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The Holocaust in Jewish and Christian Theologies (MRC V3a)

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1. Introduction

In 1984 Hans Jonas gave a lecture to commemorate and discuss his receipt of the Dr. Leopold Lucas Prize in Tübingen. Jonas explicitly dedicates his statement to the memory of the wife of Leopold Lucas, who, like Jonas's mother, died in Auschwitz.¹ Jonas pairs this guiding memory of Jewish victims of the Holocaust with another memory, a memory reproduced in the form of self-citation. The speech is entirely dedicated to the explication of a passage from another speech, the 1961 Ingersoll Lecture, which Jonas delivered in 1961. The ghosts of the victims of the Holocaust and echo of the meaning of a Jewish voice from the past frame and condition the Jewish theologian's systematic discourse. As a result of its centralization of self-citation in the direct context of the Holocaust, Jonas' text reveals paradigmatic features of the relationship between the Jewish voice-in-citation and the event of the Holocaust. The pair of mourning memory of the victims of the camps and the citation of „A Jewish Voice“ (sub-heading of the 1984 lecture) forms an irreducible structure of religious and inter-religious discourse after the Holocaust, in and beyond Jonas' thought. The Jewish philosopher-theologian who speaks to remember the loss of Jewish life in World War II can do so only by means of a kind of self-ventriloquism, a replay of his own voice. The suffering of the Jews does not guarantee the immediate self-presence of the Jewish voice, and the dialogue about the Holocaust continually

¹ Hans Jonas, „The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice.“ *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Jan. 1987), p.1.

calls upon, cites and ventriloquizes the speech and writing of Jews in order to combat this fact—and this limitation is not specifically Christian or non-Jewish. Although Jewish voices receive a new status after the Holocaust as privileged artifacts, they do not receive a unique position as sources of veridiction after the Holocaust.

The failure of the Jewish voice-in-citation to uphold the burden of truth placed upon it after the Holocaust also emerges in Jonas' post-Holocaust thought (thus his exemplarity), specifically in the complex intertextual relationship the 1984 lecture maintains with his previous writings, more than anything his denouncement of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In Jonas's work, the Holocaust necessitates a multiplication of voices: Jonas's rejection of his master, Martin Heidegger, depends on a variety of new voices both divine and human which unavoidably clash with Jonas' invocation of God's silence in the 1984 lecture. Jonas requires a Christian voice in order to gain independence from his teacher—a voice, as demonstrated below, that he borrows from his Christian audience—and he requires God not to be silent, but to maintain a trans-historical phonocentric presence. The 1984 lecture and the text on Heidegger thus demonstrate an impasse in Jonas's thought, an impasse that typifies the paradigm of post-Holocaust theology: that the Jew cannot speak for him- or herself.

2. Contextualizing the economy of religious speech after the Holocaust

The division of European populations in the Holocaust on the basis, primarily, of religion (along with race) and the systematic destruction of Europe's Jews introduced an irreducible division into historical experience that non-Jewish religious practice and theology were forced to approach from without: Christians could not speak about the historical or salvific

consequences of the Holocaust because they were not present at the scene of destruction. Christian theology after the Holocaust—though not only Christian theology—converts this limitation of historical experience into an economy of identity and speech. The privileged primary relationship to the historical trauma of the Holocaust transforms Jewish survivors and Jews in general into witnesses, into first-person sources of emotion, experience, speech, art and reflection. Christian historically critical theologians, at least the ones who consider the Holocaust as a radical imperative to revise Christian theology, in turn begin to conceive of themselves as „attorneys for the dead“ who organize „the testimony of the Jewish history of sufferings.“² The recording of the testimony of Jews after the Holocaust involves the creation and citation of a Jewish archive, a database of texts, interviews, songs and stories from the ghettos and camps, and theological-historical reflections of the Rabbis who survived; Christian historical theology mediates this archive in place of an absent historical experience.

