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## Of Scripture, Paradox, and Interpretation

„What is written in the law? How do you read?“<sup>1</sup>

When, according to Luke, chapter 10, a lawyer stands up to put Jesus to the test, he asks: „Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?“ Jesus answers with two questions: „What is written in the law? How do you read?“ The lawyer responds, citing Deuteronomy and Leviticus: „You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.“ „You have answered right,“ Jesus tells the lawyer: „do this, and you will live.“ But the lawyer, not yet justified, Luke writes, asks further: „And who is my neighbor?“ Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan who, unlike the priest and the Levite, shows mercy on the man who had fallen among thieves when going down from Jerusalem to Jericho: „Go and do likewise,“ Jesus tells the lawyer.

What is written in the law? How do you read? In response to the lawyer's singular question about what he should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus answers him with two singular questions. He directs the attention of his interlocutor to law, to Torah, to Scripture as involving not only what is written but also how he reads. The „doing,, or action which is involved in inheriting eternal life is written in the law, but the written law involves the further question: how do you read? The Greek word, which is translated as „read“, is rooted in the verb for „know“. In other words, Jesus asks the lawyer: how do you know, how do you read or do – enact or live – what is written in the law? The lawyer responds to the two questions of Jesus by citing two of the greatest legal text in the Hebrew tradition: Deuteronomy 6.5 (from the Shema, itself commenting on the covenant made by God with the Israelites and the giving of the Ten Commandments, in Deuteronomy 5) and Leviticus 19.18 (which is part of the suite of legal ordinances which God delivers through Moses to the Israelite people). Commanding the love of God and the love of neighbor, these two texts are among the most glorious of scriptural passages about what is written and how one reads what is written in the law. We may recall the parallel passage in Matthew. In response to the lawyer who is said there to test Jesus by asking: „Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?“ Jesus responds: „You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second

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<sup>1</sup> Luke, 10. 26. In this study I make use of the Authorized Version, the Revised Standard Version, and the New Revised Standard Version (in light of the Greek text for the New Testament). For texts cited see References. For authors cited, only representative texts are indicated.

is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (22.35–40.)

After the lawyer, in Luke's version, indicates how one is to read what is written in the law, Jesus tells him: „you have answered right; do this and you will live." The response which Jesus gives to the lawyer involves the same terms as those of his original question—doing (action) and (eternal) life. We are thus led to understand that the action appropriate to inheriting eternal life expresses a tradition of law, a covenantal history, which, as scriptural, involves one in the action of how one reads (or knows) what is written. There is clearly a parallel between the two questions asked by Jesus and the two scriptural passages cited by the lawyer. On the one hand, what is written in the law – Torah – represents the one God of the Israelites whose uniqueness and universality express the ten commandments, the summation (the summit or sum) of which is that you are to love your neighbor as yourself. On the other hand, how you read (or know) what is written in the law is revealed in the action which you bear towards your neighbor. For, as you love God, the other, in utter commitment of self, as yourself, so you love your neighbor, as yourself, in utter commitment, above all others.

It is uncontestable, I think, that God and neighbor – both of whom one is commanded to love with the deepest commitment of self, as, indeed, one's very self – are indistinguishable in their very difference. It is undecidable whether God or neighbor is prior (or posterior) to the other, for each involves and expresses the other: the first will be last and the last will be first. What is written in and how one reads the law involve both God and neighbor, both scriptural tradition and action, the inheritance of which is eternal life. Even when Jesus explicates the lawyer's further question, „And who is my neighbor?", with the parable of the Good Samaritan and then commands the lawyer, „Go and do likewise", he is still explicating the question of what one shall do to inherit eternal life. Eternal life expresses the inheritance (the history) of law whose written command to love God and neighbor involves one in the question of reading, of knowing what is written. But how do you read (know) what is written in the law? Clearly, only by loving God as yourself and your neighbor above all others – with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind. God and neighbor, Scripture (writing) and reading, the law (the command) of eternal life and doing (living) it – such are the concepts which articulate what I have called elsewhere the dialectic of biblical critique, that of existence and interpretation.

