

Like Bread from One's Mouth: Emmanuel Levinas and Reading Scripture with the Other

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Abstract: Discussions of alterity in biblical hermeneutics wrestle with paradox. While attempts to “speak for” the other frequently reduce to the same, interpretive approaches safeguarding difference are often unable to respond to concrete needs of actual others. Emmanuel Levinas’s efforts to negotiate this paradox serve biblical hermeneutics well, challenging interpreters to recognise the call to responsibility encountered in the face of the other. Levinas himself is not without his others, and conversation with christology and Eucharistic ecclesiology (represented here by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Miroslav Volf, and John Zizioulas) challenges him toward more coherent accounts of transcendence in the human other, and of the communal obligations of the church toward the other. With these cautions in view, this article commends Levinas as a guide for breaking the bread of Scripture with others, even – and especially – when this demands “the bread from one’s mouth”.

DURING A CRUCIAL STAGE OF WRITING THIS ARTICLE, I was interrupted by a phone call from a neighbour. His tone was urgent as he relayed his predicament: he had been evicted, and as one bearing the marks of a long struggle with mental health, it would not be easy to find replacement accommodation. Would he be welcome in my home? The irony of the situation did not elude me: as he spoke, my preoccupation with biblical hermeneutics and the other seemed too important to be compromised by such hospitality. And yet, from a point beyond these academic considerations, his voice intruded.

While first-person singular anecdotes may appear inappropriate in a discussion of biblical hermeneutics, this illustration succinctly conveys the motivation and argument of this article. Like the priest and Levite on the Jericho road, we are conscious of the Levitical mandate to love one’s neighbour, and have devised interpretive methods to read the Bible

accordingly. And yet, preoccupied with these hermeneutical considerations, we cross to the other side, ignoring the stranger lying in the gutter. How does the presence of *this* other affect (and effect) our reading of Scripture? Does our reading enable hospitality and welcome upon their intrusion, or hostility and rigidity?

Arguably the twentieth century's foremost expositor of alterity, the work of Emmanuel Levinas serves us well in considering these questions. Though Levinas's portrayal of the other¹ is in philosophical terms, it is here commended to biblical hermeneutics, and will be discussed within the discourse of this theological tradition. However, as a guide for the distinctly Christian practices of interpretation, Levinas takes us only so far. While his hermeneutical contribution is vital for biblical interpretation, his articulations of corporate commitment to the other, and of the transcendence encountered in the human other are shaped by his own confessional and philosophical commitments. Here, the Eucharistic and christological resources of the theological tradition augment Levinas's contribution, offering a primordial communality in the body of Christ, and an account of the Other who meets us in the face of the other.

Levinas's work is primarily concerned with morality and the "holiness" of the other, and hence this article does not present a "method" of interpretation, but rather an interpretive relationality and spirituality that should characterise encounters with the other and

1. A prefatory note regarding the expression "the other" in this essay: a categorical definition of the other would be contradictory to Levinas's enterprise. However, it is recognised that the connotations of this term differ significantly between thinkers. The other in Levinas's discourse (*l'Autre; l'Autrui*) is not simply the dialectical opposition of the same, but is wholly other. Nor is the other portrayed in psychoanalytic terms as the object of desire; for Levinas the other most commonly represents the other human being with whom I have an ethical relation. See Simon Critchley, "Introduction", in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 1-32, 14.

Frequently Levinas characterises the other as the "widow", "stranger", "poor", or "orphan", with particular emphasis on their concrete needs of hunger and destitution (in later writing he also uses *prochain*, the biblical "neighbour"). In his illuminating essay on the other in Levinas, Robert Bernasconi cautions an over-literal reading of these terms, noting that "over and beyond their cultural meaning, these terms...possess an enigmatic or exorbitant meaning that exceeds their phenomena" (Robert Bernasconi, "strangers and Slaves in the Land of Egypt: Levinas and the Politics of Otherness", in Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz [eds.], *Difficult Justice: Levinas, Ethics and Politics* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006] 246-61, 249.) However, while indicating the manner in which the "widow", "orphan", "poor", and "stranger", signify phenomenologically in Levinas's work, Bernasconi neglects their biblical signification which echoes throughout his philosophical and confessional writing. And while Bernasconi's caution must be heeded, this enquiry into biblical hermeneutics notes that Scripture reflects God's interest in particular others – most often those who are literally widowed, orphaned, impoverished, or outcast – and hence the other in this article is conceived cognisant of this biblical interest.

Scripture. Exploring the play between Scripture as the “bread of life” and the demand of the other for “bread from one’s mouth”, it concludes that reading Scripture with the other can only be a hospitable relation of proximity, where breaking bread together leads to new and transformative encounters with Christ.

THE CLAIM OF THE OTHER

Concern for the other has captivated discussions of hermeneutics in recent decades. Inside and outside of the Academy, we have become increasingly aware of our situatedness, discovering that “what counts as true for one group is often...a manipulative disguise to legitimate power-claims by another”.² Interpreters of Scripture have not been exempt from the critique of suspicion; historically dominated by white male scholars of privilege, biblical interpretation has its own unfortunate history of sanctioning oppression. Confronted with those who are different, “our instinct has been to subjugate them to our system of identity”, Anselm Min observes, “reduc[ing] and violat[ing] them in their integrity as other”.³

Generally speaking, biblical hermeneutics has responded to the claim of the other in two directions. The first movement has attempted to interpret Scripture “listening to” or “speaking for” those traditionally “other” to the Western theological enterprise.⁴ Whether in gendered, sexual, racial, socio-political, or postcolonial terms, such contributions have been influential, bringing new heterogeneity to biblical interpretation, and are undoubtedly to be celebrated. But in what sense do these contributions encourage *our* encounter with the other in the reading of Scripture? Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has correctly noted the “drive to unity and essence” in many such attempts: while speaking for the other, they ultimately foster sameness, conflating diverse and varied particularities into “women’s experience”, or “the African quest for liberation”.⁵ That “grass-roots” readings of Scripture from Serbia to Samoa can be immediately acquired from virtually any point in the

2. Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: on Meaning, Manipulation, and Promise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 6.

