religions

MDPI

Article

Form and Content in Buber's and Schweid's Literary-Philosophical Readings of Genesis

Jonathan Cohen

Department of Education, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 91905, Israel; yonathan.cohen@mail.huji.ac.il

Received: 29 April 2019; Accepted: 20 June 2019; Published: 24 June 2019

Abstract: The following essay is presented as part of a long-term project concerned with the theory and practice of modern Jewish thinkers as interpreters of the Bible. The recent Bible commentaries of Eliezer Schweid, who is one of the foremost Jewish scholars and theologians active in Israel today, are analyzed in comparison with parallel interpretations of Martin Buber, with special reference to the first chapters of Genesis. Their respective analyses of Biblical narrative reveal notable similarities in their treatment of the literary "body" of the text as the key to its theological significance. Nonetheless, Buber articulates religious experience largely "from the human side," striving to mediate Biblical consciousness to the contemporary humanistic mindset, while Schweid positions himself more as the clarion of the "prophetic writers" for whom the fear of God, no less than the love of God, must inform an authentic religious sensibility. Schweid's more theocentric perspective has great import for contemporary issues such as the universal covetousness engendered by the violation of our ecological covenant with the Earth.

Keywords: Bible interpretation; post-criticism; form and content; Creation; embodied language; concepts and symbols; dialogue; theocentrism

1. Introduction

In this essay, I hope to make a modest contribution toward the placing of the work of Prof. Eliezer Schweid, who is perhaps the greatest living Jewish thinker in Israel today, in a growing tradition of modern Jewish philosophical interpretations of the Bible. Schweid, born in 1929, grew up in Jerusalem in a Socialist-Zionist home, was active in frameworks associated with the Zionist Labor Movement, served in the legendary Palmach corps in the 1948 War of Independence, and was one of the founders of Kibbutz Zor'a near Jerusalem. In 1953, he came to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to study Jewish thought, and went on to become one of the foremost scholars in this area in contemporary times. He was awarded the coveted Israel prize for his research in Jewish thought in 1994. During the course of his activities as director of cultural activities in his kibbutz, and later as scholar and educator, Schweid has never ceased speaking and writing, as a Jewish thinker and theologian in his own right, systematically yet passionately, on issues relating to Judaism, humanism, and the possibility of a religious relation to Jewish tradition under conditions of secularity, modernity, and post-modernity.[1]

[1] For studies on the connection between Schweid's research in Jewish philosophy and his own contribution to Jewish thought, see (Amir 2005, pp. 3–162). For a bibliography of his numerous writings until 2005, see the end of the above-mentioned volume, pp. 451–97. For an appreciation of Schweid as a premier modern Jewish thinker, see (Levin 2013). This collection also contains a number of Schweid's most important articles in the English translation. Some other Schweid's works that have appeared in English are: *Democracy and the Halakhah* (Schweid 1994), *The Jewish Experience of Time* (Schweid 2000), *The Classic Jewish Philosophers* (Schweid 2008, vol. 3) and, most relevant to this essay: *The Philosophy of the Bible* (Schweid 2009). The tradition of modern Jewish philosophical Bible interpretation that I have in mind includes the work of thinkers such as Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Leo Strauss, Erich Fromm, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and others.

As the first step in this project, I wish to focus on a critical dialogue that emerges between Schweid and the only other modern Jewish thinker of whom it might be said that his occupation with Bible translation and interpretation was a major feature of his life's work: Martin Buber. I hope to show how Schweid builds on Buber's insights and modes of reading, yet takes them in a direction that Buber might hardly have recognized or approved. Since the framework of this paper allows only for the possibility of a "beginning," we will focus on Buber's and Schweid's readings of the opening Genesis narratives as the basis for their theology and philosophical anthropology. Reference to their readings of other portions of the Bible will also be made, to the extent that they illuminate their perspectives on Genesis, or represent extensions or implications of those perspectives.

Before beginning, some brief comments are provided on the hermeneutic assumptions underlying the interpretive orientations of the thinkers we will be discussing, so that the reader might have some idea of what to expect, and what not to expect. Neither Buber nor Schweid saw themselves as beholden to traditional Jewish commentaries on the Bible as a matter of religious faith. They did have recourse to them from time to time, but did not consider any of them as binding authorities. On the other hand, they were not academic Bible scholars of the type who engage chiefly in historical-philological research. While both were very familiar with major trends in the Biblical scholarship of their time, they were much more interested in the Bible as a cultural source that radiates out to subsequent generations than in the near Eastern background of its composition and immediate reception. As Franz Rosenzweig has written, they were much more interested in the Bible since it was redacted, canonized, and *read* as a foundational cultural document than in the manner in which it was first *written* or composed within the confines of its historical context.[2] They also believed that the Masoretic text could be profitably read as a whole within which intertextual dialogue between words, phrases, plot-elements, and other components could be trusted to lead to an enrichment of meaning. Like the well-known 11th century commentator Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (also known as the RASHBAM) and the renowned modern hermeneuticist Hans-Georg Gadamer,[3] they believed that logical implications and metaphorical repercussions articulated by later readers of a canonical text could be said to somehow "belong" to the text itself—much as original, though loyal, interpretations of a musical work "belong" to the work itself in some way. Just as a symphony is not exhausted by its score, or by the biography of its composer and his cultural context, but lives most fully in its performances over the ages, according to Buber and Schweid, a classical, or canonical text, *becomes more fully itself* by way of its interpretive reception in the tradition of reading and action that it spawns.

In light of the above orientation, which has only been most briefly recounted in this manuscript, some traditionalists might very well be taken aback by some of Buber's and Schweid's "unorthodox" readings, especially regarding the serious weaknesses and failings of certain revered Biblical characters. On the other hand, historically-oriented Bible scholars might not approve of their expanded (some might say over-expanded) notion of what might be legitimately considered the "plain sense" of the text. Nevertheless, for Buber and Schweid, a specific interpretation that incorporates a "concordantial" perspective on the Biblical canon as a whole– and draws implications from what could be considered the "inner logic" of the text—can and should be regarded as a legitimate attempt to draw out the text's potential for meaning.

---

[2] See (Buber and Rosenzweig 1994, p. 26) for his comments on this matter.

[3] See (Gadamer 1994, pp. 290, 295, 358) for a discussion of how a new interpretation "belongs" to a classical work.

2. Buber's Reflections on the Experience of Creation and Its Expression in the Bible

In his seminal essay "People Today and the Jewish Bible,"[4] Buber affirms Franz Rosenzweig's distinction between Creation, Revelation, and Redemption as the fundamental theological categories implicit in the Bible. He is, however, acutely aware of the fact that these categories, not to mention the legal, narrative, and exhortatory texts in which they are embedded, are foreign in both letter and spirit to the contemporary reader shaped by modern secular consciousness. In response to this impasse, Buber engages in a mode of phenomenological reflection he hopes might open a way into the reality of these categories.

With regard to the possibility of an experience of Creation, Buber writes, unforgettably:

> " . . . all human beings know themselves to be both individual and unique. Suppose that it were possible to take a psychological inventory of his or her person in such a way as to dissolve it into a sum of qualities. Suppose it were possible to trace developmentally each of these qualities and the process of their confluence back to their most primitive forms. Suppose finally that such a seamless genetic analysis of a given individual, or his derivation and etiology, were in fact to be carried out. At the end of it, the person, this unique, incomparable, singular being—the countenance such as was never found, the voice such as was never heard, the bearing such as was never seen—this ensouled body would still be there, the intact remainder, altogether underived and underivable, there and nowhere else but there. At the end of his useless pains, drawing himself up once again to confront the question 'where does this come from?' he would find himself in the last analysis a created being. With every birth, the first person enters the world, because every person is unique. In our own lives, in the manner of children, each of us groping toward our own origin, we learn that origin is—that creation is."

In a masterful stroke of educational discourse, Buber's takes on the contemporary human being's sense of his/her own individuality, that subjective self-understanding so characteristic of our time, is his point of departure in order to open up a correlative awareness of being deliberately "given" and placed, which begins a genuine dialogue between our own "horizon" and that of the Biblical writers. Buber carries this insight even further, however. It is the individual's very sense of his/her own unique being a gift that makes it possible for him/her to imagine the surrounding world as an intentional gift as well. Just as the bio-psychological causality that might ostensibly "explain" the origin of the individual, it should be regarded as a mere matrix wherein an intelligent Will is at work, so the cosmological causality that might "explain" the origin of the world should be seen as a prism through which such a will is expressed. These insights, accessible to what Strauss would have called "man as man," (See, for example (Strauss 1989, p. 213)) need not be couched in particular "religious" language in order to be perceived, and it is precisely insights such as these that are reflected in the Creation narratives of the Bible. In true dialogical fashion, one who comes upon realizations such as these seeks a response to them in the Biblical text, while, at the same time, the Biblical text guides the reader in shaping and deepening his/her understanding of them.

Moving from the individual's self-awareness to his/her perception of the environment, the causes and effects that mediate the subsistence, survival, and growth of the world seem to have a life of their own. Most of the time, we regard them as self-understood, but, upon reflection, we come to wonder at their very orderliness and coherence. On the one hand, they seem to form an immanent system, yet this very system, when contemplated, seems to point beyond itself: to the same "Giver" who gave us our individual being.

---

[4] The essay appears in (Buber and Rosenzweig 1994, pp. 4–21). His specific reference to these categories appears on (pp. 8–9). The extended quote following is drawn from (p. 10).

To what might this independence/dependence be compared? In one of the most artful and fruitful applications of what he called the "leitwort style" (a repeated word, root, or sound that discloses a hitherto hidden meaning), Buber compares the "wind-spirit" active in the creation of the world to the "wind-spirit" generated by the mother eagle as she flaps her wings, by encouraging her offspring to fly.[5] When we first read of the "spirit of God hovering over the waters," before the Creation process is described, we wonder what its role might be in what follows. It would seem that, henceforth, God speaks, calls forth, separates, shapes, and forms. What, then, is the purpose of the "hovering" wind-spirit? What does this "hovering" mean and how might it be imagined? For this, we must turn to the only other passage in the Bible where this word occurs—in Deuteronomy 32:11. There, God's provenance over the course of Israel's way out of Egypt, through the desert and into the land of Canaan, is figured as "an eagle awakening (or enlivening) her nest, hovering over her young." By flapping her wings, the mother eagle generates the "ruach," or "wind-spirit" that then activates the flight of the fledgling birds. With the help of this first "rushing" of "wind" from the flapping of the mother, the young are then powered and prompted to fly on their own. The rarity and exclusivity of the word "merachef" or "merachefet" (hovering) in these particular contexts invites us to envision the act of Creation along similar lines. God, as it were, "breathes" or "blows" a wind-spirit from within Himself. This "surging" wind then generates and infuses a like "surging" within the world, which energizes the separations, motions, and formations that are to follow. The very order and lawfulness of the Creation, then, is derived from the Divine wind-spirit wherein wisdom and living will are joined (as Buber believes they should also be in the life of the creature created in God's image) as the human being. He also insists that this "bringing forth" of an ordered world from amid the undifferentiated waters is represented in the Bible as an activity of God and not as an emanation, which is an activity that unites planned reflection and vital motion.