This trend in post-Holocaust theology effects a reversal of a Pauline paradigm regarding the immediacy of Christian and Jewish relations to God. This paradigm originates in Exodus 17:1-7: Moses strikes the rock rather than asking God to give Israel water. The water flows, and Moses's direct connection to God is demonstrated; in the same act however, the prophet's entrance into the Promised Land is barred. This brutally direct communication of the prophet of Israel with the Lord is interrupted by Paul. „[A]nd drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ“ (1 Corinthians 10:4). The Jewish prophet communicates with God only by means of the mediation of Christ. Thus, for Paul, the arrival of the Christ reverses (,supersedes') the priority of Israel's relationship to

² Johann-Baptist Metz, „Facing the Jews. Christian Theology after Auschwitz.“ In: *The Holocaust as Interruption*. Ed. Fiorenza and Tracy (1984), pp. 28, 30 respectively.

God. In the Holocaust, the reversal is undone: Christ died on the cross and thus transformed the Hebrew bible into a prehistory of his suffering, and the Jews died at Auschwitz and thus transformed worldly history into a history of their suffering. Post-Holocaust religious discourse (or a certain strand of it) institutionalizes the Jew as the unified victim-protagonist of history.

„Through the years that "Auschwitz" raged God remained silent.“³ After the Holocaust, the silence of God's voice is matched by a self-prohibition of the Christian voice and a corresponding inflationary effect of the Jewish voice: Christians such as Metz content themselves with a silent reflection, amplification and interpretation of the Jewish voices which can, and must, speak directly of the camps. God's silence during the Holocaust becomes an imperative to speak afterwards, viz. an imperative received only by Jews. The Jews are returned to the desert, but it is for them to decide if in fact God has ceased communications with the elected people, and what this might mean. An examination of post-Holocaust theology must analyze the function and dysfunction of this reliance on the Jewish voice. The voice under discussion here, that of Hans Jonas, will be shown to function only on the paradoxical basis of hearing itself speak.

3. Jonas's double voice

Jonas's presentation of „A Jewish Voice“ on the the concept of God after Auschwitz thus answers the challenge of Jewish theology after the Holocaust quite anticlimactically: the Jewish answer to the Holocaust has already been provided, in the form of a myth, and the author has now only to give the myth a systematic interpretation and contextualize it with

³ Jonas, „Concept,“ p. 10.

regard to Auschwitz. Like when Samuel Beckett's Krapp, alone on stage, brandishes a tape recorder and plays back his own pre-recorded voice while he himself listens with the audience, Jonas re-delivers the myth he presented in 1961 when he was asked to give a speech on the „immortality of Man“ (as the endowment of the Ingersoll lectures stipulates). Between these two lectures, between the the myth and its hermeneutical interpretation, lies nearly a lifetime of philosophical and theological engagement, including the opus magnum *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (1979). Because Jonas subjects his myth to no critique or revision whatsoever, the unproblematic relationship of systematic interpretation to original text is projected onto Jonas's intervening life's work. The entire edifice of his postwar thought expresses a singular religious vision (or „myth“). The 1984 lecture has the retroactive effect of encoding this body of work as a response to the Holocaust.

The most salient feature of the construction of the divine in Jonas's myth—so says the author-interpreter—is God's non-omnipotence (alongside but beyond his suffering, his becoming and his caring). Jonas the interpreter establishes an iron triangle of divine attributes, of which one must be renounced in the face of the Holocaust: divine omnipotence, divine goodness and divine intelligibility. For Jonas, the only acceptable response to Auschwitz is the dissolution of divine omnipotence.

After Auschwitz, we can assert with greater force than ever before that an omnipotent deity would have to be either not good or (in his world rule, in which alone we can "observe" him) totally unintelligible. But if God is to be intelligible in some manner and to some extent (and to this we must hold), then his goodness must be compatible with the existence of evil, and this it is only if he is not all powerful. Only then can we uphold that he is intelligible and good, and there is yet evil in the world (8-9)

With greater force than ever before—does this phrase imply that the consequences of the Holocaust for theology were already virtually present to Jonas's mind before the event made

them actual? This question pertains to the degree of discontinuity represented by Auschwitz; Jonas presents in this passage a pair of re-actualizations: the reactualization of systematic theology (Jonas' iron triangle) in the historical crucible of the camps, and the reactualization of the consequences of the Holocaust for systematic theology (the recognition of the need to abandon divine omnipotence). It is as if there is a lag in not only in Jonas' thought, but in the relationship of history to theology itself. Jonas comes to express the theological consequences of the Holocaust not in returning to the camps, but in returning to his own voice.