3. Anselm Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World: a Postmodern Theology after Postmodernism* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004) 35.

4. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s influential article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

5. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Politics of Otherness: Biblical Interpretation as a Critical Praxis for Liberation”, in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (eds.), *Expanding the View: Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) 140-56, esp. 143.

world – and in English translation – also diminishes the otherness of these readings. As Stanley Hauerwas has observed, Western society harbours the belief that “there is no ‘otherness’ that is not capable of being understood if we just work hard enough at it”.⁶ With such effortless translation, the distance between these outsiders and ourselves disappears. Furthermore, as Christine D. Pohl insights, ultimately our fascination with these distant others inoculates rather than empowers us. Consequently, they “delude us into thinking that by simply knowing about [them] we are somehow sharing in the suffering of others”.⁷ In entertaining such hermeneutical solidarity with the other on our page, we miss the other on our doorstep.

Concern regarding this movement towards sameness has informed a second direction in biblical hermeneutics. For many thinkers, the Holocaust obliterated the possibility of ethical or hermeneutical principles based on commonality, prompting instead the championing of difference. Consequently, such thinkers display reticence toward totalising structures of thought that subjugate difference, including those of metaphysics, ontology, and of language itself. Taking cues from Jacques Derrida and John Caputo, biblical hermeneutics has offered readings of scripture that seek to “subvert totalities, disrupt the same... and destabilise all systems and fundamentalisms – by exposing them to the shock of alterity, the demand of the others...”.⁸ Such approaches, given their nuanced analyses of language, are particularly conscious of the danger of speaking of the other, lest they be violated by the totalities inherent in language. And yet, despite the intellectual rigour of such articulations, they have invited critique for their inability to meaningfully respond to the concrete needs of the other. As Anselm Min observes of this hermeneutic, “it may offer prayers and tears for the coming of the wholly other and its messianic justice, but it does not want to dirty its hands...”.⁹ Furthermore, avoidance of the other precludes the possibility of our own transformation; hence Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s suspicion that poststructuralist thought belies “the fear of encountering the other...the fear that the encounter may change us, the fear that *we* may be ‘undone’”.¹⁰

6. Stanley Hauerwas, “On Witnessing Our Story: Christian Education in Liberal Societies”, in *Schooling Christians: “Holy Experiments” in American Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) esp. 214n1.

7. Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 91.

8. Min, *The Solidarity of Others*, 30.

9. Min, *The Solidarity of Others*, 44.

10. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 187.

With regard to the other, then, biblical hermeneutics wrestles with paradox. Efforts to speak for the other in biblical hermeneutics invariably risk nullifying her otherness. And yet biblical interpretation obsessed with preserving difference forfeits the ability to respond ethically to the needs of the other. At this hermeneutical impasse, the work of Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas will prove germane, for his work has been constantly motivated by this paradox.

LEVINAS AND THE OTHER¹¹

Memory of the Holocaust underlies much of Levinas's writing, which addresses not only totalitarianism, but totalities in all their guises: "The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy" (*TI* 21). Radically departing from his predecessors, Levinas's critique is not simply levelled at political or religious totalities, but more fundamentally at the ontological foundations of philosophy itself. "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology", Levinas observes, "a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being" (*TI* 43). Where accounts of being are prior, ethical considerations of the other are subsidiary, and invariably a reduction to the same. Consequently, Levinas's work looks beyond self-centred epistemologies toward more ethical ways of knowing:

Next to Greek philosophy, which promotes the act of knowing as spiritual act par excellence, man¹² is he who seeks truth. The Bible

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11. Abbreviations are used for the following works of Emmanuel Levinas:
EI Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo, translated by Richard A. Cohen. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).
EN Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Athlone, 1998).
JS "On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures." *Cross Currents* 44:4 (Winter 1994/95) <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=1&hid=103&si_d=dfabac3a> (30 July 2007).
OB Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006).
RJ "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition", in Seán Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader*, translated by Sarah Richmond (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
TI Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007).
12. From Simone de Beauvoir onwards, the deficiencies in Levinas's understanding of gender have been well documented (though regrettably this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper). Such critique comes not simply as a response to his use of patriarchal language, but more significantly, his characterisation of "the feminine" as bearing the attributes of alterity. In response, many writing in Levinas's defense have argued that his account of alterity in fact precedes issues of gender. An excellent collection of essays debating the relationship between Levinas's work and gender is offered in Tina Chanter

teaches us that man is he who loves his neighbour...a modality of meaningful life, of thinking as fundamental – I would say more fundamental – than...truth as knowledge of objects.¹³

In the face of the other, Levinas observes an obligation that is “primordial” and “an-archic”, preceding any ontological formulation (or *arche*) that we may offer. However, morality and ethics cannot be abandoned, lest there be no ground upon which to oppose genocide and other “anti-semitisms”. On what basis then can otherness be respected without inevitably lapsing into totality? Levinas’s response is “founded in the idea of infinity” (TI 26), which he draws from Descartes’ *Third Meditation*. Countering his “anti-totalising” peers, Levinas not only recognises the validity of metaphysical discourse, but asserts its primacy. In contrast to “Greek philosophy”, Levinas posits an unapologetically Hebraic understanding, in which the other reveals a certain transcendence: the stranger at the door as a divine messenger in disguise.