How is this sense of createdness, as well as other insights that accompany it, echoed in the Biblical text? For this, we must first turn to Buber's comparison of the two "versions" of the Creation story in Genesis: the one found in Chapter 1 and the first verses of Chapter 2, and the one embodied in Chapters 2 and 3. Buber does not spend many words on the similarities and differences obtained between these two Creation narratives. His thoughts on this come to us more as a kind of background regarding what was composed as a series of lectures on the mission of Abraham.[6] Nonetheless, his concentrated remarks on the first chapters of Genesis appearing in the first lecture in this series bespeak a very close reading and are pregnant with insight.

From the same "post-critical" perspective as Rosenzweig, Strauss, Erich Fromm[7], and Schweid, Buber accepts some of the results of modern, philological-historical Biblical scholarship. As he writes, "My ear, too, distinguishes a variety of voices in the chorus. Even the most ancient of memories are likely to have been preserved from a variety of motives and will accordingly have been rendered in a variety of tones. Later chroniclers and scribes are even more likely to differ from one another in their treatment of the material and their style of representation."[8] Yet, he rejects the self-assured assignation of various components of Biblical narrative, law, or prophecy to seemingly well-defined "sources," as well as the assumption that the compilation of these sources by later redactors was undertaken in a slovenly or piously over-inclusive manner. Over time, according to Buber, many portions of the Bible assumed a more unified and homogeneous character, as the master redactors (the last of which was called famously by Rosenzweig "Rabbenu") (Rosenzweig 1994a, p. 23) shaped the inherited material

---

[5] See (Buber 1994c, pp. 13–17) for an extended discussion of "wind-spirit" (ruach) in general in the Bible, and its especial expression when it is joined to the word "merachefet" (hovering). See Buber's essays, Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative (Buber 1994b, pp. 114–28), and Leitwort and Discourse Type: An Example, (Buber 1994a). See also (Rosenzweig 1994b, pp. 129–42).

[6] In English, this lecture series is called "Abraham the Seer" and appears in *On the Bible* (Buber 1982, pp. 22–43).

[7] See (Fromm 1966, pp. 7–23), with notes.

[8] The quote is from "Abraham the Seer," in *On the Bible* (Buber 1982, p. 24).

in keeping with a common spiritual atmosphere generated from the experience of a "dialogue between heaven and earth" (Buber 1967, pp. 214–25).

Given this orientation, it was not difficult for Buber to write: "The Book of Genesis begins with two accounts of the creation which, no matter when and how the one or the other originated, complement one another perfectly, like nature and mind, and like man's sense of living at the fringe of the cosmos as a latecomer, and man's sense of being at home in the center of his world."[9] He then reinforces his comments on the content of the stories with some literary-structural remarks meant to highlight the artfulness of the narrative as a whole. The first creation story ends with a double blessing-bestowed on the first humans and on the Sabbath. This second story ends with a double curse: on the guilty couple and on the Earth. Precisely between the blessing and the curse, in the second story, we hear of the violation that precipitated the curse. Such balanced structuring over the course of both "versions" of the narrative could only be the work of a coherent spirit.

The "complementarity" Buber speaks of, however, does not mean harmony. In a very concise phenomenology of the human condition, Buber articulates two opposing states of consciousness that he believes are reflected in the two Biblical accounts of Creation. The first account, wherein the human being is formed last, after all else has been created, is not meant to teach us that the human being is the "crown" of creation, gently set upon the "head" of the world after all has been set in place for him. The first humans in Chapter One are not described as feeling harmoniously at one with the world, as the world's masters, or as self-satisfied and content. The literary placing of the human being at the end of the creation narrative actually expresses a sense of being a "latecomer." Everything has already been made. Everything is already in its place and fits in its place. The human being awakens to this condition as one who has just arrived, as a stranger, one who is not "at home in the world." The first humans of Chapter One do not live in the "midst" of things, as a part of things or with a sense of the cosmos as a support. They live "at the fringe of the cosmos," a most precarious and unsettling situation to be sure. They are "on the edge"—both "of" and "not of" their surroundings. This symbolic story represents our own existential concern that much has happened while we were not around to perceive it, and that much may yet happen without our awareness. We are strangers in an environment not of our own making.

Immediately afterwards, we are told a second creation story wherein the human being is created first, not last, and seems to be at the "center" of all that takes place around him. As soon as he is created, God plants a garden that surrounds him and serves as a "home" for him. The garden is watered and the trees provide shelter. His every need is supplied: the trees are pleasing to his sight and good for him to eat. This vision of human "settlement" within a supportive environment expresses another aspect of our self-understanding: the sense that we somehow belong here, and that the workings of the world are somehow supportive of our needs and purposes.

The two modes of world-consciousness described above are certainly not harmonious. They cannot but be in tension with one another. Yet, as Buber writes, they "complement one another," since we do not experience only one of these two modes of being. We somehow know ourselves to be both "on time" and "late," oriented and disoriented, at home and strange in the world. Both of these self-understandings inform our sense of what it is to be human.

We return, then, to Buber's structural analysis of the two narratives. The blessing at the end of the first account brings forth what Buber calls "natural man" and the curse establishes what he calls "historical man." Together, they reflect the tension that we all know between our "natural" selves—reflected in the impulses for procreation, survival, and flourishing that we share with other creatures, as well as our "historical" selves, which is that aspect of our experience that derives from our potential for reflective action and free will.

---

[9] This quote, as well as the distinction made below between "natural man" and "historical man," come from Buber's essay "Abraham the Seer" in *On the Bible* (Buber 1982, p. 26).

It is precisely this condition of free will that underlies Buber's more detailed literary-philosophical analysis of the trespass of the tree of knowledge.[10] The commandment issued by God to Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge is not a compulsion, but a prohibition. Although this prohibition is accompanied by "a severe threat," the human being may either "give or withhold his obedience" to it. What, then, precipitated the transgression of God's command? According to Buber's reading of the interchange between the serpent and the woman, and later the accession of the man to the offer of the woman, it all takes place in an atmosphere of what he calls "play and dream." The serpent begins (deviously as might be expected) by deliberately overdramatizing the severity of the Divine command. It says that God has prohibited the humans from eating from any of the trees in the garden even though, as we know, God has actually permitted them all of the produce of the garden except the tree of knowledge. The woman appears to be taken aback by this distortion, and replies as if she were personally offended at this affront to the Divine generosity. She says, as it were: "Oh no! We may eat of all the fruits of the garden!" Yet, she joins the serpent in its game of over-dramatization by adding a small, yet significant detail of her own. Regarding the tree of knowledge, she says that God has forbidden the human beings to even touch it, when the original prohibition only demanded that they not eat it. They have both, then, set out on a course of "playing" with the prohibition so as to make it seem even more severe than it is. When the serpent sees that the woman has joined the game, it continues to "play" with God's word, saying that if the humans eat of the tree, they will not "die." This is a further "playing" since, as will be become clear later on, the serpent is both right and wrong, and knows it. In the "literal" sense, the serpent is right, for when the humans eat of the tree, they do not die then and there. They do, however, as part of their awareness of good and evil in the world, "plunge into human mortality, into the knowledge of death to come." They enter into that human condition and consciousness so famously described by Heidegger as "being towards death" (Heidegger 1962, pp. 247–55).

The theme of "playing" with the parameters of reality and the "imagination of possibilities" other than those placed before us by the limitations of the situation within which we find ourselves, continues in the woman's "contemplation" of the tree before she eats from it. She has never tasted the fruit before, and knows nothing of the relationship between its form and its content. She cannot know if what seems to her to be a "delight to the eye," also tastes good and confers the "gift of understanding." In the atmosphere of "play and dream" initiated by the serpent, however, she imagines the tree's beauty must also bring pleasure to the taste and enlightenment to the mind.

Most certainly, it is the woman who is the active party here. It is she who plucks the fruit, eats it, and hands it to the man. No presence or activity, however, is reported of the man: he passively receives the apple from her hand and then eats of it. This literary contrast between the characters is telegraphically interpreted by Buber as follows: While the woman has been caught in dream web partly of her own weaving, the man seems to be immersed in a kind of "dream lassitude." Without any real activity of his own, or thought of the consequences, he "goes with the flow" of the woman's more active play.

After having eaten the forbidden fruit, the man and the woman do attain to that "knowledge of good and evil" spoken of in the prohibition. For Buber, however, the "knowledge" meant here is not mere cognition, for such knowledge was vouchsafed earlier, and assumed when the animals were brought to Adam for naming. Neither is it the emergence of sexuality per se. However, as Buber says, without the element of sexuality, the "good and evil" referred to in this passage would be "inconceivable." More importantly and primarily, the couple becomes aware of the condition of sexuality as an occasion for the disclosure of a fundamental "oppositeness" in human existence.

---

[10] The ensuing discussion, including quotes, concerning Buber's interpretation of the transgression of Adam and Eve is based on the chapter called "The Tree of Knowledge" from (Buber 1952, pp. 67–80).

Human "being-in the world"[11] (after paradise) reveals that sexuality can be the occasion for both the enhancement of life and for dehumanization. In Buber's reading of Genesis, this contradictory potential, embedded in sexuality, represents a first "case study" in the ubiquitous phenomenon of what he calls "oppositeness," which is an endemic and irremediable aspect of the human condition and of the incomplete Creation.

"Opposites" are broadly described by Buber as having the form of "fortune and misfortune" or "chaos and orderliness." A well-known example that comes to mind is the good fortune that accrues to the unjust, while the just or the innocent suffer misfortune. We also know that deeds intended to bring about good fortune often, in a most chaotic and disorderly fashion, bring about ill fortune. We experience a desire to realize our individual selves, but we simultaneously wish to belong to some collective or meaning-structure that is "larger" than ourselves. We find ourselves mysteriously alive, yet know ourselves to be journeying towards death. We cannot but be existentially puzzled: if there is life, why is there also death? If there is death, what is the purpose of life? By the same token, then, what seems to be a single phenomenon, such as sexuality, can beget both fortune and misfortune, chaos and unity.

In the harmonious world of the garden, the "natural state of unclothedness" was not experienced as an evil, or as a potential evil. Once the humans' "eyes are opened," however, this "unclothedness" is sensed as "nakedness." The very word used to describe this state carries a negative valence. This sense of the potential "misfortune" or even "chaos" that can follow from nakedness creates embarrassment, between the two humans and between them and God. "Clothedness" now acquires a positive valence, so the humans try to "better" the situation by "plaiting a girdle" for themselves.

