas' reading that the being with whom Jacob wrestles is not God, as Jacob himself believes, but an Angel. As a "purely spiritual being," the Angel is "a principle of generosity, but no more than a principle. Of course, generosity demands an adherence. But the adherence to a principle is not enough; it brings temptation with it, and requires us to be wary and on our guard." What exactly is the temptation? That general principles, and even generous principles, can be inverted in the course of their application, or, as Levinas puts it, "All generous thought is threatened by its own Stalinism" (220).

This threat is acknowledged in the rabbis' creation of the oral law, or Talmud. According to Levinas, the Talmud "is concerned with the passage from the principle embodied in the Law to its possible execution, its concrete effects. If this passage were simply deducible, the Law, in its particular form, would not have demanded a separate adherence." Talmudic casuistry tries "to identify the precise moment within it when the general principle is at risk of turning into its opposite; it surveys the general from the standpoint of the particular." In this way, says Levinas, it "preserves us from ideology." In short, "the Talmud is the struggle with the Angel" (ibid.). On the one hand, it is the struggle not to "recognize" the angel or to presume that one is familiar with its essence. On the other, it is also the admonition to struggle against a danger that presents itself under the guise of generosity — and perhaps even love.

Jean-François Lyotard suggests that Paul interrupts this struggle in his appeal to the mystery of the incarnation: "The Word was made flesh and came among us: is this not to announce that the Voice voices itself by itself, and to say that it asks not so much to be scrupulously examined, interpreted, understood and acted so as to make justice reign, but loved?"<sup>4</sup> The struggle that defines Jewish ethics is thus inverted: it is no longer the "angelism" of the Voice that one must struggle against, but the letter of the law that limits this euphoric insistence. The Voice demands not to be examined and enacted, but "loved."

What, then, is the meaning of the "freedom" Paul proclaims, the freedom revealed to him by the Voice? On the one hand, it involves a freedom *from the Law* in its proscriptive formulations, on the other, it implies an identification with a principle *behind* the law that both fulfills it and

renders it obsolete. In this regard, Paul is very much an ancestor of Kant, since, as Hannah Arendt observes, “Kant’s spirit is the demand that a man...go beyond the mere call of obedience and identify his own will with the principle behind the law — the source from which the law sprang.”<sup>5</sup> But they are also radically different, in that for Kant this “principle behind the law” is practical reason, whereas for Paul it is the authority of the Voice.

In making this distinction, I am borrowing from Juliet Flower MacCannell’s work on fascism and the voice of conscience, which is a reading not of Paul, but of Adolf Eichmann. The architect of Hitler’s Final Solution claimed to be guided in his moral conduct by Kant’s categorical imperative. Following Arendt, MacCannell suggests that the “principle behind the law” with which Eichmann identified was not practical reason, but the will of the Führer, incarnated in the Voice as object *a*.<sup>6</sup> MacCannell assimilates his position to the structure of perversion, which Lacan defines as “a response...to the jouissance of the Other as *voice*, rather than to the Other as *speech*.” For him, speech is defined as the field of the symbolic pact, “the social contract that divides us from each other as mutual aggressors.”<sup>7</sup> By contrast, “*Voice* is already *object a*; the embodiment or bearer of a ‘principle behind the law.’ It took shape in Lacan’s discourse as one of the four fundamental *objects a* (gaze, voice, breast, feces) around which the fantasy that structures drive circulates.” Speech, as the field of the signifier, works to limit the insistence of jouissance by erecting barriers against it, while the voice as object *a* is a bearer of the deadly jouissance that insists within the fantasy. Thus, speech as pact protects against not only the aggression of others, but also the aggression of the voice itself. In the structure of perversion, the pervert foregoes the protections offered by the law, “*identify[ing] himself with the object a* in its role as agent of the *Jouissance of the Other*.”<sup>8</sup> In Sade’s work, for instance, this identification is evident in the libertine’s attention to the maternal voice, which appears in the form of the uncastrated “voice of Nature” that guides him in his systematic critique of symbolic authority.