Levinas writes in the mode of moral philosophy akin to Buber, Rosenzweig, and indeed the biblical tradition. Thematic to such thought, Hillary Putnam argues, is the belief that “there is a need for something *prior* to principles or a constitution, without which the best principles and the best constitution would be worthless”.¹⁴ Thus Levinas’s contribution is in terms that precede method, a morality of ethical obligation to the other. Or more precisely, *my* obligation to the other – *mine*, and nobody else’s! Responsibility to the other cannot be distilled to abstract principles applicable to all others. Hence Levinas’s frequent citation of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others” (OB 146).

Separation and Enjoyment

Distinctive to Levinas is his account of radical “separation” between the interiority of the same and the exteriority of the other – an unrelated relation that cannot be conceived through oppositional logic. Simon Critchley explains that “if I conceive of the relation to the other in terms of understanding, correlation, symmetry, reciprocity, equality and

(ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) 53, cited in Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: an Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) 223.

14. Hilary Putnam, “Levinas and Judaism”, in Critchley and Bernsconi, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 36.

even...recognition, then that relation is totalised".¹⁵ For Levinas the other is not a dialectically conceived "negation of the same", and yet neither is it hermetically isolated, for this would prevent encounter (*TI* 305). Levinas thus concludes that the door between the same and the other must be "at the same time open and closed" (*TI* 149).

Interiority, for Levinas, is a self located "at home" (*chez soi*), and is characterised by enjoyment (*jouissance*). It is content, and does not seek to account for the exteriority of the other. Enjoyment recognises a self that "that lives *somewhere*, from *something*", enjoying ""good soup"... spectacles, work, ideas, sleep", and "consummating terrestrial and celestial nourishments" (*TI* 216, 110, 114). The self hungers and seeks to satisfy its hunger, enjoying the nourishing bread it eats. Jens Zimmermann observes in this understanding "the biblical notion of a good creation", allowing the self to enjoy its material bounty "neither in opposition to nature nor with reference to any greater totality".¹⁶ And as Levinas himself makes explicit, this initial aspect of selfhood is also reflected in our encounter with Scripture:

[Revelation] is not only a source of wisdom, the path of deliverance and elevation; it is also the food of the life of knowledge, and the object of the enjoyment (*jouissance*) which goes with it. (*RJ* 197)

[I]t is books that have nourished Israel, almost in the physical sense of the term, like the prophet who swallows the scroll in chapter 3 of Ezekiel. A strange diet, indeed, of celestial foods!" (*RJ* 199).

Though positively portrayed, Levinas's enjoyment does not characterise a comprehensive self, but rather a self oblivious to the outer world, the inherently self-interested "ego". For the other's arrival to be an interruption, and for hospitality offered to carry any worth, the separation of enjoyment is a precondition. "[O]ne has to first enjoy one's bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one's heart, to give oneself in giving it" (*OB* 72).

Interruption and Hospitality

The arrival of the other is a knock on the door of the at-home of enjoyment, an unexpected request for hospitality. For the separated self, the presence of the other is unaccounted for, a radical interruption that calls into question the enjoyment and freedom of the ego. For Levinas then, hospitality is not the goodwill of a meal planned in advance. "To

15. Critchley, "Introduction", 13.

16. Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*, 194-95.

take hold of oneself for a present of welcome is already to take one's distance, and miss the neighbour" (*OB* 88). Rather, the arrival of the other is better likened to the unexpected visitor at Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:7-24). The widow is not waiting at home, table laid, but gathering sticks on the outskirts of town. The stranger's requests seem to demand more than she is prepared to give. Though she doesn't flatly refuse him, she doesn't have any baked bread to offer, and what she does have – "a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug" – is potentially the last provision for herself and her son before they succumb to famine. In response, Elijah commands her to share what was intended for her own nourishment. So also the request of Levinas's other, demanding

the bread from one's mouth, of one's own mouthful of bread. It is the openness, not only of one's pocketbook, but of the doors of one's home, a "sharing of your bread with the famished," a "welcoming of the wretched into your house" (Isaiah 58). (*OB* 74)

For Levinas, the arrival of the other is a radical disruption, and to the ego of enjoyment, comes as surprise, even shock. To offer hospitality is thus "to take the bread out of one's mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one's own fasting" (*OB* 56).

The Transcendence of the Other

Levinas's portrayal of the other evokes the God of Hebrew scripture: one who can never be seen face-to-face. I am never able to fully comprehend the other, as she always transcends my grasp, overflowing every idea I might have of her.¹⁷ While philosophically Levinas describes this transcendence in terms of Cartesian infinity, biblical traits of the trace of God in the stranger pervade his work. Notably, while generally alluding to the Hebraic tradition of divine messengers disguised as strangers (e.g. Genesis 18-19; cf. Heb 13:2), Levinas also endorses the Matthean account of Christ's presence in "the least of these":

When I speak to a Christian, I always quote Matthew 25; the relation to God is presented there as a relation to another person. It is not a

17. If the other overwhelms any conception I might have of her, does this not make it impossible to recognise her need and respond ethically to her? Paul Ricoeur raises this objection to Levinas's work; see his *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 339. However, as Richard A. Cohen contends, such an objection reflects an inadequate appreciation of Levinas's work, particularly Part Four of *Totality and Infinity*. See his *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 299, 304-05.

metaphor: in the other, there is a real presence of God.... I'm not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her Face I hear the Word of God" (*EN*, 110).

And yet – understandable in light of his confessional commitments – Levinas does not embrace the christological potential of this New Testament passage; the encounter with the "face" of which he writes evades the possibility of relationship. The face is not a physiological trait (which would suggest description and comprehension), but rather "the way in which the other presents himself...destroy[ing] and overflow[ing] the plastic image it leaves..." (*TI* 50-51). Concerned that the immanence of the face compromised transcendence, in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas radicalises this quality as the "trace" of the transcendent that "lights up as the face of a neighbour" (*OB* 12).