My aim in this paper is to show how writing, law, reading, and action (doing what is required to inherit, to be the heir to, eternal life), as articulated in Luke 10, provide the structure of interpretation. I also want to show that interpretation, as propounding the question – how do you read (or know) what is written? – involves and expresses an ontology which is consistent with the biblical conception of God and neighbor, the religious and the secular. All persons are neighbors; all neighbors are

persons. There is nobody without a neighbor. There is no one outside the neighbor. There is no(thing) outside the neighbor. In our so-called, secular (post-theological, atheistical) age, the existence of God is readily, easily, conventionally, but also earnestly denied. Yet, who among us today earnestly deny their neighbor, whatever the easy conventions of denial which are ready at hand? Are thoughtful people, those who love their neighbor with all their heart and all their soul and all their strength and all their mind, any more unusual today than in the time of Jesus and the lawyer? Spinoza claims in *The Theologico-Political Tractatus* not to be aware of any prophets living in his own time. (16) Still, since he holds that the certitude or moral truth of prophecy is based primarily not on the images or signs of prophetic revelation but on the right and the good to which the mind of the prophet is solely turned, it is clear that the prophet is the one who, like the Good Samaritan, inherits eternal life by doing it, by loving God and neighbor above all others. (31, 52.)

If, therefore, the prophet is no less the one who reads than the one who writes the law, since both reading and writing the law are involved in the inheritance of eternal life, of *doing*<sup>2</sup> the love of God and neighbor in one's life, we come to see that the biblical canon is at once closed and open. On the one hand, the Bible, for both Jews and Christians, is closed in the end. Yet the Bible is eternally complete(d) in the prophetic, the loving action of its readers, readers both individual and communal. On the other hand, the Bible is complete(d) in the beginning. Yet the Bible is eternally open to historical action, the inheritance of eternal life, which encompasses not only the fifteen hundred or so years of its growth into the canon which Jews and Christians possess today, or even longer if one includes within its development the story of Islam, but also the reading of its written law which constitutes history as the story of the relationship to the other, the neighbor. What I mean to indicate here is that, just as Spinoza can faithfully read the Bible only by making his reading of the written law consistent with the prophetic reading of the written law – or, to paraphrase Hegel, prophets communicate only with prophets – so, in the beginning, Scripture coincides with creation, the creation of God and neighbor. There is no beginning, no creation,

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the Greek word for „do” (what shall I *do* to inherit eternal life?, *do* this and you will live, go and *do* likewise) is *poiein* (to make, do, poetize). For the Bible, action (reading) is poetry, and poetry (the written law) is action: the Word made (poetized as) the covenantal flesh of the neighbor. We can thus see that, when Plato (at the end of the *Republic*) reduces poetry to appearance and Aristotle (in the *Poetics*) elevates appearance to poetry – each utterly consistent with, in his blind opposition to, the other – the entire realm of what for the Bible is action, doing, expression, poetry, communication, community (the covenant of the neighbor) is for the Greek world but unreal appearance whose contradictory opposite is form (Plato) or *nous* (Aristotle). In other words, there is, in the Greek world, neither a theory of action nor a praxis of poetry, the singularly written law of both of which, for the Bible, is the neighbor whom one is commanded to read (poetize, do, love...) as oneself.

outside Scripture, just as there is no Scripture, no writing, outside creation, outside the creativity of beginning. Scripture begins with the story of creation, than which there is none other (or greater). The beginning of creation is the beginning of Scripture, than which there is none other (or greater) written. The story of creation is complete – in six days: yet, in its eternity, bespeaking the seventh day of rest, fulfillment, and thanksgiving, the creative story is unconditionally historical.