In appealing to this argument, I do not mean to imply that Paul is a fascist or a pervert (although I would not exclude the second possibility, which is arguably the upshot of Nietzsche’s notorious psychological study of the apostle). What is striking is that for Paul, *nothing* comes to limit the authority of the Voice. As Lyotard writes, “Neither Jewish signs nor Greek proofs will be offered. Every intermediary is bypassed. You will hear the incarnation only if the incarnated Voice speaks to *you*, speaks through you, in you.”<sup>9</sup> Or, as Paul himself puts it in First Corinthians, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit...And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truth to those who possess the Spirit. The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one” (1 Cor. 2: 9-10, 13-15). In Paul’s

claim that the mystery can only be discerned spiritually, without ever passing through speech, we see the insistence of what Levinas calls the “angelism” of the Law, which appeals to a spiritual “principle behind the law” that underlies — but also supercedes — the Law’s authority.

What does it mean to say, as it does in the final line of this citation, that the “spiritual man” is “judged by no one”? Of course, the spiritual man is not subject to the judgment of the law, wielded by those who are “jealous” of the Christian’s freedom. But this is not simply a question of “getting off” without judgment because the cost of being judged by no one is to *profoundly deliver oneself over to the violence of the Other* in the form of the *absolute authority* of the Voice. As Paul says again and again, “I was freed to the law so that I might become a slave to Christ.” And after the event of Damascus, the Acts of the Apostles attributes to Jesus the words: “I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9: 16). As Slavoj Žižek has argued, the most horrifying, superegoic dimension of God is witnessed not in Judaism, as is often maintained, but in Christian love itself.<sup>10</sup> Levinas’ reading is insightful in that it locates this superegoic quality in the spirit or “angelism” of the Law, which in its very generosity veers in the direction of what he calls “Stalinism.”

Amazingly, Paul makes the exposure to this superegoic violence the very basis of ethics, and in so doing identifies not simply a hermeneutic error or a lack of faith, but a severe ethical failing or cowardice in the refusal to open oneself to the Voice — not just to its love, but to its violence. Perhaps this is what Lacan means when he claims that “Christianity naturally ended up inventing a God such that he is the one who gets off,”<sup>11</sup> a God of limitless jouissance. Israel, on the other hand, is not always so eager to surrender to this enjoyment; she has reservations about exposing herself to the “love” of God without protection. In this respect, it is significant that Levinas’ reading of the angelism of the Law appears in a reading of a Talmudic passage concerning the handing down of the law at Sinai, which implies a very different conception of the Voice. In his commentary on the Hebrew decalogue, introduced by the verse “and God spoke all of these words [all together]” (Exod. 20: 1), the medieval rabbi Rashi suggests that the voice of God took the form of a single terrifying utterance, so unbearable that the people of Israel begged Moses to shield them from God’s voice by speaking the commandments for them, mediating its awesome force.<sup>12</sup> This gloss contests the stock reading according to which Judaism is said to be marked by the tragedy of God’s absence, his withdrawal from the “dead” letter that signals his retreat from the human community. Rashi makes clear that the Israelites’ relation to God is marked by a profound dread of the unmediated divine presence, an insight that casts the stakes of the Jewish law in a different light.<sup>13</sup>

In his provocative essay “The Sacrifice of Sacrifice,”<sup>14</sup> Frank Vande Veire notes that one of the core innovations of early Judaism was the shift from ritual human sacrifice to law-based observance, the biblical proof text of which is God’s intercession on behalf of Isaac at the moment

when Abraham prepares to slit his son's throat. Vande Veire argues that the corollary of this shift is the fact that it is no longer possible to manage divine terror: God can no longer be seduced or appeased with gifts. The result is a "spiritualization" of sacrifice, which now takes the form of unconditional respect for the Law. In this sense, the non-sacrifice of Isaac corresponds to a demand for an entirely uneconomic, unconditional sacrifice, one that can be required at any moment, without advance warning. As an example, he cites the infamous episode from the Book of Exodus, where God, after having called upon Moses to be his prophet, suddenly decides to kill him. Moses is saved only by the ingenious ruse of Zipporah, who quickly circumcises their infant son and touches the bloody foreskin to Moses' feet, effectively circumcising him and so warding off the demonic attack (Exod. 4: 24-26). Vande Veire interprets this impromptu circumcision to be a reminder that God can at any time impose his insatiable demands. In this reading, the act of circumcision is not so much a protection against divine terror as an extension of it, a mark of the Israelites' profound subjection to the destructive force of divine wrath.