In the face (or trace) of the other, Levinas argues, one is confronted with the command "Thou shalt not kill"; the face reveals an ethical imperative "as if a master spoke to me" (*EI* 88-89). This command comes from outside the self, as revelation; hence the other is an ethical teacher who "can bring to the student what the student does not yet know" (*TI* 180). And yet, despite this asymmetrical "height"¹⁸ of the other over me, I also experience her destitution and poverty, an ethical obligation to which I am hostage. However, neither this sense of obligation toward the other nor the command she exercises can be accounted for by theological or philosophical systems. Rather, the moral summons issued by the other is an-archic; that is, it precedes any sense of order that seeks to imbue it with an imperative.

The One-for-the-Other

For all the severity of his writing, at the heart of Levinas's thought lies the belief that "exteriority is not a negation, but a marvel" (*TI* 292). Encounter with the other provides opportunity for transformation. The movement from egoism to responsibility is described by Levinas as "substitution", becoming one-*for*-the-other. For Levinas, substitution only occurs in the first-person singular; any sense of communal "third party" responsibility is secondary and subsidiary. It is a responsible individual that is "ordained" or "elected" by the other, modelling the

18. It will be evident that the relationship between the other and I exhibits an asymmetry. In contrast with the reciprocity of Buber's relationality, for Levinas the other exercises a dimension of height over me. Putnam notes, "one is obliged to make oneself available to the neediness of the other without simultaneously regarding the other as so obliged" (Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism", 55). The other may choose to respond in reciprocity, or even out of responsibility toward me, but this cannot be my concern. "[I]t is only thanks to God that... I am approached as an other by the others" (*OB* 158).

passive response of the biblical patriarchs and prophets: "*hineni*" ("here I am"). Whether in the case of Abraham (Gen 22:1) or Isaiah (Isa 6:8), Levinas finds in the response *hineni* an "obedience to the glory of the Infinite that orders me to the other" (OB 146). Without seeking to comprehend the other, *hineni* embodies an ethical response that makes me "available to the neediness (and especially the suffering) of the other person... without reservation."¹⁹

Transformation occurs as the transcendent other calls into question my egoistic existence, and "introduces into me what was not in me" (TI 203). Though Levinas describes this dislocation as a "wounding" or "coring out" (*dénucléation*), this does not denote aggression, but rather the pain occurring as the other resists *my* pull toward the same. By resisting, the other offers me freedom from egocentric existence. Such transformation represents the recovery of a more original, primordial self; "it is the very fact of finding oneself while losing oneself" (OB 11). Richard A. Cohen explains: "To say 'the self is for-the-other' does not mean that first there is a self and then this self becomes 'for-the-other', but rather that insofar as the self is for-the-other it is itself. Its original way of being is moral."²⁰

LEVINAS, THE OTHER AND BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS²¹

Levinas's thought challenges conceptions of the other within biblical hermeneutics, particularly attempts to understand difference within the realm of the same. Many readings from the perspective of the marginal other betray an encompassing "gaze" from outside that suppresses difference (TI 121). For Levinas, there is no view from outside: "the ethical relation is a description from the point of view of an agent in the social world and not a spectator upon it".²² Self-reflexive interpreters – acknowledging their situatedness before attempting to comprehend the other – are also cautioned, for it is Levinas's appraisal of "comprehension" that is perhaps most damning. He playfully observes that "the hand [*prend*] takes and comprehends [*comprend*]..... An organ for taking, for acquisition, it gathers the fruit but...keeps it, puts it in reserve, possesses it in a home" (TI 161). Comprehension attempts to acquire the other, seeking mastery and proficiency, but betraying a

19. Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism", 38.

20. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, 183.

21. While this study is primarily interested in the challenge Levinas's account of alterity poses to treatments of the other in biblical hermeneutics, his confessional writings give a helpful indication of his own approach to (Hebrew) scripture. For theological engagements with Levinas's "biblical hermeneutic", see the recent *Semeia Studies* volume, "Levinas and Biblical Studies", No. 43 (2003).

22. Critchley, "Introduction", 14.

master and a profit. When the goal is comprehension of the other, "alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes" (*TI* 42). The other is transformed into the same without transforming the same.

Biblical Hermeneutics and Closure

Levinas admonishes hermeneutics for its drive toward closure, fortified against the interruption of exteriority. Closure – a thought closed in itself – he likens to the adventures of Ulysses that always return to the point of departure, a return home to oneself, to completion and thus totality. This in contrast to the Abrahamic journey, "a movement going forth...from an "at home" which we inhabit, toward an alien outside-of-oneself, toward a yonder" (*TI* 33). As Krzysztof Ziarek suggests, such journeying "is not concerned with its destination; what matters instead is the prohibition to return".²³ Levinas's confessional writings discuss this "Hebraic" sojourn in the context of biblical interpretation: "Talmudic thought constantly returns to the example out of which the concept is born and delays over it in order to let ideas germinate and be able to start out in different directions, seeking [a] new result." (*JS*)

For Levinas, the Odyssean journey represents preoccupation of Western thought with the "Greek" logos of understanding, which "has the last word dominating all meaning.... Nothing can interrupt it." (*OB* 169). The Odyssean journey of closure aptly characterises many expressions of biblical hermeneutics, including those allegedly speaking for the other; interpretation rests secure with full coverage insurance, fortified from the risk of interruption.²⁴

Ethics Prior to Hermeneutics

The arrival of the other offers redemptive interruption in this Odyssean voyage, as illustrated by the Syrophenician woman's disruption of Jesus and his disciples (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). The alterity of this Gentile woman – the biblical other *par excellence* – renders her ineligible for Jesus' expressed mission to the lost sheep of Israel (e.g. Matt 10:5-6). And yet she requests the very bread from one's mouth: in

23. Krzysztof Ziarek, *Inflected Language: Towards a Hermeneutics of Nearness: Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, Celan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 72.