In the beginning we still find the written law. There is no beginning prior to Scripture, for the beginning is contained in Scripture, just as there is no Scripture prior to the beginning, for the beginning is written – as our end. Writing is the beginning. In the end we still find ourselves involved in the question of how we read (or know) what is written – in the beginning. There is no end posterior to reading, for the end is contained in reading Scripture, just as Scripture is contained in the end of reading, for the end is reading. Reading is the end.

To comprehend the paradox that in the beginning is scripture and that in the end is reading, that there is no beginning outside Scripture and that there is no end outside reading (or knowing) what is written in Scripture, is to comprehend – and to be comprehended by – the paradox of interpretation. By the paradox of interpretation – the interpretation of paradox – I understand the revealed, the undecidable, the liberating truth that there is no scripture outside its reading and that there is no reading outside Scripture. The end (reading) is in the beginning, and the beginning (writing) is in the end. I do not know whether these claims sound innocent or not. My point, however, in elaborating the Lucan passage about the law written and the law read is to see that there is no Scripture outside its interpretation and that there is no interpretation outside its Scripture. Not only in the beginning is Scripture (or writing) interpretation, but equally in the end is interpretation Scripture. It may seem obvious that (in the beginning) all writing involves interpretation, but is it so obvious that (in the end) all interpretation expresses Scripture, even though we have already seen that beginning and end are as intricately bound together as are God and neighbor, law and action, and writing and reading in the inheritance of life whose eternity involves a temporality which is expressly historical? If, however, all Scripture involves interpretation and all interpretation is expressly scriptural, if there is no writing outside interpretation and no interpretation outside writing, then it will follow that where there is no Scripture, there is no interpretation, and where there is no interpretation there is no Scripture.

Either/or. Either both Scripture and interpretation or neither Scripture nor interpretation. Thus we can say with Paul: either letter (flesh) and spirit, or neither letter (flesh) nor spirit. The spirit of the letter (flesh) is always its interpretation, while the letter (flesh) of the spirit is always what is written. Or we could say with Ezekiel: either a heart of stone or a heart of flesh, or neither a heart of stone nor a heart of flesh. The heart of flesh is always interpretation, while the heart of stone is always what is written. I push these analogies hard, but my point is that there is no letter, no

Scripture, no writing, no heart of stone outside its interpretation and that there is no spirit, no interpretation, no reading, no heart of flesh outside Scripture. In his *Tractatus* Spinoza speaks of the two levels of Scripture in terms of its sense (*sensus*) and its truth. (100) But we are to understand that the dialectic of Scripture and interpretation, of the written law and its reading, is at once embodied (historical) and true. Falsity, of both *sensus* and truth, emerges whenever Scripture (whether letter or spirit) is „read” or „interpreted” without the reading or interpretation involving us in the inheritance of eternal life: go and do likewise. Falsity, of both *sensus* and truth, equally emerges whenever interpretation claims to express letter or spirit which is not scriptural (or written) and thus does not involve us in the inheritance of eternal life: go and do likewise.

We may anticipate, however, that the lawyer, in the postmodern guise of the secular philosopher or the literary critic, will rise up and put the biblical thinker to the test, asking: Teacher, what does the inheritance of eternal life have to do with me? What does my life have to do with eternity? The biblical thinker answers with two questions: What is the law of writing? How do you read? I terminate this brief dialogue here, but the point I want to make in introducing it is that, whatever the philosopher or the literary critic (the successor of the Israelite lawyer) may say, s/he can give no other answer to these two questions than that of the lawyer, as reported by Luke. There is no life outside the love of God and the love of neighbor, whatever its guises, and the life which involves and expresses the love of God and neighbor is the life eternal, life lived under the eternal command: do this, and you will live; go and do likewise. Eternity, understood biblically, is not opposed to temporality; rather, eternity is temporality comprehended as history, uniting beginning and end, alpha and omega, past and future, linear and circular, self and other, prior and posterior, analytic and synthetic, identity and difference...