I would interpret this episode differently, however. For me, this passage best expresses the stakes of circumcision in the Jewish tradition, in which it appears as a barrier *against* the deity that is intimately related to the function of speech as a limit against the Voice. The act of circumcision is not just a submission to the deity's exorbitant demands, but a talismanic protection against them. It is a purely symbolic sacrifice — and ultimately a rather modest one — that serves to ward off something much more radical. Having verified Moses' circumcision, God is no longer at liberty to strike against the mere mortal who stands helpless before him; he cannot further demand an arm, a leg, and so on. As the act that seals the covenant with God, circumcision is not only a demand imposed from without, but a pact. Most obviously, it is a mark of election that identifies the subject of the covenant as under God's protection, but more importantly, it is an act that protects its subject against the unmediated wrath of God himself.<sup>15</sup> Israel's covenant with God is a mutually binding contract, one that commits both parties to certain obligations with respect to one another (although there is no denying, as Vande Veire quite rightly observes, that those obligations are asymmetrical, and that God has a fairly open-ended time frame in which to make good on his promises). In this sense, the law limits the satisfaction not only of the subject who submits to it, but also of the deity himself.

In the epistle to the Romans, Paul argues that to live under the law is to live with the impossibility of ever fulfilling the Law, since one would have to fulfill its precepts in their entirety, something the flesh can never achieve (Gal. 3: 10). It is true that the Jewish law cannot be "fulfilled," but to the extent that one lives within its confines, it nonetheless functions as a protective barrier against something that is considerably more difficult to live with — the limitless jouissance of the Other. Lacan says of the Ten Commandments that "whether or not we obey them, we still cannot help hearing them — in their indestructible character they prove to be the *very laws of*

*speech.*”<sup>16</sup> This is because “the condition sine qua non of speech” is the “distance between the subject and *das Ding*,”<sup>17</sup> the deadly jouissance that represents the ultimate “fulfillment” of the subject, its annihilation or absorption by the superegoic Other. In contrast, consider the notion of “sinning in the heart” elaborated in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5), which holds that to think lustful thoughts about a woman other than one’s wife is already to commit adultery, even in the absence of an adulterous act. By this logic, it is no longer possible to fulfill the Law simply by not transgressing it or by avoiding the object it designates as abject. As a result, the Law loses its function as a protective barrier.

The difference between the two ethics can best be illustrated by reference to the commandment against lying, or “bearing false witness.” Lacan suggests that this may be the cruelest commandment of all because the subject is inseparable from the ability to lie.<sup>18</sup> But if there is a commandment against lying, it is because, in the context of Hebraic law, it is *possible to lie*; in Judaism there is no supposition of divine omniscience. Conversely, when Jesus introduces the notion of sinning in the heart, and thus the transparency of the heart to God, he suggests that it is no longer even possible to lie. In the process, he lifts the barrier against the deity that is so central to Judaism. In this vein, the gospel of John famously asserts that Christ “dwells in us” (John 1: 14). While Christian doctrine tends to emphasize the positive side of this cohabitation (the Christian is not alone, is redeemed from his fallen state, and so on), it also introduces an ominous new possibility, one markedly absent in Judaism: the subject’s radical exposure to invasion by the deity. In this sense, the psychotic Doctor Schreber’s fantasy of being anally raped by God is not so much a delusional departure from the logic of Christianity as an intuition of the superegoic violence implicit in the intimate relationship between God and man.<sup>19</sup>

According to Badiou, the message of Paul’s gospel is that “we *can* overcome our impotence, and rediscover what the law has separated us from.”<sup>20</sup> This reading posits the Jewish law as one in which the subject is impotent with respect to the all-powerful Other. But what it does not acknowledge is that this impotence is itself a kind of potency in that it carves out a space in which the subject can live by limiting the Other and thus rendering it impotent. In other words, what the Jewish law has “separated us from” is not merely the object that would complete or fulfill us, but the superegoic jouissance of the Other. Paul’s treatment of the law casts a new light on the problem of the pact as a protection against this violence. In this sense he is very much the heir of Jesus, who presents himself as the one who violently breaks apart all pacts, separating brother from sister and father from son. As he says in the gospel of Matthew, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10: 34). The stakes of this position become clear in Paul’s reversal of the attitude toward the law implied in Jacob’s struggle with the Angel, a reversal whose implications are far reaching and sometimes contradictory. This struggle seems to be already implied or encrypted in the event of Damascus, as a heritage it both alludes to and displaces. On the