According to Buber, the Adam and Eve story is colored by an undercurrent of irony. Eve imagines the tree to be a "delight" to the eye and to the mind. She hopes to find concord and pleasure in the eating of the fruit. She could not know that the wisdom embodied in it would actually disclose dissonance and its attendant suffering. She thought that "knowledge of good and evil" would be good. Ultimately, both our first ancestors found out that "knowledge of good and evil" is both painful and challenging. Why would God bring this about, or allow it? Buber does not answer this question directly, even though he does give some suggestive hints.

On one level, God is literarily characterized in the early Genesis narratives as a beneficent Being who breathes life into a "construction of dust," plants a garden for him, and brings him a helpmate. He also wishes, from a like beneficence, to protect human beings from making the excruciating choices that the contradictoriness of life confronts him with. This is why He prohibits him from eating from the "tree of knowledge." Yet, on another level, it would appear that He ultimately wants human beings to face this contradictoriness directly, since, in this case, man reacts to the "oppositeness" embedded in Creation that his existential mettle is tested. Thus, He allows the serpent to tempt the woman into a kind of "demonry" characterized by the kind of imaginative "play and dream" that clouds over the real limitations and commands that are an inextricable part of human "being-in-the-world." However, once Adam and Eve "wake up" and experience the contradictory nature of sexuality "on their skins," the full force of oppositeness asserts itself. The woman, who was "prepared at the time of her creation" to bear children, is to "suffer pains such as no other creature suffers." In due time, she will "desire" once more to "become one" with the man, and this desire will render her dependent on him. The man, who was prepared at the time of his creation to "work the garden and tend to it," will find his work arduous and sisyphic. Precisely one's enjoined purpose and calling will bring suffering in its train. As Buber writes: "a price must be paid for being human." Ultimately, however, God wants humans to be human in the fullest sense.

---

[11] This term is, of course, not from Buber's repertoire, but from that of Heidegger. We, nonetheless, think it is appropriate to have recourse to it in this context. See (Heidegger 1962, pp. 52–59).

Still, from both a literary and existential point of view, there remains, according to Buber, one last dialectical twist. True enough, what was earlier deemed "natural" for the woman: childbirth, and for the man: working the soil, became cursed, and, thereby, accompanied by pain and frustration. Yet, says Buber, "the curse contains a blessing." The curse, the fact that things do not come "naturally," is what sends human beings into "history," the realm of will and choice. History records the reactions and decisions made by human beings in response to the unavoidable pains and frustrations of life.

Startled, disoriented, and tossed about by the contradictions encountered in experience, each human being must make his/her way, or find his/her "path." On the basis of Buber's interpretation of the Adam and Eve story, we find that there are basically two "arch-paths" open to us, although the circumstances within which of these paths present themselves to us will always be contextual and idiosyncratic. We can, as the first humans did, "play with possibilities" in order to flee from the limitations and contradictions that the "givenness" of the situation has placed before us. Alternatively, we can attempt to confront the situation as it is, in all of its contradictoriness, and respond with our whole, unified being to an address that comes to us from its very midst. As an example of the first "arch-path," we may respond to the arbitrariness, chaos, and incoherence we find around us by repudiating reality and pursuing redemption in some other imagined world. We can abandon this reality to its paradoxes and dissonances and seek satisfaction in some more rarefied and harmonious sphere. It is this "arch-path" that Buber calls the "no-position," the one where this world and all its "oppositeness" is rejected. On the other hand, we may take up what Buber calls the "yes-position." By this, he means the affirmation of life in all of its contradictoriness and seeming hopelessness. The person of what Buber calls "great character"[12] works, as God's partner in Creation, to bestow a measure of unified, coherent meaning on that aspect of reality that has been entrusted to his/her care. In so doing, he/she fuses his/her internal opposing drives into a unified decision, which attends with his/her whole being to what he perceives to be the command of the hour, and realizing it in the world, however, imperfectly. By so doing, he/she testifies to his/her faith in the ultimate, beneficent coherence of the Creation, despite its chaotic manifestations. The one God is still sensed as "hovering over" the abyss, turning to the world as He did when He created order out of chaos, and, calling to us, through its very vicissitudes, to unify ourselves and partner with Him in the never-ending work of "mending" the world and "redeeming" its ultimate goodness.[13]

For Buber, it is this "pre-ethics," one's primordial sense of the positivity of the world despite evil, that ultimately informs ethics—or the patterns of interaction that are obtained between human beings. One cannot really seek to harm the Creation or to do harm to other creatures from the "yes-position." Violence and injustice break forth from the "no-position," wherein our deep disaffection with the seemingly arbitrary contradictions that abound in the world leads us to repudiate it and all that is in it.

In the case of Cain, the "no-position" that refuses to accept the situation leads not only to an excess of imagination but to overt action.[14] As we saw, Adam and Eve came upon contradictoriness unconsciously. They could not sustain the limitation that God built into the garden, but they did not deliberately rise up against Him. They were lured into a fictitious world, one wherein that limitation had somehow receded, and proceeded to act out their fantasy. It is Cain, however, who resorts to active violence in response to what appears to him to be the most arbitrary contradiction. He makes an offering in what he believes is good faith, and his offer is refused, while that of his brother is accepted. As Adam and Eve were tested by the playful imaginings of the serpent, so, too, is Cain tested by the refusal of his offering. In his frustration and sense of having "missed out," he strikes out at his brother. He could not have known that his violence would lead to murder, or what murder really is, but he

---

[12] For the concept of the person of "great character, see (Buber 2004, pp. 123–39).

[13] I am much indebted to my student, Ofer Shapira, whose Masters' thesis served me as an important source on the notions of creation, chaos, and self-unification in Buber's Biblical and educational writings. See (Shapira 2011).

[14] The following discussion of the Cain and Abel story, including quotes, is based on the chapter called "Kain" in (Buber 1952, pp. 81–89).

acts violently nonetheless. He, too, flees from responsibility for his action, giving credence to God's insight that he was not really disposed to the good from the very beginning. From a literary point of view, Buber sees Cain's punishment as an external hypostatization of the chaotic soul he was unable to integrate. He is to be a "wanderer to and fro" upon the Earth. Yet he has been told, as have we, that the "evil demon," crouching in the soul plagued by the seeming meaninglessness of events, can be overcome. We can, yet, confront the "opposites" of existence and work to overcome them by recasting our own internal vicissitudes into a unified, decisive will directed toward the primordial call of God to mend His world.

3. Schweid's Reflections on the Experience of Creation and Its Expression in the Bible

We cannot know whether, and, to what degree, Eliezer Schweid had recourse to Buber's thought when he formulated his own reflections on the experience of Creation, both in his earlier writings and in his later commentary on Genesis.[15] Whatever the case, we find a close kinship between some of Schweid's insights on this theme and those we have come upon in Buber's writings. Schweid, like Buber, comes to a consciousness of Creation by way of reflection upon human individuality and its implications. In one of his important earlier writings, *Judaism and the Solitary Jew*, he poses the same questions, and reaches similar conclusions, to those we have seen articulated by Buber above. In the last chapter of that work, entitled "On Faith," he writes as follows.

> "A person does not attain to reflection on God as the absolute source of his being without (first) raising (and considering) the thought of his identity to its full extent . . . The question 'Who am I?' can only be responded to from within the question 'Where do I come from?' . . . (This is) human thought wondering at the riddle of its own existence . . . A person conceives of himself as a unique 'I,' and he asks "Where did I, in this very individuality through which all of the world is reflected (to me), come from?" . . . The question of the source of the 'I' from the aspect of its individuality does not point to a past perceived before the awakening of the consciousness of the 'I.' Even if we were to consider the body as the source even of the conscious entity carried "within" it, could we really consider it as the historical origin of the I-consciousness? We cannot respond to the question of the origin of consciousness except by the reflection of consciousness upon itself. This reflection finds that a clear border has been placed before it—the border of memory that has reached the full extent of its contents—and wonders at a dark 'before,' from whence it has emerged, and a dark 'after' into which it will disappear. The consciousness of the 'I' does, indeed, have a notion of 'before itself' and 'after itself.' But it cannot fill these with content, such that its beginning and end is, for it, an absolute mystery. There is something else that has brought it forth—upon which it depends. In its very givenness it depends upon that which is beyond it . . . One who discovers the thought of faith in God upon pondering the riddle of the origin of the 'I,' will not conceive of God as the 'cause of causes' or just any kind of beginning—beyond his (own) life. The faith in God that emerges from within the (individual) personality, is faith in a personal God, in He who created this one-time personality—this unique 'I'—and turned to it in the act of its creation and in the life that proceeds from it. Only in such fashion does the faith in God respond to the question of the origin of the 'I'" (Schweid 1974, pp. 98–99).

Schweid, too, then, like Buber, begins from the phenomenon of individuality, including one that he and his readers can relate to on the basis of their own experience. In a way similar to that

---

[15] Schweid's interpretation of the Five Books of Moses, including Genesis, can be found concentrated in two of his major recent works. The first of these is titled *Haphilosophia Shel HaTanach Ke'Yesod Tarbut YIsrael* (2011). The second is a two-volume work called *Derashot Al Parashat HaShavua: HaActualiut Shel Torat Moshe* (2016–2017). In our notes on *The Philosophy of the Bible*, we will refer to the Hebrew edition, since it is closer to the author's original intention. *Studies in the Weekly Torah Portions* has not yet been translated into English.

of Buber, he leads out from this experience to our inability to comprehend the emergence of this uniqueness of ours from non-being to being. Additionally, like Buber, he does not, in this passage, confront this intellectual void by filling it with some abstract external cause. Having reflected on the difference between the impersonal causality obtaining between other beings, and having meditated on the possible origin of his own uniqueness, he testifies to an immediate experience of having been personally created. Negatively and reflectively, the individual and the personal could not have been generated by the impersonal. They could only have been brought into being by a personal, unique, and intentional being like oneself, though wiser, more beneficent, and more powerful than oneself. Positively, as a matter of immediate experience, one senses that one has been personally intended, and, thereby, also addressed and charged.

Schweid, however, in his later interpretive writings on the Bible, goes beyond Buber and invites his readers to engage in two additional modes of reflection on Creation that he assumes were undertaken by the Biblical writers. We should note that Schweid does not assume that the Biblical writers were philosophers in the Greek sense, the kind that expressed their reflections by way of an explicit conceptual and systematic terminology. He believes that the Biblical writers occupied themselves chiefly with what Hermann Cohen called a "philosophy of will" (Schweid 2011, p. 44), and expressed themselves by way of what Steven Kepnes, in reference to Buber, has called a "narrative theology" (Kepnes 1992, pp. 120–50). Nonetheless, he assumes that they were as penetratingly reflective about "first things" as the Greeks and the medieval philosophers, and made all the requisite logical "moves" that they made in contemplating the origin of the mind and the world.