But eternal life, comprehended as the command to read others ('writings) as you would have them read you (r writings), wounds from behind. Eternity is the double-edged sword of life, the sword of writing and reading which cuts both ways. The double-edged sword of life is the written law which must be grasped without a handle – read – for all eternity. Jesus said that he came to bring not peace but the sword. The sword of Scripture creating eternal life – the heartfelt love of God and neighbor – cuts both ways precisely because, just as reading is contained in what is written in the law, in the law of writing, so Scripture is contained in its reading, in its interpretation. But, since there is no Scripture outside its interpretation and no interpretation outside Scripture, wherever there is interpretation there must Scripture be and wherever there is Scripture there must interpretation be. I intentionally play upon the relationship between Scripture and writing and between reading – the question: how do you read? – and interpretation. The only text that can be read (or interpreted) is that which is

written – in the law. But for the law to have been written – for the law of writing to have come into existence – it must, always already, have been interpreted. The point – the double-edged sword – to grasp is that, since Scripture, the Bible, the book, writing is eternally its interpretation, it is completed only in its interpretation, just as interpretation is completed only in Scripture. But, since both writing and reading, Scripture and its interpretation, involve and express the love of God and neighbor, wherever the neighbor, the other – God – is present, there are scripture and interpretation; and wherever the love of God and neighbor, the other, is absent, there is neither Scripture nor interpretation. In bringing the sword which, in writing both ways, creates the peaceable kingdom and not the peace which represses the blood of sacrifice – of not only truth but also idols – the Bible brings both Scripture and reading, both writing and interpretation, into existence. The writing of the Bible, which is also its reading, its interpretation, cuts both ways precisely because, just as all writing is contained in the Bible, the Bible is contained in all writing.

The double-edged sword of the Bible, which is its reading, its interpretation, is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. The Bible includes all writing and reading within its covenant: choose life, not death; and the Bible is included within all writing and reading which are covenantal: go and do likewise. The Bible excludes all writing and reading which are not „writing” and „reading” and is excluded from all writing and reading which are not „writing” and „reading” – precisely because such „writing” and „reading”, in that they are not writing and reading, do not bear the dialectic of loving God as yourself and your neighbor in the fullness of your heart. The irony, the paradox of encountering with the Israelite lawyer the revelation that the Bible is simultaneously the law of writing and the law of reading – whose singular command is to love the other as yourself – is that, because writing and reading both constitute and are constituted by the neighbor, the Bible is eternally present where the neighbor is present and is eternally absent where the neighbor is absent. What this means for interpretation is that, like Scripture, like the Bible, like writing, interpretation is always present where the neighbor is present and is utterly absent where the neighbor is absent. It follows, therefore, that there is no interpretation outside the golden rule. The golden rule is never outside interpretation. Indeed, the golden rule is interpretation, and interpretation is the golden rule – the golden rule of writing and reading the law of the neighbor.<sup>3</sup>

My argument, which is consistent, I believe, with the writing and the reading of the prophets and Jesus, for whom all truth resides in reading, in knowing, in doing, in living eternally what is written in the law, is that writing and interpretation (reading), as involved in and expressing the golden rule, are not found outside the Bible and that, where writing and interpretation are found, there the Bible is also found. This argument

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<sup>3</sup> I make the golden rule the hermeneutical principle of interpretative practice in my work.