24. This critique extends even to the dialogical hermeneutic of Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose thought has profoundly influenced biblical interpretation. For even though Gadamer's "hermeneutic circle" and "fusing horizons" are arguably more open-ended totalities, ultimately Levinas finds these processes too calculating, already anticipating structures and meanings in texts, and working towards an established understanding without any mode of ethical interaction.

this case, the bread assumed to be exclusive to Israel, the “children” of the household. Daniel S. Schipani suggests that

she is requesting that she and her daughter be included, that she hopes for a place at the table and challenges Israel’s excluding ideology.... [S]he imagines that both the children and the dogs can be graciously fed inside, within the same household and from the same table.²⁵

Such interruption cannot occur in my reading of Scripture if I seek to accommodate the other in categories of anticipation, for “no concept lays hold of exteriority” (TI 295). A feminist reading or a Syrophoenician theology of liberation may yield new exegetical data on this passage, but they do not account for the primordial alterity of this woman, one whom *Jesus* encountered as other. This is not to suggest that such categories of difference are insignificant for hermeneutics, but ultimately the alterity of the other eludes them. As Levinas insists, “[s]ociology, psychology, physiology are...deaf to exteriority. Man as Other comes to us from the outside” (TI 291).

Levinas’s assertion that “ethics is first philosophy” (TI 304) does not negate hermeneutics, but chastises it; the primordial call of the other precedes interpretive strategy. This emphasis invites comparison with of *Jesus*’ prioritisation of the other’s neediness over prevailing legal interpretation. Biblical law is not a totalising code, for it must be able to respond to shrivelled hands (Matt 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11), and crippled bodies (Luke 13:10-17). *Jesus* calls into question totalising interpretations that proved inhospitable to the disabled. His question is not posed of the law, but of its interpreters: “I ask *you*, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath...” (Luke 6:9). Notably, *Jesus* does not create new legal or hermeneutical requirements, for either could produce the same inhospitality. Rather, he directs these interpreters toward the question posed by the face of the other, the ethical call that precedes hermeneutics.

The Saying and the Said

How can interpretation voice this primordial interruption of the other? Levinas was confronted with this question in Derrida’s 1964 essay “Violence et métaphysique”, in which Derrida critiqued his

25. Daniel S. Schipani, “Transforming Encounter in the Borderlands: a Study of Matthew 15.21-28”, in Dana R. Wright and John D. Kuentzel (eds.), *Redemptive Transformation in Practical Theology: Essays in Honor of James E. Loder, Jr.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) esp. 121-22.

attempts to escape ontology while employing ontological language and categories. Levinas's distinction of "the saying" (*le dire*) and "the said" (*le dit*) represents his later efforts to avoid ontology in characterising alterity. In good Levinasian fashion, the saying and the said are terms that evade concise definition, the most helpful description being offered by Critchley:

[The saying] is the performative stating, proposing or expressive position of myself facing the other. It is a verbal and possibly also non-verbal ethical performance, of which the essence cannot be captured in constative propositions. It is...a performative *doing* that cannot be reduced to a propositional description. By contrast, the said is a statement, assertion or proposition of which the truth or falsity can be ascertained. To put it another way, one might say that the content of my words, their identifiable meaning, is the said, while the saying consists in the fact that these words are being addressed to an interlocutor, at this moment each of you.²⁶

Levinas thus draws attention to the ethical moment of language that precedes its inevitable petrification into themes and propositions. The presence of the other does not invalidate language, but rather confounds efforts to contain her within language. Under particular scrutiny by Levinas is the "kerygmatic" tendency of the said towards identification, defining and categorising objects within the realm of being without acknowledging the limitations of language before the otherwise-than-being. Levinas does not deny the ability of language (as said) to convey concepts and propositions; rather his concern is for the vocative character of language lost in the process.

The saying is not linguistic paralysis but a duty to my neighbour. "[T]his is not a play of mirrors but my responsibility" (*TI* 183). The saying resists the abstraction of "welcoming the other" by giving expression to the encounter with the neighbour. Thus, the task of ethical interpretation is returning the said to saying, activating the "ambiguity between what is said in a text, the language of ontological propositions, and the very ethical Saying of that text".²⁷ And while the saying of this encounter inevitably congeals into dogmatic assertion, "it is the task of hermeneutics to awaken and make resound the essence of the said", giving expression once again to the saying that precedes this said.²⁸

26. Critchley, "Introduction", 18.

27. Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 19.

28. Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*, 219.

Cohen names such interpretation “ethical exegesis”: resisting closure through an “exegetical over-determination of meaning.”²⁹

LEVINAS AND INDETERMINACY

While surplus of meaning may prompt discomfort for “Greek” interpreters, Levinas finds it congruent with his Hebraic heritage, in which even syntactical structures reflect a “strange and mysterious ambiguity or polysemy” (*RJ* 193-94). Though meaning may become “immobilised in the letters of the text”, exegesis awakens and animates meaning so constrained (*JS*). Levinas observes this process in the continual overlaying of rabbinical commentaries, through which the text lives. Thus multiple readings are not problematic for Levinas, for whom plurality of interpretation is not a fatal flaw, but a guard from closure.

Resistance to closure invites comparison with Derridean thought, notably deconstruction and negative theology. Yet does Levinas’s thought necessarily lead to the indeterminacy of meaning Derrida espouses? Certainly the interdependence of their work has been well documented. However, despite these familial connections, Levinas’s conception of language and interpretation does not lead to the indeterminacy of *différance*. While Levinas points to the plurality of meaning arising from intersubjectivity, “a plurality does not an infinity make”.³⁰ Notably, Levinas’s understanding of language is not grounded in Saussurean semiotics. The radical challenge of saying to the said is not “reducible to word-play”, for “saying is not a game” (*OB* 5). Meaning is not derived from the play of signs or their deferral, but from discourse between interlocutors, the face that penetrates through linguistic abstraction. And while his work may exhibit deconstructive tendencies, for Levinas these are driven by ethical responsibility and against moral complacency. For Levinas ethical interpretation does not result in impotent silence – a possibility that disturbs him – but in responsibility for the other, something altogether different “from the propositions of negative theology” (*OB* 151). And notably, as Levinas’s Talmudic writings indicate, he does not share Nietzsche’s rejection of tradition, but endorses tradition as a guide in discriminating between “personal originality” and “the play of...charlatans” (*RJ* 196).

29. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, 198.

30. James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 153.

BREAKING BREAD WITH THE OTHER

To propose a “Levinasian” method for reading Scripture with the other would misconstrue Levinas’s thought. For though this task requires hermeneutical and ideological attentiveness, Levinas redirects us to the moment of encounter that precedes method.³¹ Notably, in his later work Levinas increasingly preferred the term “holiness” over “ethics”: “One often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics...but the holy, the holiness of the holy.”³² To speak, then, of breaking the bread of Scripture with the other is to describe an interpretive spirituality and relationality that respects this primordial “holiness” of the other.

Christian interpreters may struggle with the evasiveness of Levinas’s articulations of transcendence in the human other, and his reticence to acknowledge communal responsibility for the other. However, reading Levinas in conversation with the Christian tradition (as represented below by John Zizioulas, Miroslav Volf, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer) yields an interpretive approach that is faithful not only to this tradition, but also to the trajectory of Levinas’s own thought.

Read accordingly, Levinas’s contribution is vital, challenging us to conceive of interpretation as an act of hospitality, an act that requires *me* to share with *actual* others, and an encounter that produces transformative outcomes. To describe interpretation in such terms may prove trying for those who read Scripture in order to acquire knowledge. However, for those who, following Augustine, read Scripture to commune with God and neighbour, breaking this bread with the other offers rich potential.³³

Interpretation and Hospitality

Thematic to Scripture is the coming together of unlikely strangers and guests, and through the breaking of bread, becoming one with the other. This archetypal act of biblical hospitality is powerfully rendered in Jesus’ table fellowship. Contemporary readers are rarely offended by accounts of Jesus “welcoming sinners and eating with them” (e.g. Luke

31. Regarding the hermeneutical and methodological challenges of reading Scripture with marginal others (and the danger of romanticising the other), Bob Ekblad and Gerald O. West are excellent guides. See Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); and Gerald O. West, *The Academy of the Poor* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999).

32. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 4.

33. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, edited by R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) I.36.40.

15:1); we are unlikely to align ourselves with those who dismissed Jesus' teaching because he shared his table with outsiders. However, while we may in principle be "open to different perspectives", many of us in fact *are* wary about engaging in biblical interpretation with *actual* others, seeing this as unnecessary or inappropriate. Perhaps, like the disgruntled interpreters of Jesus' day, we are offended by proposals of breaking the bread of Scripture with "the wrong people" – be it the illiterate, the mentally ill, or others marginal to our society.

Levinas challenges this mindset by recasting the interpretive task in ethical and relational terms, "knowing as a welcoming of the Other" (TI 88). What does it mean to interpret Scripture in such terms? Levinas reminds us, firstly, that for interpretive hospitality to have any worth one must "enjoy" one's bread. Whereas some interpreters show little regard for Scripture in their elevation of the other, Levinas's thought suggests that unless I myself can savour Scripture, I cannot give myself in sharing it.

Secondly, an interpretive welcome cannot be prepared in advance. To interpret as one-for-the-other is to allow her to interrupt me in my enjoyment of Scripture, bringing with her possibilities of new perspectives and understanding that I have not already anticipated. While it is tempting to interpret in the reference to the familiar comforts of "others I have known" – our recollections of travel in the two-thirds world, or a well-worn anecdote of a homeless stranger we once met – Levinas's saying/said distinction challenges such complacency. Interpretation requires interruption.

And thirdly, such interpretive responsibility is possible "only in the form of giving the very bread I eat" (OB 72). Rather than crumbs from the table, the interpretive concessions I may be happy to make, the other demands bread that might have nourished me. Are we protective or possessive about the bread we eat, tentatively engaging with the other, but all the while clutching to our own interpretation, the safety of familiar doctrinal positions and hermeneutical assumptions?³⁴ For many of us, the reluctance to be open-handed in our interpretation of Scripture suggests forgetfulness of its giver, and the nature of its provision. "I am the bread of life", Jesus revealed. "He who comes to me will never go hungry" (John 6:35). Recognising God as host reminds us that we *all* arrive hungry, seeking provision from the one who generously grants more than we deserve. And in the risky breaking of bread with others,

34. Reflecting on his experiences of reading Scripture with a Skagit County Jail inmate, Bob Ekblad shares that "I am both inspired and unsettled by my encounters with people like Armando and by the Scriptures, which together push my faith and understanding to places I would rather not go." *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, 88.

we witness to this one who broke bread with us, and who *as* bread was broken *for* us.