The first mode of reflection discussed by Schweid is introspective, and, in that sense, it is similar to the personal, existential witness that we encountered above. It takes place, however, almost entirely in the intellectual realm, and it is epistemological and metaphysical in character. It is presented as the logical substrate underlying the concentrated words of the first verse of Genesis: "In the beginning, God (Elohim) created the heavens and the earth." Upon studying the relevant passages in *Studies in the Weekly Torah Portions* (Schweid 2016, pp. 18–23) dedicated to the interpretation of this verse, it becomes clear that Schweid's thought on these matters is unmistakably informed by his extensive knowledge of medieval Jewish philosophy, and its concern with logical proofs for the existence of God and Creation. In order to make this mode of reflection more accessible, however, he translates its technical language into words and thoughts that can be recapitulated by any thinking person. The logic of what Schweid considers to be an implicit, Biblically informed epistemology and metaphysics runs as follows.

- The various beings we distinguish in the world come to us by way of interactions with our senses that are then conceptualized and categorized by the mind. There would seem to be a measure of correlation between these beings as they take form in our consciousness and their manner of existence outside of our minds. This correlation allows us to "know" them and interact with them as resources for the improvement of our well-being. We comprehend that these beings existed before, and are independent of our awareness of them. Yet, we can only know them by way of our senses and our mind. We are then led to ask: where do these beings come from and where does our apprehension of them come from?
- We cannot really "know" the beginning of the beings, since we were not present in order to apprehend it. Yet our minds tell us that they must have had a beginning, as our own thought must have had a beginning. We cannot conceive that our minds, or the beings we sense as existing outside of our minds, had no beginning, since we cannot conceive of the existence of beings without something that brought them into being as their cause. We cannot really imagine things coming into being out of nothing.
- If we, as thinking beings, come into being and then cease to be, and the beings that we perceive as existing outside our consciousness also come into being and cease to be, the only being that could have ultimately brought both of these phenomena into being must be a being that has always existed, and continues to exist, independently of the beings that constantly come into being and

pass away. This First Cause must be self-sufficient and must be its own eternal cause. It must exist only by virtue of itself, and not by virtue of anything else that it would depend on.

- Having thought this matter through, we are then ready to "hear" the first words of the Genesis narrative. It is God, (Elohim), in His capacity as the one source and bearer of many forces, the One who has no beginning and no end, who caused those beings that do have a beginning and an end, to come into being. The first of the beings that we encounter and distinguish when we look around outside of ourselves is the sky above us and the ground we stand on. It is they that surround us before we begin to distinguish between the other beings. It is they that are first described as created by God.

This manner of reflection, known to us from ancient Greek and medieval philosophy, even though based on speculative, internal reasoning, and not on "empirical" causality, directs us to ask not only about our own origin, but also about the origin of the world that exists outside our minds. In this sense, Schweid undertakes a "re-externalization" of modern Jewish thought from a focus on internal, human experience ("createdness" or "commanded-ness") to external, foundational events that actually take place in the "space" between God and the world.[16] This "re-externalization" is accompanied by a re-valorization of classical epistemology and metaphysics as media and points of departure for reflection on "first things."

This directedness to the external world is continued and intensified in yet another mode of reflection attributed by Schweid to the Biblical author, underlying, like the epistemological-metaphysical mode described above, the structure and order of the Biblical creation story. Here, Schweid returns to the experiential dimension, and treats Creation not merely as "origin," but as a constantly recurring event. For this purpose, Schweid takes his bearings from the famous passage from the prayers preceding the central "Shema Yisrael" ("Hear O Israel") proclamation praising God as He "Who renews, in His goodness, the work of Creation every day, always." This passage from the "Siddur," which is the Jewish prayer book, directs our attention to the visual re-enactment of Creation that is granted to us every morning. By following the process of the sunrise as it is presents itself to our eyes, we gain insight into the structure of the experience that led the Biblical writer to portray the early stages of the Creation as he did. Schweid's poetic description of this vision bears quoting in full.

> "From (within) the darkness of the dawn, the first light appears, although the sun is not yet visible. It is the illuminated heavens that are seen first, and they are perceived as distinguished from the Earth that is still covered by darkness, as a single black mass. Only when the light increases (and gradually overcomes the darkness), does its source, the sun, appear and the face of the Earth become visible: the mountains, the hills, the plains, the sea, and the dry land. (Then) the sun becomes stronger, the moon and stars fade, and the plants, grasses, and trees appear (along with) all the animals that graze on them. As the human being contemplates them, and his feelings rise within him, he becomes aware of himself, and of the consciousness that places him at the center of all these things that he sees. From this experience, he infers the hidden existence of a God beyond time, place, and substance, and that it is His wisdom and will that is revealed in and through the universe as a unity of multiple forces."[17]

---

[16] Leo Strauss credits Otto, Buber, and Rosenzweig for beginning a "re-externalization" process with regard to the action of God upon the world, as distinguished from His being conceived by, or even acting upon, the "internal" consciousness of human beings. Nonetheless, he takes Buber and Rosenzweig to task for not bringing this re-orientation to its ultimate conclusion—especially with regard to the question of miracles. See (Strauss 1987, pp. 8–12). Schweid, I believe, goes further than Buber and Rosenzweig in effecting a "re-externalization" of God as sovereign of the world, as I will mention further on. Yet Schweid's attitude to the miracles described in what he calls the "mythological" portions of Biblical narrative is complex, and should be the subject of a separate inquiry.

[17] See (Schweid 2016, p. 23). The translation into English is my own—as are all other translations from Schweid's works of interpretation on the Bible in this essay.

For Schweid, this more visual and experiential mode of reflection lies at the source not only of the first passage of Genesis, wherein the heavens and the Earth are described as created by God, but also behind the subsequent Biblical verses that tell of the origin of the other beings that surround us. This includes the light (the sun is the light that, in Strauss's words, is "first for us"[18]), then the grasses, plants, and trees, then the animals, and, lastly, the human being. The Creation story, then, is based on an experience that can be undergone by all who are not closed off to the possibility that everyday appearances can point beyond themselves. While not "scientific" in the modern understanding of this term, this mode of reflection is regarded by Schweid as properly "empirical," since it takes its bearings from phenomena immediately present to the senses.[19] Like Mortimer Adler and Jacques Maritain before him, he proceeds from the assumption that all human beings have potential as philosophers. They attempt to give an account of their world in terms of direct experience that is then ordered, and given meaning, by reflection (Adler 1983, pp. 1–16).

In his reading of the rest of the Creation story, as well as of many other episodes related by the Biblical narrator, Schweid adopts many aspects of Buber's post-critical, literary-philosophic orientation to the Biblical text.[20] He, too, regards the two "versions" of the Creation as, ultimately, the representation of one, coherent conception. This is reflected, for example, in his discussion of the well-known controversy regarding the use of Divine appellations in the two versions. In the first account, God appears as "Elohim," which is the name that has been given to him by human beings who have encountered Him as the multi-powerful judge and ruler. In the second account, his "personal" name, which is the one that represents His inner power and vitality, is joined to the first. This name, according to Schweid's reading, is the Biblical author's understanding of the name that God has given Himself. As distinguished from the name that humans have given Him as an outcome of the relationship they have experienced with Him, this is the name by which He wishes himself, "personally," to maintain an "I-Thou relationship" with human beings. It is for this reason that this name, Y'H'V'H, is joined to the name Elohim in the chapters wherein he initiates His relationship with human beings. It is also the name that expresses God's integral, superabundant vitality and energy. It is the name of the One whose concentrated power engenders not only fascination and a desire to come close, but also fear and trembling. Adam and Eve hide from His presence, as does Moses at the burning bush when the name Y'H'V'H is again used along with Elohim, when he is called and commissioned.

In a way also similar to Buber, Schweid pays close attention to the narrator's discrete choice of words and names, his artful use of word-repetition, his employment of compositional strategies such as parallels and contrasts, his modes of characterization through action and speech, and his recourse to dissonance and irony. Like Buber, he does not analyze the Biblical text as "art for art's sake," but rather, in Harold Fisch's terms, as "poetry with a purpose" (Fisch 1990). Neither, however, does he confine himself to the extrapolation of Biblical "ideas," which is unconnected to the nuances of literary form that are organically intertwined with the insights they generate. He praises the sensitivity of Buber, Rosenzweig, and Heschel to the philosophic and existential import of Biblical symbols and metaphors, since an important addition to and progress beyond Hermann Cohen's exclusive occupation with the principles and concepts embodied in the Biblical text.[21]

---

[18] See Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," in *Judaism and the Crisis of Modernity* (Strauss 1997, p. 364), and Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens in (Strauss 1997, pp. 382–83).

[19] See (Schweid 2011, pp. 68–69). While he believes that the Biblical writers were possessed of the empirical orientation that could have developed into what today is called "science," they chose to "dwell" within the philosophical dimension that confronts existential questions, such as the purpose and end of the world and man. See also (Schweid 2016, pp. 28–29).

[20] The discussion of Schweid's view on God's role in the creation process in the ensuing pages is based on *The Philosophy of the Bible as a Cultural Foundation in Israel* (Schweid 2011, pp. 57–58) and *Studies in the Weekly Torah Portions* (Schweid 2016, pp. 17–19).

[21] On this particular issue, see (Schweid 2011, pp. 45–46).

Schweid, however, goes beyond Buber both in his phenomenological articulation of the creation experience from the side of the human being, and, as it were, from the side of God as described by the Biblical narrator, whom he refers to as a divinely inspired, prophetic writer. For Schweid, human beings experience God qua Creator not only as the intimate, beneficent giver of their own individual consciousness. They also encounter Him as the "Almighty," or the One whose overwhelming power is reflected in the awe-inspiring manifestations of nature. This uncanny force and energy beget not only wonder and reverence, but also fear, since it can often prove dangerous. According to Schweid, this, pure, concentrated power of being, which is represented by the name Y'H'W'H—or absolute Being—can burst forth unexpectedly, bringing either destruction or redemption in its train. It can guide the Israelite people through vicissitudes of the desert (the pillar of fire) or form the prelude to the revelation of a Torah that enjoins justice and righteousness. It can also wreak destruction and bring extreme punishment. When this power is made manifest to humans, it often appears as a threatening and consuming fire. At the time of the commission of Moses, it miraculously does not consume the burning bush, even though the wondrousness of its appearance is generated precisely by the expectation that it should. It does not only invite dialogue and confer a mission, as with Buber, but also bespeaks danger and begets fear. As Moses hides his face before the vision, so does Elijah when he, likewise, encounters God in the desert. At the Sinai revelation, a great fire appears at the top of the mountain, and the mountain itself shakes and trembles. The people, direly fearful for their lives, ask that Moses speak to them in place of God, lest they be pulverized or consumed by the fiery storm. Unlike the burning bush, and in direct opposition to it, Nadab and Abihu are "consumed" by a Divine fire since, in their very celebration of God, they dared to bring a "strange fire" to the altar, which is one they were not commanded to bring. Uzza, in his joy at the parading of the Ark to Jerusalem by David, accidentally touches it and is, likewise, consumed.[22] The criteria for the appearance of this "fire" wherein God expresses his awesome power are not always intelligible.