But why does the name of Auschwitz emerge only after such a wait, in 1984 and not in 1961? The act of self-citation introduces the thematics of post-Holocaust theology *for the first time* into the cited lecture, while simultaneously Jonas structures his post-Holocaust theology around the cited text. Is this interpretation that Jonas provides—a critical *reaction* to his own text—or a look into the already-present principles of construction of the myth? Jonas's 1984 lecture continually shifts between explanation of a previous thought process and interpretation of a new emergent element in his own thought. The lag between the Holocaust and theology contains a glitch. The Jewish philosopher-theologian has to both articulate a decisive break in theological thought and demonstrate the perfect continuity of his own theological thought. So the Jew speaks twice. The internal consistency of this maneuver, however—the good faith assumption that Jonas is not retroactively revising his own speech—is a surface effect of the institutionalization of the immediate self-consistency of the Jewish voice. This effect becomes visible in the presence of the other voices that Jonas makes audible.

Another voice also reverberates—silently, like the voice of God—in the gap between myth and interpretation, namely the voice of Heidegger, Jonas’s teacher. Jonas’s relationship to Heidegger is complex⁴; it is clear though that Jonas’s 1964 paper „Heidegger and Theology“ marks a decisive break with his former master.⁵ Jonas’s rejection of Heidegger’s philosophy of Being in favor of theology likewise marks his clearest engagement with National Socialism as a historical phenomenon—but at the price of destroying his myth. Jonas rejects the „fate-laden“ nature of Heidegger’s thought in favor of a God whose power radically interrupts history.

But as to Heidegger's *being*, it is an occurrence of unveiling, a fate-laden happening upon thought: so was the Führer and the call of German destiny under him: an unveiling of something indeed, a call of being all right, fate-laden in every sense: neither then nor now did Heidegger's thought provide a norm by which to decide how to answer such calls—linguistically or otherwise: no norm except depth, resolution, and the sheer force of being that issues the call. [...] The being whose fate Heidegger ponders is the quintessence of this world, it is *saeculum*. Against this, theology should guard the radical transcendence of its God, whose voice comes not out of being but breaks into the kingdom of being from without. (218-219)

To this statement one must juxtapose Jonas’s own: „Through the years that "Auschwitz" raged God remained silent.“⁶ In response to Heidegger’s paganism and his Nazism, theology must embrace a divine power beyond history; in response to the Holocaust, however, theology must relinquish a divine power beyond history, and thus reverse God’s answer to Job. This conceptual tension may be of theological import, but the context of the post-Holocaust fixation on Jewish phonocentrism allows the problematic of the voices to emerge more clearly: *God speaks with multiple voices*. The divine voice and the Jewish voice thus share not a relation of perfect of immediacy but a cacophony.

⁴ See Elad Lapidot, „Hans Jonas’ Work on Gnosticism as Counterhistory.“ *Philosophical Readings* IX.1 (2017), pp. 61-68.

⁵ Hans Jonas, „Heidegger and Theology.“ *Review of Metaphysics*; Washington, etc. Vol. 18, Iss. 2, (Dec 1, 1964): pp. 207-233.

⁶ Jonas, „Concept,“ p. 10.

This *Stimmungswirr* takes on a decisive inter-religious aspect when one examines Jonas' borrowing of the Christian voice in his Heidegger lecture. Jonas the *Jew* leaves the stage, and Jonas the *Christian* delivers a soliloquy. "All these questions are for the philosopher," says Jonas in 1964 to his Christian audience at Drew University. "But as regards the theologian—or should I say the believer—may I for a moment speak on his behalf? Then it seems to me that the Christian, and therefore the Christian theologian, must reject any such idea of fate and history as extending the status of his own mandate."⁷ Jonas ventriloquizes the Christian theologian in order to achieve escape velocity from his teacher. This speaking-on-behalf models already the speaking-in-citation of the 1984 lecture. Unsurprisingly, it is the pagan or „immanentist“ return of the gods that Jonas rejects in Heidegger, i.e., precisely the paganism he rejects in his myth:

The same [unconditional immanence] our myth postulates for God's being in the world. Not, however, in the sense of pantheistic immanence: if world and God are simply the same, the world at each moment and in each state represents his fullness, and God can neither lose nor gain. Rather, in order that the world might be, and be for itself, God renounced his being, divesting himself of his deity—to receive it back from the Odyssey of time weighted with the chance harvest of unforeseeable temporal experience: transfigured or possibly even disfigured by it. (4)

Something analogous holds of Jonas himself, who divested himself of Heidegger only to receive him back and be disfigured by him. Jonas's voice-in-citation destabilizes his voice-in-presence and replays old voices previously abandoned, like that of Heidegger. Voices multiply: not only Jonas present but Jonas past; not only Jonas the Jew but Jonas the Christian; not only Heidegger and the voice of the Führer but the voice of God, who is also—crucially—silent. The question of identity/continuity/consistency—that of Jonas'

⁷ Jonas, „Heidegger,“ p. 217.

post-Holocaust thought, that of theology and history before and after the camps, that of the Judaism itself—is answered only by a swarm of voices, often in contradiction of themselves and each other, that constitutes more noise than signal. No auto-affection grounds the post-Holocaust regime of Jewish phonocentrism, rather the Jewish voice requires other voices and techniques of its own reproduction. Even the Jewish voice relies on a recording of itself or of others in order to speak about the Holocaust. This torsion in post-Holocaust Jewish identity however must not be understood as an indictment of weakness on the author's part. Jonas is exemplary for his willingness to be speak with the voice of another—even when, as in this case, it is his own voice between quotation marks.

4. Conclusion

Is the deconstruction of the Jewish voice an example of giving Hitler a posthumous victory, as Emil Fackenheim asks of Rubinstein and others?⁸ This standard for the evaluation of religious thought after the Holocaust demonstrates clearly that the Jew continues to hear the voice of Hitler. A Zionism according to which the Jewish voice must be nationally amplified in order to drown out the voice of Hitler is consigned to the mode of repression (and the return of the repressed); in the same way, the establishment of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust as a guarantor of the authority or consistency of the Jewish voice after the Holocaust relies on a discursive arrangement, the Jewish voice-in-citation, which infuses Jewish voices themselves.

This arrangement, i.e., the economy of speech and identity in post-Holocaust discourses, is not necessarily theological. However, the claims made by, with and about Jews in theological

⁸ Emil Fackenheim, „The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz.“ In: *Wrestling with God. Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*. Ed. Katz (Oxford 2007), p. 434.

contexts after the Holocaust participate compulsively in this discursive scene. In Jonas' case, the extinguishment of God's omnipotent relation to history in his 1984 lecture clearly stands in contradiction to his invocation of God's transcendent relationship to history in his rejection of Heidegger; this conflict makes visible the variety of voices with which Jonas speaks about the Holocaust—including his own, in a unique blend of the first and third person. Jonas at the lectern stages a series of quasi-theatrical encounters, like an epic theater of theology (in Brecht's sense). His revision of the classical question of theodicy and his reversal of God's answer to Job thus establishes a theological stage on which heterogeneous speech events impact and disfigure one another: God's answer to Job can be reversed by a theologian's personal myth of creation (so long as the author also plays the role of interpreter), and the Jewish theologian can play the role of the Christian believer in order to make God's radical transcendence thwart Heidegger's philosophy of Being, while nevertheless relinquishing this transcendence when presenting a Jewish voice. As Emil Fackenheim has argued in a slightly different register, Auschwitz is fundamentally an event in the history of the voice—the voice of God as well as the Jewish voice.⁹ The consequences of this event continue to pronounce themselves, often in unexpected voices, even when a Jew is speaking.

⁹ Fackenheim, *ibid.*, p. 437: „For the religious Jew, who remains within the midrashic framework, the Voice of Auschwitz manifests a divine Presence which, as it were, is shorn of all except commanding Power. *This* Power, however, is inescapable.“