While the Christian tradition commonly conceives of interpretation in these communal terms – as an act of the Church – this creates tension with Levinas’s work, which insists that the responsibility of the *one-for-the-other* is mine alone, preceding all social arrangements. Must responsible interpretation always take place in the first-person singular? A Eucharistic understanding of the Church challenges Levinas’s assertion, revealing communal relations more primordial than – though not diminishing – this ethical obligation. Both John Zizioulas and Miroslav Volf, while applauding Levinas’s contribution, note that ultimately the challenge of difference cannot be solved through ethics. “We need a new birth”, Zizioulas argues. “This leads us to ecclesiology.”³⁵

Baptismal rebirth into the Church is a radical transformation of the self; “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). As Volf describes it:

The Spirit of God breaks through the self-enclosed worlds we inhabit; the Spirit re-creates us and sets us on the road toward becoming...a “catholic personality”, a personal microcosm of the eschatological new creation.³⁶

In breaking the Eucharistic bread together, Christ is received by all; “each is made into an ecclesial person and all are internal to the very being of each”.³⁷ “Because there is one bread”, Paul teaches, “we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). The primordial nature of this personhood is expressed in the New Testament use of familial language for relationships in Christ. Paul thus urges Philemon to receive Onesimus “no longer as a slave but...[as] a beloved brother...both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philm 16). Thus, while Levinas is correct in identifying the an-archic nature of ethical obligation, this does not undermine the hermeneutical function of the Church in interpretation; in the catholic relations of ecclesial

35. John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006) 3. The rejoinder that communion is itself a “totalising reduction” of ontology is anticipated by Zizioulas, who notes that these relations do not “dissolve in sameness...because relations do not take place at the level of the logos of being (= substance), but at the level of the mode of being (= personhood)”. *Communion and Otherness*, 54.

36. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 51.

37. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 129.

communion, my interpretive obligation toward the other becomes the duty of the *ones-for-the-other*.³⁸

Interpretation as Proximity

Like many practitioners, Pohl has noted with irony the abstraction of “hospitality” in contemporary scholarship. She observes that

[h]ospitable attitudes, even a principled commitment to hospitality, do not challenge us or transform our loyalties in the way that actual hospitality to particular strangers does. Hospitality in the abstract lacks the mundane, troublesome, yet rich dimensions of a profound human practice.³⁹

Her observation is crucial, for even “hospitality” can preoccupy us as we pass by the stranger on the Jericho road. Levinas shares Pohl’s concern; indeed, this is the burden of his work. Critchley notes that “what is truly provocative about Levinas [is that] ethics is *lived* in the sensibility of an embodied exposure to the other.”⁴⁰ For Levinas, we cannot speak of welcoming the other from an external point where we “see without being seen” (*TI* 61). Hospitality in interpretation “presupposes interlocutors” that are themselves hungry and requiring sustenance (*TI* 73).

For Levinas, welcoming the other is the responsibility of the one who at this very moment speaks; it a relationship in which *I* participate. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas terms this relation “proximity”. This does not denote a relation determinable by an external geometric gaze. Rather, proximity is “the subject that approaches...a relationship in which I participate as a term” (*OB* 81-2). For Levinas, “an *ethical* relation is one where I *face* the other person”.⁴¹ Interpretative concern for the neighbour is not conveyed through a hospitable hermeneutic, but through *my* encounter and welcome of the other.

Indeed, proximity to marginal others has long provided vital impetus for interpreters in the two-thirds world, working in shanty towns or rural communities where

they listen to the poor and facilitate the process of reflection on the Bible...giv[ing] them a stimulus to their exegesis and...open[ing] up new vistas and questions in the interpretive enterprise. This

38. Thus, to paraphrase 1 Cor 12:26, if one member is “wounded” by the other, all are wounded; if one is called to responsibility, all are called. Rather than dissolving any sense of responsibility to the other, if anything, a Eucharistic ecclesiology intensifies it.

39. Pohl, *Making Room*, 14.

40. Critchley, “Introduction”, 21.

41. Critchley, “Introduction”, 26.

grassroots biblical interpretation provides a basis for the more sophisticated theological edifices the liberation theologians wish to build.⁴²

However, the stimuli and questions emerging from such relations of proximity can quickly become “lost in translation” during the construction of these “more sophisticated theological edifices.” Consequently, most Western interpreters remain profoundly *approximate* from the “others” that inspire such fruitful readings, relying (at best) on the academic conclusions produced by them.⁴³ Levinas turns our attention from such thematisations of the said to the moment of encounter with the other that birthed them. If my reading of Scripture is to be informed by the other *as* other, it is not a nod toward “praxis” that is a prerequisite, but proximity. In practical terms, this invites us to consider our own reading location and practices, and indeed, the company we keep.⁴⁴ In what sense do *actual* encounters with *actual* others inform our reading?

Inevitably, interpretive forays with the other lead to the propositions of the said: papers and publications, words rapidly distanced from moments of encounter. However, Levinas urges, responsibility to the other requires once more the voicing of the other’s approach, a returning of the said to the saying, exposing and re-exposing these thematisations, reawakening and renewing interpretation. Interpretation in proximity is not a once and for all transaction, but a lived commitment.

Interpretation as Transformative

Most often, our reticence to break the bread of Scripture with the other reflects our assumptions about what we deem to be appropriate sources and conditions for meaningful interpretation. Compared to

42. Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: the Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989).

43. Many liberation theologians object to the absence of any explicit ethical or political framework in Levinas’s work. It is important to note that Levinas does not dismiss the importance of such systems, but rather recognises the need for an account of the morality that underwrites our motivation for participating in (or rejecting) them. “My relationship with the other as neighbour gives meaning to my relations with all the others” (*OB* 159). The broader societal implications of Levinas’s thought are most apparent in his discussion of the “third party” and the implications their presence has on my relation to the other – most notably, the need for articulations of justice. “The fact that the other, my neighbour, is also a third party with respect to another, who is also a neighbour, is the birth of thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy.” (*OB* 128).

44. John S. McClure provides a helpful summary of practitioners who make a “mutual speaking-listening, face-to-face encounter with others” an integral part of their biblical interpretation. See “The Way of Love: Loder, Levinas, and Ethical Transformation through Preaching”, in Wright and Kuentzel *Redemptive Transformation in Practical Theology*, 95-115.

one's cloistered study, with commentaries and lexicons at arms reach, the merit of (often messy and unpredictable) encounters with the other for biblical interpretation can be hard to appreciate. However, Levinas's insistence in the relational quality of epistemology challenges these assumptions: "There can be no "knowledge" of God separated from the relationship with men" (TI 78).