road to Damascus, Paul, like Jacob, is waylaid by the Angel of the Lord. Both men are travelling alone in anticipation of a possible confrontation: Jacob with his brother Esau, and Paul with the Christian converts of Damascus. In both cases, the divine intervention results in a wound: Jacob is made lame, and Paul is temporarily blinded. Both men are renamed, and both events result in new covenants: the naming of Israel as the heir to Abraham's promise and the "new alliance" with the Gentiles that will become Paul's special mission.

Yet, the two episodes are almost diametrically opposed in their subjective and hermeneutic implications. In Jacob's story, the renaming that follows the struggle gives birth to the nation of Israel, a name that is traditionally interpreted as either "the one who strives with God" or "God strives." Their struggle results in a mutual wounding, in which each strives against and marks the other without managing to prevail over him. Their parting at dawn is really a kind of "mutual non-aggression treaty," in which blessings are exchanged as part of a pact. But it is significant that the story Levinas reads as an allegory of the transmission of the law also produces a law: one of the *hukkim*, or "unjustifiable laws," concerning the taboo against eating the sciatic muscle of the hip, where Jacob is marked by his opponent. In this sense it also concerns the dangers inherent in trying to "digest" the law, to presume to internalize its spirit.<sup>21</sup> What the story of Jacob tells us is that the Other, and even the traces it leaves on the subject's flesh, cannot be "digested" or sublated. The taboo is a reminder that the encounter with the Other causes the subject to lose some part of himself, the attribution of the name causing something of his being to fall under erasure. But in delivering the wound, the Angel is also checked, and so made to confess its limitations. Although it is customary to read the Jacob story as an allegory of castration, what is not always appreciated is that it is not only Jacob who is castrated, but God as well; the result of the contest is a mutual checking, a mutual castration.

The scene of Paul's conversion both recalls and displaces the Genesis story. Paul is stricken with blindness only to be filled with "vision," wounded only to be made whole again. If for Levinas it is Jacob's "religion" that emerges from the struggle a little bit wounded, here it is Paul's faith that emerges, whole and intact. Whereas Jacob struggles with an opponent who delivers his blessings without revealing his name or his character, Paul's revelation is complete. Jesus reveals himself to Paul as the living word of God; the Voice speaks to him and to him alone, calling him into being out of nothingness. As he tells the Corinthians, "by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15: 10). The vision on the road to Damascus is not the reaffirmation of an existing pact, but a violent rupture. It marks Paul's birth out of Saul's ashes, but it also gives rise to Christianity as a displacement and erasure of the Jewish tradition. It represents the overturning of the struggle implied in Israel's relation to the Law, in which that struggle is put to rest "once and for all" (Heb. 10: 10) by the advent of the Voice. In the words "why do you persecute me?" it seems that Paul hears a call to end not only the persecution of the Voice, but also the struggle against it.

Paul's polemic does not end there, however. His reading of faith invites not only the "Stalinism" inherent in listening only to the angelism of the Law, but also a turning of that angelism *against* the Jews. This is why I find it interesting that the Voice that interpellates Paul on the road to Damascus is credited only with one specific enunciation: "why are you persecuting me?" It seems that Paul understands that question, at least initially, as follows: *Why are you, Saul the Jew, persecuting me, the living Voice, the resurrection, with the Law, the dead letter?* But when Paul the Christian invents figural reading, the Voice insists in a new way, in the form of a voice not voiced, with a new question: *Why aren't you persecuting the Jews instead of me?* Even as it cries out against its own persecution, the Voice demands a sacrifice.