Fortunately, though, it would seem as if there were some equally mighty force keeping this power in check, or within certain borders. It is this feature of our experience of the world (not only of ourselves) that generates our sense of God as One who can both overcome the forces of chaos in nature and also permit them to assert themselves unabated, as well as send out reverberations of His own power, and, rescind them, as He sees fit. As Eliezer Berkovits has written in his theological work *God, Man, and History*, God must often lend support to human beings so they might stand in freedom in the presence of His overwhelming vitality and power (Berkovits 1959, pp. 35, 51–52).

We return now to the Creation narrative itself. According to Schweid's interpretation, God certainly does not appear there as an abstract First Cause. He is portrayed as a "living" God who, like all living beings, generates motion meant to issue in a realization and externalization of His personal intentions. He is vital and creative, however, to a degree that far exceeds anything we can know. His superabundant vitality and creativity burst forth from Him, which externalizes itself at first into a "heaven and Earth" that is dark, undifferentiated, and chaotic. It is only "afterwards" that He crafts and shapes this inchoate mass into a "world." Schweid, therefore, characterizes Creation not as "ex nihilo," but as "yesh mi'yesh," being from being. He bases this insight on a close analysis of the terms used by the narrator to describe God's various "doings" at the "time" of Creation.

While some creatures are "put out" by the Earth, the sea, or the wind at His behest, and others are crafted or "made" from the Earth or other elements, those that are called "created" (from the root B'R'A') come forth, either wholly or in part, directly from God without a mediating substratum. The undifferentiated mass of "heaven and Earth" (not yet separated) bursts forth from Him as a manifestation of His vital, creative drive to external expression.

---

[22] For a discussion of the "consumption by fire," of Nadab and Abihu, see the second volume of *Studies in the Weekly Torah Portions* (Schweid 2016, pp. 33–38).

God's first gesture vis-à-vis this "tohu va'vohu" (chaotic, formless mass) is also not yet an "act" or "making." It takes place within His own consciousness. He wills that there be a vision and plan for an orderly world. The coherent interaction of these distinguishable parts shall ultimately redound to the benefit of the creatures that will live upon it. It is this that is meant by His call "Let there be light." Light does not come into being as the product of a divine "making," but rather appears as an immediate result of a conception and utterance ("let there be" and "there was"). First, the wind-spirit that "hovers over the waters," and, then the light, are disembodied forces and emanations that proceed from God Himself. One surges from within Him, and the other is radiated out from Him. These exteriorizations, or first expressions of God's will and plan, then become what Schweid calls the "tools" of God as He transforms the "tohu va'vohu" into a "world." Until there was light, primordial matter subsisted in a state of dark, undifferentiated chaos. Light makes it possible to distinguish between things. Discrete beings can now be called forth or crafted out of the primordial matter, with each bearing its own essence and character, and interacting with other beings according to a "visible" plan.

The wind-spirit also has a role in Creation. Schweid does not imagine the wind-spirit, as did Buber, as that surge of support that then allows the Creation as a whole to "live itself out" on the basis of its own, independent causality. For Schweid, the "wind-spirit" serves as the source of the life breathed into all living creatures, including the human being. While God "crafts" (va'yitzer) the bodily aspect of the human being from the dust of the Earth, he "infuses" (va'yipach) him with a "wind-spirit" that comes directly from within Him. For this reason, after the "creation" ("bara") of the primordial "heaven and Earth," the only beings that are referred to as directly created by an emergence from God, and not brought into being from within a medium, are (for some reason not altogether explained) the "great lizards," and, most emphatically, human beings. Only with regard to the creation of the human being in God's image is the verb-form B'R'A' repeated three times, after which it no longer appears in the narrative.

Buber's brief, though much laden, account of the Creation narrative, does not focus on, and makes no attempt to explain, the stages of God's "bursting out," contemplation and action as seen from an ostensibly "divine" perspective. Buber does portray God Himself as acting in response to human beings' failures in history (universal violence, the tower, the flood, etc.). He treats the Creation story, however, chiefly from the "human side," as a mythological figuration of certain contradictory and tension-ridden aspects of the human experience. Schweid, however, is much more "theocentric" in his orientation to the Creation narrative, which gives less weight to modern humanistic sensibilities. Rather than consistently striving to build a "bridge" between the Bible and contemporary consciousness, in Buber's dialogical mode, he takes up the position of an explicator and promulgator of the Biblical world-view itself, which allows the present-day reader few "concessions." This is evident in the emphasis he places not only on God's beneficence, but also on His overweening, threatening power. On Schweid's reading of the Bible, God did not altogether tame the "tohu va'vohu" when He conceived and implemented His plan for an orderly, fundamentally beneficent "world." On certain occasions, the "tohu va'vohu" might reassert itself, and God Himself may will that his own vital, yet sometimes destructive, power burst forth without apparent reason.

In Buber's writings, we find him more occupied with the theme of God's political sovereignty over Israel as a model for His eventual political sovereignty over humanity (Buber 1990). From Buber's perspective, all personal, communal, national, and eventually international, human doings and makings must stand under the Divine charges of justice and responsibility, with no aspects of life abandoned to the forces of power alone. Schweid, however, focuses equally on that aspect of Biblical narrative that presents God not only as a wise and just political sovereign, but also as the omnipotent sovereign over the forces of nature.

There is another important respect in which Buber's and Schweid's understandings of God's relation to the world and to human beings in the Creation narratives differ significantly. As will be remembered, with regard to the humans' encounter with the Tree of Knowledge, Buber opposes the interpretation that the eating of the fruit represents the birth of sexuality and its attendant tensions.

He refers to sexuality as a mere condition of the real "knowledge" gained from the fruit, which is the consciousness of "oppositeness" (in this case, the potential for both generation and dehumanization inherent in sexual interaction). He denies that "knowledge of good and evil," the awareness that would make human beings "like God," could refer to sexuality, since "this God is supra-sexual" (Buber 1952, p. 71).

Schweid, on the other hand, while certainly not maintaining that God has a body like humans, nevertheless, depicts the one God, in His relations with the world and with human beings, as possessed of certain "modes" of relation[23] that are correlative to certain typically "masculine" and "feminine" patterns that we know from our human experience. Schweid takes particular note of the fact that, in the Bible, the human being is first created as both one and two. When we are told that the human being has been created in God's image, he is described as in the singular, as one: "In God's image was he created." From the perspective of sexuality, however, the human is described in the plural, as two: "He created them male and female." Similarly, God, although integrally One in Himself, nonetheless, relates to His Creation and to human beings by way of His dual "modes" of masculinity and femininity. The "mode" that externalizes His vital superabundance, lays His plans and injects the seeds of his orderly plans into the "tohu va'vohu" is His masculine aspect. The "mode" by which He then gently touches, crafts, and intimately "breathes spirit" and engenders fertility into the distinct beings is His feminine aspect, which is figured by the Biblical narrator as the "hovering spirit." It is by virtue of this spirit, that the "planted" potential beings gestate and are "born." Without direct recourse to the later rabbinic conception of the Shekhina as God's feminine mode of expression, and without expanding on the dynamics of God's dual sexuality in the manner of some of the Jewish mystics, Schweid, nonetheless, attributes such modes to the Biblical God in His relational capacity, and most certainly does not portray Him as "supra-sexual." For Schweid, God appears to us, and is experienced by us, as both powerful and sexual. For this reason, the being described as "created in His image," the human being, also expresses power and sexuality as an inherent part of his/her being and behavior throughout the Biblical narrative.

For Buber, the term "yetser" in the Bible refers to human beings' penchant for creative imagination. While fully aware that this attribute can serve as a positive resource, Buber, nonetheless, emphasizes its negative potential. It is this capacity that tempts human beings to imagine alternative realities to the one they must confront, and, thereby, induces them to flee from responsibility. When the Bible says that humans' "imaginings are evil from their youth," it means, for Buber, that "the storm of adolescence first deluges him with the infinitude of the possible" (Buber 1952, p. 93). For Schweid, on the other hand, the "yetser" refers to sexual desire. For him, sexual avarice is the archetype and prototype of the cardinal sin of "chemda," or the desire to possess something that is not one's own because it belongs to another and not to oneself. It is this drive that lies at the root of all avarice, including that rampant acquisitiveness that, in Schweid's oft-expressed view, has taken hold of our contemporary world.

Now Schweid most certainly does not believe that power and sexuality can or should be totally "conquered" or repressed. Neither, however, does he seem to think that it is humanly possible merely to sublimate or dissolve power and sexuality into the resolute, unified personality of Buber's "great character." Power and sexuality are such potent components of our make-up that they must be struggled with constantly, and, while not exactly subdued, certainly restrained and sometimes

---

[23] Schweid consciously borrows the term "modes" when applied to God from Spinoza. See *Philosophy of the Bible as a Cultural Foundation in Israel* (Schweid 2011, p. 40). Schweid's depiction of divine sexuality and human sexuality as correlative contrasts sharply with the interpretation of Genesis conceived by Strauss. Strauss highlights the fact that, while human sexuality is explicitly described "male and female created He them," no sexuality whatsoever is attributed to God Himself. There is, then, no correlation here—rather a marked contrast. On Strauss' view—sexuality attributed to God would most certainly lead to a conception of dualism within God that no theory of "modes" could overcome. Strauss insists, in "On the Interpretation of Genesis," (Strauss 1997, pp. 361–62), that imputing sexuality to God would lend credence to the view that "male and female" are "universal characters" used for the "fundamental articulation of the world"—as with many pagan conceptions. It would seem that Schweid has no compunctions whatsoever about attributing sexuality to God, and does not fear the consequences.

even overcome altogether so that they do not get the better of us. They cannot be expected simply to integrate into some more elevated quality of soul that has unified all of its vicissitudes.