Hospitality offered to the unanticipated other can result in surprising and transformative outcomes. For Abraham and Sarah, welcome extended to three unexpected strangers was miraculously rewarded with a long awaited heir. And for an "unclean" tax collector hiding in a sycamore tree, a startling request for table fellowship prompted a life-changing conversion. The presence of the most unlikely candidates can inform our reading in unexpected ways.⁴⁵

Encountering the other transforms us as interpreters. For Levinas, the arrival of the stranger or the widow "ordains" me to responsible interpretation as one-for-the-other, as one whose interpretive response becomes the openness and availability of "here I am".⁴⁶ And if it is true that "double love of God and neighbour" is the measure of our interpretation, then such encounters are vitally important, for the presence of outsiders can "help us...to read and enact Scripture in ways that are more faithful than they otherwise would have been".⁴⁷ Breaking the bread of Scripture with the widow or stranger may not yield new data, but nonetheless the other "teaches" us, transcending our interiority, and reminding us of our calling to "exist for others".⁴⁸

For Levinas, speaking of the transcendence of the human other is always problematic; God in his illeity remains disincarnate, and the face only reveals the trace of the infinite. "Divinity", for Levinas, "keeps its distances" (TI 297). However, drawing on the incarnational theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Zimmermann's contribution is a theological

45. Bob Ekblad recounts one such encounter in rural Honduras, during which current scholarship on Genesis 32 was unknowingly précised by his illiterate neighbours in an evening's discussion. He concludes:

[O]ver the rumble of our portable generator, I witness what I now have come to anticipate. In an uncontrollable moment... through the weak, powerless word and its feeble mediators, the Word becomes flesh and lives among us. The apparently distant God draws close. In this case through Maria, an impoverished campesina woman – an outsider to the church and an outcast in her community (*Reading the Bible with the Damned*, 92).

46. For accounts of this transformation in terms of biblical interpretation, see Gerald O. West's "conversion from below", and Gustavo Gutiérrez's "conversion to the neighbour": West, *Academy of the Poor*, 34-62; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM, 1979) 194-208.

47. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.36.40.; Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 125.

48. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1965) 166.

hermeneutic that finds Levinas's account of selfhood fulfilled in the incarnation.⁴⁹ For whereas Levinas's articulations of transcendence in the human other often retreat into the allusive, the incarnation of the divine Other in Christ offers a compelling account of one who "stands on boundary of my existence, beyond my existence, but [is] still for me".⁵⁰ In Christ, God bears a human face. Through Christ, the veil that hid the transcendent glory of the face has been removed.

To suggest that the messianic openness of Derrida and Levinas is fulfilled in Christ may invite objections of dogmatism and closure. However, for Bonhoeffer the incarnate Christ transcends dogmatic conceptualisations, for "the Logos with whom we are concerned here is a person".⁵¹ It is the "person of Jesus Christ" in the other that confronts our interpretive categories, Zimmermann observes.⁵² "[O]ur intellectual questions encounter the personal transcendental barrier; and we must ask, 'Who are you?'"⁵³ To acknowledge the presence of Christ in the other does not subordinate the ethical call of the other to doctrine. As Bonhoeffer notes, the Samaritan's assistance is not dependent on this theological conviction; "he helps him because he sees that he is in distress".⁵⁴ However, it is encountering the divine Other in the human other that enacts this obligation, and indeed that safeguards difference itself. We encounter the other as other "only insofar as God makes him this. It is only in God that the claim of the other resides; but for this very reason it is the claim of the other".⁵⁵

Encountering Christ in the other interrupts our Odyssean journeys toward interpretive closure, challenging us toward new destinations. However, in contrast to Abraham's nomadic wanderings, a Christian reading directs us toward the Emmaus road. For while the disciples were interrupted by a stranger and challenged toward unfamiliar and provocative interpretations of Scripture, this journey nonetheless resulted in a transformative encounter with the divine Other: bread was broken together, their eyes were opened, and Christ became known. A journey without closure, demanding risky hospitality from the disciples, and yet yielding new possibilities for communion with God.

49. An alternative "incarnational reading" of Levinas employing the thought of Karl Barth is offered by Graham Ward in *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) esp. 147-170.

50. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, translated by John Bowden (London: Collins, 1966) 61.

51. Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 28.

52. Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*, 299.

53. Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*, 291.

54. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (London: Collins) 121.

55. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 36.

CONCLUSION

Biblical hermeneutics is well characterised by the Lukan journey from Jerusalem to Jericho: however we conceive interpretive responsibility toward our neighbour, invariably our tendency is toward conceptual totalities that continue on their journey, passing by the destitute stranger at the roadside. However, for Levinas ethical obligation to *this* other interrupts our journey. His account of alterity cautions hermeneutical efforts that “grasp” the other, or in their drive toward closure, fail to notice the widow and orphan. It does not, however, reduce us to apophatic silence, or the indeterminable response of deconstruction. Rather, for Levinas, the arrival of the other is an interruption that – as for the Samaritan traveller – calls us to responsibility.

This ethical summons is not to *interpretation* as such, but to *interpreters* (contra Levinas, the interpretive community): to acknowledge the obligation that interrupts our hermeneutical journeys and demands responsible interpretation. For Christian interpreters, Levinas’s insistence that interpretation is a “welcoming of the other” is underwritten by the incarnation, the presence of Christ in the other. This observation challenges us to read in proximity with those who may appear to offer little. Furthermore, Levinas’s other brings the distinctive request for “bread from one’s mouth”, a demand for that which nourishes us. While this request challenges us to be open-handed in our interpretation, it does not deprive us of our sustenance, but rather reminds us of the nature of this gift and its giver, that we might know him in the breaking of the bread. In breaking the bread of Scripture with the other we encounter God in unexpected and transformative ways, renewing and enlivening our reading, and enabling us to experience this divine hospitality anew.