Augustine provides another account of the Jacob story in *City of God*. There the angel is understood to be Christ himself, who wounds the Jews but spares the Christians. He writes:

This angel obviously presents a type of Christ. For the fact that Jacob 'prevailed over' him (the angel, of course, being a willing loser to symbolize the hidden meaning) represents the passion of Christ, in which the Jews seemed to prevail over him. And yet Jacob obtained a blessing from the very angel whom he had defeated; thus the giving of the name was the blessing. Now 'Israel' means 'seeing God'; and the vision of God will be the reward of all the saints at the end of the world. Moreover, the angel also touched the apparent victor on the broad part of his thigh, and thus made him lame. And so the same man, Jacob, was at the same time blessed and lame — blessed in those who among this same people of Israel have believed in Christ, and crippled in respect of those who do not believe. For the broad part of the thigh represents the general mass of the race. For in fact it is to the majority of that stock that the prophetic statement applies, 'They have limped away from their paths.'<sup>22</sup>

For Augustine, the Christian is above all the one for whom "wounding" is no longer necessary because Christ, "being the willing loser," has assumed the wound himself and thus preempted their wounds. For the Jews, however, the angel of God becomes an avenging angel, the angel of the apocalypse. Those who lack faith will be wounded, disinherited, and condemned to slavery.

This reference to Augustine is not as much of a digression as it may appear. Its proof text is Paul's typological reading of Hagar and Sarah as representative of the distinction between the "Jerusalem of the flesh," in slavery with her children, and the "Jerusalem above," born free through the promise (Gal. 4: 22-31). It is well known that Paul's reading of the Abraham saga is structured by two oppositions: between slavery and freedom, and between faith and works. But perhaps more fundamental, and much less discussed, is the implied opposition between faith and *doubt*. Consider Paul's synopsis of Genesis 17, where God promises Abraham that he and his barren wife will have a child through the covenant: "He *did not weaken in faith* when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. *No distrust made him waver* concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being *fully*

*convinced* that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was ‘reckoned to him as righteousness’” (Rom. 4: 19-22; emphasis added). But in the text of Genesis, Abraham greets God’s words very differently: “Abraham fell upon his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?’” (Gen. 17: 17). When the same promise is made to Sarah in the following chapter, the same incredulous laughter erupts once more. While this laughter has been interpreted in many ways, it would be difficult, I think, to read it as an expression of simple faith.<sup>23</sup> Certainly the God of Genesis does not read it that way. Immediately following Sarah’s outburst, he says to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?’” At these words, “Sarah denied, saying ‘I did not laugh,’ for she was afraid.” To which God replies, “Oh yes, you did laugh” (Gen. 18: 13-14).

Though God clearly reads the laughter as a sign of doubt or disbelief, it is important that he doesn’t punish it. His rebuke of Sarah is more comical than truly stern, anticipating the patience and even fondness with which he will later entertain Abraham’s doubts when he questions the soundness of making the righteous few of Sodom and Gomorrah perish with the sinners. So why, for Paul, must this doubting laughter be foreclosed? Because Abraham’s distrust of the word of God introduces the possibility that the Voice itself might be castrated, that in having to pass through the signifier it must necessarily lose something of his power.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, Augustine’s characterization of the Jew’s lack of belief as a “wound” is a displacement designed to avoid acknowledging doubt — the doubt that points to a wound *in God himself*.

We are all familiar with Paul’s rereading of circumcision as a “circumcision of the heart,” in which the cutting of the flesh is replaced by the internal mark of faith (Rom. 2: 25-29). But how does Paul have to “circumcise” the Hebrew Bible to arrive at his vision of faith? What has to be “cut off” or trimmed away? In my view, it is not only the “letter” of the law, but also the doubt it sustains, that is, whatever undercuts or disbelieves the authority of the Voice. In the Voice that interpellates him on the road to Damascus, Paul hears another question: *Why aren’t you persecuting and prosecuting the doubt that stands in the way of love, that doubt that seeks to castrate the Voice?* Perhaps this is what Lyotard means when he writes that “Paul’s suffering, his own passion, consists in having to kill the father of his own tradition, or at least in having to pronounce him dead”<sup>25</sup> — that is, in having to kill the doubt that defines Abraham in the Jewish tradition.



1. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 17.
2. See Emmanuel Levinas, "The Pact," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 218. Subsequent references to this essay will appear parenthetically within the text.
3. In the "attempt to encapsulate Judaism in a few 'spiritual' principles," it is hard not to hear an allusion to Jesus' celebrated reduction of the Ten Commandments to the principle of love (Matt. 22: 37-40), the proof text for Paul's assault on the Jewish law.
4. Jean-François Lyotard, "On a Hyphen," in Lyotard and Eberhard Gruber, *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Prometheus, 1999), 15.
5. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963), 121.
6. See Juliet Flower MacCannell, "Facing Fascism: A Feminine Politics of Jouissance," in Willy Apollon and Richard Feldstein, eds., *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 73, 70. A revised version was reprinted with somewhat different wording in MacCannell's *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 127-152.
7. MacCannell, "Facing Fascism," 69.
8. *Ibid.*, 70.
9. Lyotard, "On a Hyphen," 23.
10. See, in particular, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).
11. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 76.
12. Is it a coincidence that, having heard the terrible Voice, the Israelites turn immediately to building the golden calf? It is as if they need to limit this insistence by erecting a barrier against it in the form of the idol's concrete image. According to this reading, the building of the golden calf and the acceptance of the law are not as opposed as they may appear, since both function to limit the insistence of the Voice.
13. "Rashi explains that first all the commandments were uttered by God in a single instant. Then, God repeated the first two commandments word for word. Following that, the people were afraid that they could no longer endure the awesome holiness of God's voice and they asked that Moses repeat the remaining eight commandments to them." *Aseres Hadibros / The Ten Commandments: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, ed. Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, trans. Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer (Brooklyn: Artscroll Mesorah, 1981), 23. For an excellent reading of both Rashi's commentary and the stakes of the voice within the logic of the decalogue as a whole, see Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard, "Lacan and the Ten Commandments," *diacritics* (in press).
14. See Frank Vande Veire, "The Sacrifice of Sacrifice," in *Wieder Religion? Christentum im zeitgenössischen kritischen Denken (Lacan, Zizek, Badiou u.a.)*, ed. Marc De Kesel and Dominiek Hoens, trans. Erik Vogt, forthcoming from Turia + Kant.
15. In a way, this demonic manifestation, which is conceived as something that must be guarded against rather than welcomed, is not unrelated to the appearance of the Voice in Paul. The same notion of jouissance is at stake in each case. Even in the blood sacrifice at the heart of the passover ritual, it is striking that the lamb's blood painted on the lintel of the house serves not to exalt the Israelites over the Egyptians or shield them from their might, but to protect the members of the household from YHWH himself.
16. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 174; emphasis added.

17. Ibid., 69.
18. “‘Thou shalt not lie’ is the commandment in which the intimate link between desire, in its structuring function, with the law is felt most tangibly. In truth, this commandment exists to make us feel the true function of the law.... ‘Thou shalt not lie’ as a negative precept has as its function to withdraw the subject of enunciation from that which is enunciated.... It is there that I can say ‘Thou shalt not lie’ — there where I lie, where I repress, where I, the liar, speak. In ‘Thou shalt not lie’ as law is included the possibility of the lie as the most fundamental desire.... Another proof is that of the cries of anguish lawyers emit whenever it is a question, in some more or less grotesque and mythical form, of using a lie detector. Must we conclude from this that the respect of the human person involves the right to lie?” Ibid., 81-82.
19. See Freud’s discussion of Schreber’s autobiography in “Psycho-Analytic Notes On an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 12: 3-82.
20. Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 23.
21. For Levinas’ own analysis of the problem of “digestion” as a mode of relation to the other, see “Metaphysics and Transcendence,” the first chapter of *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
22. Saint Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984), 704.
23. For my own reading of Sarah’s laughter, see the chapter entitled “Israel, Divine Hostess” in *The Hostess, My Neighbor: Hospitality and the Expropriation of Identity*, forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press. A shorter version of this chapter was published under the title “Israel as Host(ess): Hospitality in the Bible and Beyond,” in *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 3.1-2 (1999): < <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v3i12/mcnult.htm> >.
24. According to Lyotard, Abraham’s and Sarah’s laughter underscores the possible misrecognition that always presides over the transmission of the divine signifier: “the pure signifier, the tetragram... can always come to be lacking, and to signify something other than what the one who was called thought it did. It is this failure that makes one laugh.” “Mainmase,” *The Hyphen*, 10.
25. Lyotard, “On a Hyphen,” 16.