On the one hand, the "music" and "body language" of Schweid's writings on this issue sometimes recall Augustine's pre-occupation with "concupiscence" as the root of all evil.[24] On the other hand, he does believe, contra Augustine, that, with the help of the limitations and restraint afforded by Biblical law, power and sexuality can be not only contained, but ultimately harnessed and, thereby, redeemed. According to Schweid, the Biblical narrative is replete with episodes wherein originally illicit sexual liaisons eventually lead to the advancement of the Divine plan for Creation.[25]

The potent and deleterious character of human sexuality and power is first described in the narratives depicting the sins of "our first parents" and of their son, Cain. Here, too, Schweid's interpretation differs markedly from that of Buber, even though it does show some signs of continuity with it.[26] For example, both Buber and Schweid construe the prohibition to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, and the temptations of the serpent, as a test that Adam and Eve cannot really pass. Although the humans have the freedom either to obey or to refuse the command, God somehow knows that human beings, if they are to ever pass the test, will have to initially fail it in order to experience the consequences. Each philosophic interpreter of the Bible, however, understands the test differently. For Buber, as we have seen, it is a test to see if human beings can accept the oppositional nature of human experience as part of the human condition within Creation. Can they accept limitation and dissonance within an environment of harmony and plenty? Without knowing more about the contradictions of life, something they will surely learn after they are expelled from Eden, they cannot possibly resist the temptation to "play and dream" of a reality where dissonant prohibitions disappear. When they fail the test, God responds with a "stern benefaction" (Buber 1952, p. 79), which is one that brings pain and frustration, but also allows humans to face their contradiction-ridden condition with authenticity before God, rather than flee from responsibility. The nakedness that they become aware of after eating the fruit is just a "case study" in "oppositeness" or exposure to the both good and evil potential of sexuality.

For Schweid, the test is also known by God to be one that the humans must fail. However, this is so for much more "earthly" reasons. From the later passage that speaks of the human desire for evil as originating during the time of "ne'urim," or adolescence (Genesis 8:21), Schweid assumes that Adam and Eve were adolescents when they first faced each other in their nakedness, and that the temptation they experienced was utterly sexual to its very core. The forbidden fruit symbolizes sexuality, and the "eating of the apple" means engaging in the sexual act on the basis of "animal-like" desire, without any of the human empathy and mutual support that must accompany the sexual attachment if human lovers are also to be, in Biblical language, "help-mates" to one another.

Schweid accesses many literary resources where Buber was one of the first to make available to modern Biblical scholarship in order to craft an interpretation decidedly different from his. Before the "action" between Adam, Eve, the serpent, and God even begins, the narrator's description of the very planting of the garden already forms an "exposition" that introduces the chief tensions in the narrative.

The two special plants mentioned as standing out in God's planting of the Garden of Eden are the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life. From the "concordantial" perspective, often employed by Buber, wherein words and expressions distantly deployed in the Bible shed light upon one another, Schweid, like Strauss before him, cannot help but notice that another context in which the words "Tree

---

[24] See in particular *Studies in the Weekly Torah Portions* (Schweid 2016, pp. 43–44).

[25] See Schweid's interpretations of the relationships between Adam and Eve (who were siblings), Abraham and Sarah (who were also brother and sister, a least by one parent, according to Schweid) and Yehuda and Tamar in his readings of the appropriate *parashot* in *Studies*—for example, how illicit liaisons can be "restarted" and re-forged for constructive purposes.

[26] The ensuing discussion of the Tree of Knowledge story and the Cain and Abel narrative in Schweid's interpretation is based on the *Philosophy of the Bible as a Cultural Foundation in Israel* (Schweid 2011, pp. 69–71, 87–92) and *Studies in the Weekly Torah Portions* (Schweid 2016, pp. 31–48).

of Life" (Etz Haim) occur in the Bible, namely in Book of Proverbs,[27] wherein the Torah is compared to a Tree of Life (as are the "fruits" of the righteous and the truth spoken by the "healthful tongue"). The "Tree of Life," then, represents the commandment and teaching of God that contains both truth and righteousness. In opposite fashion, when God communicates His prohibition, He says that eating from the Tree of Knowledge will bring death. He does not draw attention to the other tree, but, just as He assumes that the humans know which tree is the Tree of Knowledge, so they must also know which tree is called the Tree of Life. Schweid reads this situation as an implicit, yet unarticulated, command issued by God to choose life over death and the truth of God's word over the falsehood implicit in sexuality. Yet, Adam and Eve cannot understand this implicit command until they undergo the experience that reveals pure sexuality to be intrinsically "false." How so? At this point, Schweid has recourse to yet another element of literary analysis that Buber made famous in his writings on Biblical narrative: word repetition and word-play. He notices the obvious consonance of both form and sound between the Hebrew word describing the deceitfulness of the serpent ("arum"), and the word describing the state of being naked ("erom"), with some variation of which is repeated three times. When the man and the woman "eat from the fruit" and reach sexual satisfaction unaccompanied by true human companionship, they learn precisely how deceitful the sexual act can be. When sexual attraction is ignited, sexual intercourse seems to promise a kind of secret pleasure that can only seem good. When the sexual act is over, however, it is revealed for what it ultimately is: "an arousal the satisfaction of which bears no secret, and which attracts no longer" (Schweid 2016, p. 44). "Nakedness" (erom), then, is intrinsically "deceitful" (arum). It makes the appearance of offering that which it cannot really deliver: something really good. "It appears to promise much more that it really contains, until experience dispels the illusion, exposes the deceit, and arouses disappointment and repulsion in its place" (Schweid 2016, ibid.).

The unalloyed sexual situation, then, "lies," because it presents a superficial, sensual truth as the whole truth. It does not "say" that the phenomenon of sexuality also has a moral valence, so that, when it is not joined with love and the commitment to loyalty and procreation, it is "false," unworthy of trust, and ultimately generate emptiness rather than pleasure.

Yet all this is clear in advance to the "prophetic" narrator, who writes from the point of view of the creating and commanding God. It cannot be clear, however, to human beings unless they experience it, which means undergoing the "test" of false sexuality, failing it, and "having their eyes opened." As we saw, according to Schweid, God actually hints at the "truth" from the beginning. He tells Adam that the Tree of Knowledge, that one that is said to bestow knowledge of good and evil, actually harbors death. It is the Tree of Life, which represents God's commandments, that does not reflect a "false image" of reality. The commandments are founded on the distinction between truth and falsehood, and show the way that human beings must conduct themselves in the light of the "true" human condition.

Once Adam and Eve experienced the "falseness" of sensuality, and understood the "truth" of their situation, they are embarrassed at their nakedness—before each other and before God. They now realize that human sexuality cannot and should not be the same as animal sexuality. It cannot be based on pure instinctual desire. Human beings were created such that they must "face" each other, with all that that denotes and connotes, when they have sex with each other. Only then can the sexual act be hallowed as part of a supportive relationship dedicated to the increase of life in the world. Adam and Eve, however, see themselves naked just like the animals around them who are impelled to copulate by instinct and desire. They feel demeaned and degraded, and it is this feeling that prompts them to separate from the animals by making clothing for themselves.

As we have seen, then, the assertion that human beings have been created in God's image does not, according to Schweid, only mean that they are possessed of the potential for rationality and free will. That very same "image" also constitutes them as imperfect embodiments of divine sexuality

---

[27] Proverbs 3:18, 11:30 and 15:4.

and divine power. They must, however, learn to rule and redirect these forces in keeping with God's natural, moral, and social ecology. The Adam and Eve story is the first Biblical "case study" in the education of humankind with respect to the proper place of sexuality in this ecology. The Cain and Abel story, which immediately follows upon the banishment from the Garden of Eden, is the first "case study" in the education of humankind with regard to power and its potential for violence. In his explanation of the literary transition between these two narratives, Schweid reminds us that the seeds of violence are already contained in the sexual act when it is not accompanied by love, empathy, and commitment. In the unmitigated sexual act, elements of exploitation and domination emerge and assert themselves. We cannot, therefore, avoid noticing the continuity that is maintained between the transgressions of Adam and Eve and that of Cain. As with the Adam and Eve Story, Schweid's interpretation of the Cain and Abel story is based on a very close reading of the details of the narrative, which relates them all to each other and to the overall insight transmitted by the whole.

On the face of it, it would seem that Cain should have been the one whose offering was accepted. He is the firstborn whom Eve celebrates as the "Ish," or person of distinction, that she has procured directly from God. His name is interpreted by Schweid to mean "blade,"[28] a sharp tool forged by human beings in the post-paradisiacal world to "work the land" and for purposes of defense. It was God's explicit command that man tend the Earth, and Cain takes on this role resolutely despite the extreme difficulties he must face in doing so, now that the land has been cursed. With his sharp tool and mind, Cain makes his "mark" in the world. He does what is needed to grow a new "garden," which represents, for Schweid, that the civilizational framework is needed by human beings for their sustenance and protection. His descendants are the inventors of key agricultural and cultural implements. "Hevel," on the other hand, makes no "mark" in the world. He rather disappears right after his narrative ends, as if he were the embodiment of his own appellation: the breath of the mouth that evaporates immediately into thin air. According to Schweid, by becoming a herdsman, and by living from what his animals and the land yield on their own, he lives as if he were still in the Garden of Eden.[29] This, too, is reflected in his name: his orientation to human life in the post-paradisiacal world is based on "Hevel," which has a lack of connection to reality. He does not follow God's command to work hard and try to get the recalcitrant Earth to yield more than it would of itself. He is a kind of "hippy" who flows with what nature provides without worrying about tomorrow. However, the positive side of all this is that his "laid back" orientation prevents him from becoming enslaved to working the land, or jealous of others for having wrested more from it than he has.

Why, then, did God accept Hevel's sacrifice and not that of Cain? Like Buber, Schweid learns the answer to this question from the expression on the faces of the brothers after the sacrifice has taken place. Since it is written that Cain's "face had fallen," he assumes that in this sense, as well, Hevel has been characterized as a "foil" for Cain. From the outset, Hevel was satisfied with what the land and his flock had yielded him with very little planning and work. He entered his sacrificial rite, and walked away from it once it was completed in a "happy and good spirit." This happiness was not the result of God's "direct" approval. He knew that God had approved of his "offering," in the larger sense, by the very fact that he had enough to live on. This was enough of a "gift" to beget the desire to bring a sacrificial "gift" in return. Similarly, Cain's "fallen face" was not only a result of God's refusal of his sacrifice. It was part of his intrinsically discontented make-up, which causes God to distance Himself from Him. His orientation to the land, to life, and to his brother made his him constitutively dissatisfied. The land would never yield as much as his inventiveness and industriousness might lead

---

[28] I am grateful to the anonymous reader for pointing out that this interpretation, while not reflecting the plain sense on site in his/her view, might have derived from a comparison with 2 Samuel 21:16 where the blade ("Kino") of the spear of Yishbi who sets out to defeat David, is said to weigh some "three hundred *mishkal*." If this is so, it further shows how Schweid implements Buber's concordantial, trans-Biblical literary method in assigning meaning to rare words and names.

[29] As the same anonymous reader has also pointed out, there was no herding in Paradise. However, herding would seem to Schweid to be a more "natural" and less "civilizational" way of life than agriculture, which reflects, in a non-literal way, the paradisical ethos.

him to expect. The fact that his brother could live adequately without suffering the anxieties and the frustrations of the "advanced" husbandman drove him to distraction. He came into his sacrificial rite "wanting more" and becoming secretly jealous of his brother's way of life and happiness.

Schweid, like Buber, takes one last note of the literary-anthropological sophistication of the Cain narrative by commenting on the commensurability between the nature of Cain's transgression and the form of his punishment. On Buber's reading, as will be remembered, the "wandering to and fro" of Cain's punishment represents an external reflection of his internal state, such as his inability to unify his chaotic soul by way of a resolute decision and the assumption of responsibility in the face of the arbitrariness and "oppositeness" of life. Schweid, however, sees the punishment as deriving from the breach of a covenant that was to obtain between human beings and the Earth, from which they were created. Humans were meant to care for the land and "work" it, and not over-exploit it. They were not to attempt to wrest from it more than it can yield by reasonable cultivation. They were to remember that they were formed from the Earth and would return to the Earth, and that the Earth is ultimately God's possession, given to human beings in trust as the ground of their sustenance. Cain broke his pact with the Earth by attempting to rule over it and force it to guarantee all of his needs. When this did not happen, his "face fell," and he became fundamentally dissatisfied. Since he did not see himself as also giving of himself to the land, but only as taking from it, God ruled that the land would no longer give its strength to him, and that he would wander to-and-fro upon it. For Schweid, this conclusion bears an important ecological message for the contemporary reader. Humans must live justly, by way of mutual covenant, not only with each other, but with the Earth. They must give of themselves to the Earth so that the Earth will give of itself to them. One-sided exploitation, in breach of this covenant, will cause the Earth to withhold its life-giving fertility, and no longer serve as a "home" for humans.

4. Conclusions: The Religious Significance of the Bible's Embodied Discourse for Schweid

In the above pages, we hope to have taken some first steps toward placing Eliezer Schweid in a tradition of literary-philosophical interpretations of Genesis initiated by Buber. As Schweid himself writes at the beginning of his book *The Philosophy of the Bible as a Cultural Foundation in Israel*, Buber and Rosenzweig go beyond the intellectualistic rationalism of Maimonides and Hermann Cohen by not restricting themselves to the extrapolation of abstract "ideas" from the "body," or form, of the Biblical text. The "bodily" characteristics of the text (its "texture," as Michael Fishbane has called it (Fishbane 1979)) are not to be regarded as mere scaffolding for disembodied principles and concepts. True, writes Schweid, the overall perspective of the Bible can still be properly formulated in conceptual terms as "ethical monotheism" (Schweid 2011, p. 35). However, the true character and normative force of this "world-view" can only be genuinely experienced by the way of a close literary reading of the details of Biblical narrative and law.

Both Buber and Schweid adopt the Biblical orientation that regards the human being as a "body-soul" whose "spiritual" attributes cannot be reduced to his/her "bodily" characteristics, and whose "material" manifestations cannot be seen as mere reflections of his/her rational "essence" (Buber 1994c, pp. 5–6). By the same token, both regard the divine voice proceeding from the Biblical text as representing a "body-soul," in which the nominally "physical" and "spiritual" attributes cannot be separated. Therefore, one can only "get on the inside" of the "discernments" and "commitments"[30] communicated by the Biblical voice by way of close attention to both form and content, or better: by close attention to the patterns of interaction between its literary composition and the world-view organically embedded therein.

---

[30] These terms are developed by (Ramsey 1974). They stress the fact that for the Biblical consciousness, fundamental insights, "discernments," about the nature of the world and man's task in it, and "commitments," normative duties, are most often coupled, and reinforce each other.

In our comparison of Buber and Schweid as they close-read the Genesis narratives, we have found them both to be faithful to this orientation. Both assume that whatever may have been the origin of the two accounts of Creation in Genesis, they have ultimately come to form a literary-philosophical whole. Turning our attention once again to Buber's sensitivity to the literary structure, we recall the two blessings imparted to the first couple and to the Sabbath in the first account, and the two curses, directed at Adam and Eve and the Earth in the second, as well as the sin that occurs in between, which gives the rationale for the curses at the end. Schweid, revealing the same structural sensitivity but arriving at a different conclusion, shows how the first account portrays the world and the Earth as serving human beings, while the second enjoins human beings to serve and preserve the Earth and not exploit it. As with Buber, these messages, though seemingly mirror-images of each other, are actually complementary. Schweid sees this complementarity as deriving from God's cosmic and moral ecology: human service to the Earth and its creatures is a condition of the Earth serving as a support and "home" for human beings. Without this mutuality and solidarity, human existence on Earth is intrinsically threatened, since there is an imminent "justice" built into Creation. While this justice may not always be apparent, Schweid fervently believes, with the "prophetic writers" of the Bible, that it will most certainly assert itself in the long term.[31]

Both thinkers also pay close literary attention to word deployment, word repetition, and word-play in the Biblical narrative. As we have seen, Buber directs us to the only two places that the two words "ruach merachefet" (hovering wind-spirit) occur in the Bible: once as a prelude to Creation and once as a characterization of the way that the mother eagle prompts her young to fly. From this aspect of "form" deriving from the "body" of the text, he reaches the "substantive" conclusion that, for the Biblical author, God has energized the subsequently independent motion of the world in the same manner that the eagle powers the autonomous flight of her offspring. Schweid focuses more particularly on the single word "ruach" (wind-spirit), and comments on its uses in the more immediate context of Genesis. For him, it is this "ruach" that is "blown" into the bodies of living creatures, including the human being, which infuses them with motion and vitality.

Another feature of the "body" of the Biblical text highlighted explicitly by Schweid is its symbolic mode of expression, especially with regard to those points in the narrative where the presence of God is manifested. Schweid explicitly praises the literary sensitivity of Buber, Rosenzweig, and Heschel to the features of symbolic, and not only of conceptual language (Schweid 2011, pp. 45–46). Concepts gather the "bodily" details and movements of a narrative into themselves, leaving no "bodily" remainder. The living God becomes, for example, the One or the Absolute. Symbols and metaphors, on the other hand, overflow their "normal" denotative sense (think of someone feeling "stained," for example), yet without forfeiting their "material" quality. The concrete does not merely serve as a stepping-stone to the abstract, but somehow is able to express something more wide-ranging and universal from within itself. When the Biblical narrative speaks of the incursion of the transcendent God into the human world of body, space, and time, it "naturally," then, has recourse to symbol and metaphor. God "overflows" whatever earthly manifestation mediates His presence at a given place and time, yet the quality of His relation to human beings is expressed by way of images and figures that vitally engage the senses.

From the point of view of religious experience, both Buber and Schweid testify that one cannot hear the living Divine voice as it courses through the Bible if the "bodily" aspect of the text is dissolved into a set of abstract ideas. The Biblical perspective cannot and should not be reduced to a set of concepts meant for the intellection only. The Biblical God is experienced as a "living" God with "personal" characteristics, not as a supreme Idea (as with Maimonides) and not as a teleological force (as with Kaplan). Similarly, the Biblical text, wherein His voice has been heard, appropriated, and passed on by what Schweid calls the "prophetic writers" cannot and should not be commuted to the sphere of

---

[31] On the idea of an overarching justice built into Creation, according to the Biblical world-view, see (Schweid 2011, pp. 195–98).

abstract ideas. One should rather hold oneself open to the possibility of experiencing it as a "living voice" that calls out to us by way of its textural "body language."

One of the best examples of the degree to which both Buber and Schweid attribute special significance to symbols in Biblical language, is their respective interpretations of the image of fire in a Biblical narrative. Both Buber and Schweid make special reference to fire as a leading metaphor indicating the presence of the divine in the Bible. Each of them, however, understands the manifestation of God in and through fire in a significantly different way. Buber avoids relating to the threatening, dangerous, and consuming aspects of fire as a mediator of God's presence. Fire, along with fog or cloud, is one of the indications of God's formlessness. It is an example of a kind of form without form. The fire observed by Moses at the burning bush, aside from serving to attract his attention, is meant to be a symbolic manifestation of God's name, "ehyeh asher ehyeh" (I will be with whomsoever I will be). This name, for Buber, does not refer to an abstract "essence," but to a formless Presence that is "with" whomsoever God wishes to be "with" at a particular place or time.[32] Elsewhere, it appears as a "pillar of fire" that accompanies and leads Israel on its "way" at night, as does the "pillar of cloud" by day.

Schweid, however, does not recoil from dwelling at length on the more threatening, dangerous, and "consuming" aspects of the fire metaphor. For the Biblical writers, according to Schweid, fire represents, first and foremost, a most intense concentration of Divine power, which is an overwhelmingly powerful force that would consume all that surrounds it, should God choose not to contain it. In comparing the Burning Bush episode with the account of the revelation at Sinai, Schweid highlights the fact that first Moses, then the people of Israel, are sorely frightened by the fire that reflects the presence of God. He leads his readers back from these narratives that render Divine vitality and force through the metaphor of fire, to the Creation story itself as a veritable eruption of Divine energy (Schweid 2011, pp. 50–61). On Schweid's interpretation, the first externalization of the world generated by God at the Genesis, before the radiation of the light and the forming of the beings, was an infinitely powerful explosion of vital energy. He characterizes God's first "move" at the Creation as the outward explosion of God's absolute vitality derived from a most powerful desire that has not yet been infused with will and wisdom (ibid., p. 65). Schweid reminds us, as we have noted above, that Nadab, Abihu, Uzza, and the priests of Baal are all consumed by fire from heaven. Trespassing the domain of the Holy, even without intention, can, from the unadulterated Biblical perspective, lead to death by fire. A fortiori, should human beings consciously rebel against God's plan for cosmic and social solidarity, can forfeit their "right" to life. From the Biblical perspective, life, and all that supports life, is given to human beings in trust, on condition that they dedicate their lives, and use the means of life-support given them by God, for constructive purposes.

In general, it would appear that while Buber emphasizes those aspects of the Divine that might engender openness to God in those in whom this disposition has not yet ripened, Schweid sees himself not only as a mediator of the Bible to contemporary readers, but also as a spokesman for its more mysterious and unfathomable elements. He concerns himself not only with what Strauss has called the "liberating" and "granting" characteristics of the Torah, but also with its "austere," "stern," and "prohibiting" aspects.[33] He sees the fear of God, and not only the love of God, or partnership with God, as a legitimate human response to God's sovereignty and power. God's plan for the world does not always overlap with human, time-bound understandings of justice, and His interaction with the world and with human beings is not always predictable. In a way similar to Strauss in this regard, Schweid's reading of Genesis encourages obedience even in the face of unfathomability and seeming injustice.

Schweid, like Buber, is ultimately an educator who wishes to bring the Biblical message closer to contemporary readers with rationalistic, democratic, and egalitarian sensibilities. Yet, he does not do this by moderating and domesticating God's "otherness" and impenetrability, but precisely by placing these

---

[32] On the revelation and commission at the Burning Bush, see his *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (Buber 1958, pp. 39–55.)
[33] For more in this distinction, see Strauss' Introduction to his book *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (Strauss 1965, p. 14).

very aspects of the divine, as communicated by the Bible, at the feet of his readers for contemplation and reflection. Schweid does regard the Bible, in some sense, as the ultimate precursor and harbinger of modern humanism and egalitarian democracy (Schweid 2016, pp. 35–36). In this respect, he might be likened to Erich Fromm or Tzvi Adar (Adar 1967, Fromm 1966). Yet, more like Strauss, at least in this respect, he seems much more intent on presenting the Biblical world view as a magisterial, internally coherent, and conscious alternative to the excesses of modernity and post-modernity.

Lastly, the attributes of God, and the nature and task of human beings, as they emerge from Schweid's literary-philosophical readings of the Bible are even more "bodily" and sensual that the ones that issue from Buber's readings. The Buberian God also meets the human being in his own sphere, by way of "physical" manifestations in time and place. Yet, His changing appearances are always a function of the quality of a specific divine-human dialogue. Buber's God would seem to have no permanent attributes that "belong to Him." He cannot and should not be described in sexual terms. Neither is He given to outbursts of unintelligible power, anger, or authority. When He does appear to be such in Biblical narrative (as in the story of Saul who was charged with killing all the Amalekite women and children, and was then stripped of his kingship for not having done so), Buber disavows the passage as "deviant" and unrepresentative of the Biblical outlook.[34] For Schweid, on the other hand, the Biblical God is portrayed by the "prophetic writers" (with whom Schweid strongly identifies) as manifestly sexual, both male and female, and as impenetrably powerful. The attributes of sexuality and power do not appear to be dialogue-specific for Schweid, but are rather presented as permanent features of the Divine personality.

As will be remembered, in discussing the correlation between divine love and human love in his commentary on the Song of Songs, Franz Rosenzweig writes "man loves as God loves, and because God loves" (Rosenzweig 1971, p. 199). Therefore, the Song of Songs is not to be regarded as a "mere" allegory, but as a "true-to-life" representation of the living parallel between the experienced phenomenon of divine love and that of human love. By the very same token, one could say, following Schweid, that: "humans use power and are possessed of sexuality because God (in whose image they are created) is possessed of sexuality and uses power." The crucial difference would be that humans do not always express their sexuality and power in the way that God expresses these attributes, or in accordance with God's plan and vision for a more complete Creation.

Sexuality and power are manifested and enacted by God for the purpose of creating and sustaining a world intended for the ultimate benefit of His creatures. These creatures are also endowed with power and sexuality, so that they might build themselves a "home" in this world (a civilization) and generate more life on Earth, which is in keeping with God's vision of mutual service and support among creatures, and between creatures and their environment. Human beings, however, most often engage in the sexual act and wield power in order to control and exploit others. They are, therefore, charged to engage in a sustained, never-ending struggle to overcome these powerful urges that are permanent, while somewhat modifiable, "attributes" of the human personality. These energies, which are derived from the Earth from which humans have been created, and still bear the traces of the primordial chaos, must be continuously confronted, controlled, and redirected. Unlike Aristotle and Maimonides (and Buber), Schweid does not envision the human soul as attaining coherent unity, with its "vegetative," "sensory," and "appetitive" parts ultimately reflecting a rational and moral "essence." More like Plato and the Neo-Platonists, he anticipates a constant conflict and struggle between man's animal, Earth-derived energies, and the rational and moral consciousness that has been granted to him by God. Rather than cooperating with each other, or synthesizing themselves, the cognitive and the appetitive "parts of the soul" often strengthen themselves precisely at the other's expense.

---

[34] See the famous passage in Buber's "Autobiographical Fragments" wherein he insists that Samuel could not have heard God rightly if he ordered Saul to murder the women and children of Amalek in (Friedman and Schilpp 1967, pp. 32–33).

As we know, Buber has famously characterized the human condition as two-fold: humans have the potential to engage in both "I-It" relations and "I-Thou" relations. Though, in modern times, the instrumentalism of "I-It" has certainly gained the upper hand, the return to a healthier balance between the "I-It" and the dialogical mode of "I-Thou" is presented by Buber as a task that human beings can and should strive for. While employing these very categories in his interpretation of Genesis, Schweid's view of the contemporary human situation would seem to be significantly more pessimistic. At one point, he goes so far as to characterize the human being as an "animal of the species of the beasts of prey" (ha-torfim) (Schweid 2016, p. 37) whose desires are bent on evil from the first indications of adolescence. Like Strauss, he seems convinced that, first and foremost, human beings are in need of restraint.[35]

On the one hand, Schweid would probably agree with Buber that one of the most important human tasks in our time is the cultivation of openness to the Divine call to join with Him in the healing and completion of Creation. On the other hand, however, he would not regard such a response as even remotely possible unless humans first overcome their endemic sexual and material covetousness. In his subsequent readings of the "parashot" of the Torah, Schweid does show how even the most adulterous and licentious relations, and the most unjust manipulations of power, between supposedly "righteous" Biblical characters, can, in principle, be redirected and re-energized to serve the Divine vision for a more harmonious world. Yet these complex literary readings, that depict Biblical characters with all their foibles with no holds barred, actually end up portraying them as most exceptional and rare human beings, of the kind who can redirect some of their "animal" energies to higher ends. Even these "successes," however, eventually deteriorate and regress, without accumulating in the direction of anything that might be called "progress."

Given the fundamental covetousness of human nature, Schweid maintains that the Biblical vision and norm of familial, societal, national, and international solidarity has become more important than ever. For him, this ideal represents what Strauss has called "the one thing needful"[36] for our times. In reading Schweid's recent works on the Bible, we get the impression that they have been written out of a sense of emergency. From Schweid's point of view, human beings have become so inveterately self-serving and oblivious to the command of God to "cultivate and preserve" the world and their fellow-creatures, that the ecological sustainability of human life on Earth, and the very possibility of human community and society, might very well be in danger. It is his hope that in reading and interpreting the Bible, we might be led to "set this message before us at all times."

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Adar, Tzvi. 1967. *Humanistic Values in the Bible*. New York: Reconstructionist Press.

Adler, Mortimer. 1983. Everybody's Business. In *Philosophy for Education*. Edited by Seymour Fox. Jerusalem: Van Leer, pp. 1–16.

Amir, Yehoyada. 2005. *The Path of the Spirit: The Eliezer Schweid Jubilee*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University and Van Leer Institute, vol. 1.

Berkovits, Eliezer. 1959. *God, Man and History: A Jewish Interpretation*. New York: Jonathan David Publishers.

Buber, Martin. 1952. *Good and Evil*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Buber, Martin. 1958. *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.

Buber, Martin. 1967. *On Judaism*. Edited by Nahum Glatzer. New York: Schocken Books.

Buber, Martin. 1982. *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*. Edited by Nahum Glatzer. New York: Schocken Books.

---

[35] See Strauss' comments on this theme in his book *The City and Man* (Strauss 1964, p. 5).

[36] See Strauss' comments on philosophy as the "one thing needful" in his *On Tyranny* (Strauss 1961, p. 201). Elsewhere, however, he tells us that philosophy cannot refute revelation, and that it could therefore be that revelation is the "one thing needful." See his comments on this theme in *Philosophy and Law* (Strauss 1987, p. 13).

Buber, Martin. 1990. *Kingship of God*. Translated by Richard Scheimann. Atlantic Highlands and London: Humanities Press.

Buber, Martin. 1994a. Leitwort and Discourse Type: An Example. In *Scripture and Translation*. Edited by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 143–50.

Buber, Martin. 1994b. Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative. In *Scripture and Translation*. Edited by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 114–28.

Buber, Martin. 1994c. People Today and the Jewish Bible. In *Scripture and Translation*. Edited by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 13–17.

Buber, Martin. 2004. On the Education of Character. In *Between Man and Man*. Translated by Ronald Gregor-Smith. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 123–39.

Buber, Martin, and Franz Rosenzweig. 1994. *Scripture and Translation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Fisch, Harold. 1990. *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Fishbane, Michael. 1979. *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts*. New York: Schocken Books.

Friedman, Maurice, and Paul Arthur Schilpp. 1967. *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*. La Salle: Open Court, pp. 32–33.

Fromm, Erich. 1966. *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition*. New York: Fawcett Premier.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1994. *Truth and Method*. New York: Continuum.

Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row.

Kepnes, Steven. 1992. *The Text as Thou*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Levin, Leonard. 2013. Eliezer Schweid: An Intellectual Portrait. In *Eliezer Schweid: The Responsibility of Jewish Philosophy*. Edited by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron Hughes. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Ramsey, Ian. 1974. *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases*. London: SCM Press.

Rosenzweig, Franz. 1971. *The Star of Redemption*. Translated by William Hallo. Boston: Beacon Press.

Rosenzweig, Franz. 1994a. The Unity of the Bible. In *Scripture and Translation*. Edited by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 23.

Rosenzweig, Franz. 1994b. The Secret of Biblical Narrative Form. In *Scripture and Translation*. Edited by Everett Fox and Lawrence Rosenwald. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 129–42.

Schweid, Eliezer. 1974. *HaYehudi HaBoded VeHayahadut*. Tel-Aviv: Am Oved Publishers. (In Hebrew)

Schweid, Eliezer. 1994. *Democracy and the Halakhah*. Lanham: University Press of America.

Schweid, Eliezer. 2000. *The Jewish Experience of Time*. Northvale: Jason Aronson.

Schweid, Eliezer. 2008. *The Classic Jewish Philosophers*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, vol. 3.

Schweid, Eliezer. 2009. *The Philosophy of the Bible*. Boston: Academic Studies Press.

Schweid, Eliezer. 2011. *The Philosophy of the Bible as a Cultural Foundation in Israel*. Tel-Aviv: Yediot Aharonot. (In Hebrew)

Schweid, Eliezer. 2016. *Studies in the Weekly Torah Portions: The Relevance of Moses' Philosophy for Our Time*. Kadima: Reches Publishers for the Melton Center for Jewish Education of the Hebrew University and the Mofet Institute. (In Hebrew)

Shapira, Ofer. 2011. Bein Sippur HaBri'ah LeMishnato HaChinuchit Shel Martin Buber. Unpublished Masters' Thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel. (In Hebrew)

Strauss, Leo. 1961. *On Tyranny*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Strauss, Leo. 1964. *The City and Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Strauss, Leo. 1965. *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Strauss, Leo. 1987. *Philosophy and Law*. Translated by Fred Baumann. Philadelphia: JPS Press.

Strauss, Leo. 1989. How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy. In *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*. Edited by Thomas Pangle. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, p. 213.

Strauss, Leo, ed. 1997. *Judaism and the Crisis of Modernity*. Albany: SUNY Press.