is the burden of my two books, *The Dialectic of Biblical Critique* and *Truth and Interpretation*, and here I can only outline, in schematic form, its central implications. Let me observe, first, however, that it is not the standard authors on hermeneutics, from Schleiermacher on,<sup>4</sup> but the speculative thinkers of modernity, at once theological and philosophical – Descartes, Spinoza, Vico, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche – who remain true, whatever their waverings, to the hermeneutics of biblical writing and reading. It is also not Alter, Bloom, or Frye but rather Auerbach, Barfield, and Schneidau who recognize that it is not original participation in nature but final participation in the neighbor which constitutes interpretative practice. As for our modern philosophical writers,<sup>5</sup> they, without exception, so far as I know, in imputing the beginning of thinking, of writing, of reading, of interpretation to the Greeks, evade acknowledging, with Kierkegaard,<sup>6</sup> that, because Socrates is ignorant of the neighbor, he is ignorant of thinking (of philosophy). For, as the lawyer discovered in his conversation with Jesus, thinking has a singular object and a singular subject, which are uniquely and universally the neighbor. But there are thoughtful exceptions: N. O. Brown, Carse, Foss, Miranda. As regards our theological and religious writers, at least those writing from within the Jewish and Christian traditions, they typically adopt one or more of three evasive stances. First, when addressing their own religious tradition, they simply ignore the tradition of the other. Second, when theological writers do address the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, they refuse (when Jewish) to see Christianity as originally Jewish and (when Christian) to see Judaism as originally Christian. Third, when they address problems of universalism, particularism, and pluralism, they evade the neighbor as the answer to the question of how one reads what is written in the law. Theological writers, along with literary theorists, also have insuperable difficulty in recognizing that, precisely because all writing contains the Bible, literature, for example, that of Shakespeare or Milton, is no less inspired, its truth no less a matter of revelation – of the neighbor – than the strongest biblical texts. It is

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<sup>4</sup> I have in mind especially Gadamer and Ricoeur.

<sup>5</sup> E. g. Habermas, Heidegger, Rorty.

<sup>6</sup> „What, then, is the *beautiful* according to our conceptions of love? It is the beloved and the friend. For the beloved and the friend are the spontaneous and direct objects of spontaneous love, the choice of passion and of inclination. And what is the *ugly*? It is the *neighbour*, whom one SHALL love. One SHALL love him – that simple wise man (= Socrates) knew nothing of this; he did not know that one's neighbour exists and that one should love him; what he said about loving the ugly (in the *Symposium*) was only teasing. One's neighbour is the unlovable object, not something to offer to inclination and passion, which turn away from him and say, 'What is that to love!' But for that very reason there is no advantage connected with speaking about having to love the unlovable object. And yet the true love is precisely love to one's neighbour, or it is not finding not the lovable object but finding the unlovable object to be lovable.” (342–3)

also the case that thinkers like Girard and Levinas, while recognizing the primacy of biblical religion in both literary and communal life, continue to maintain the binary polarity between religion and philosophy, between faith and reason, forgetting that we are commanded to love God with all our *psyche* and with all our *dianoia*. Derrida's relation to the tradition of modernity is ex-centric, as one would expect. But it is doubtful whether Derrida is truly different from traditional philosophy, as we shall shortly see.

Let me now present, within the severely schematic terms of five headings, the fundamental implications for interpretation of the questions which Jesus puts to the lawyer: What is written in the law? How do you read? I shall restrict myself, under each heading, to a one-sentence formulation (the written law) and to a one-sentence commentary (how one reads). (1) The Bible – Hebrew and Christian, Old Testament and New Testament, First Testament and Second (Last) Testament... – is one book. Whatever the differences between Judaism and Christianity – and these differences are real, vast, and crucially significant – they are utterly different from all extra-biblical differences, for they differ only (absolutely) in their response to the singular questions which Jesus puts to the lawyer about how we read (know) – enact in our lives – what is written in the law of the neighbor. (2) The difference between biblical and extra-biblical traditions of writing and reading, between the Bible and, say, the ancient Greeks, is total, incomparable, and unknowable. This difference cannot be written and cannot be read, for extra-biblical tradition fatally depends upon the unwritten and the unreadable law of contradiction which, whenever it is written (or spoken), fatally reduces the writer (speaker) to the contradictory appearances of ignorance and blindness.<sup>7</sup> (3) The writing and reading tradition of loving God above all others and your neighbor as yourself is, as at once covenantal and incarnational, both faithful and rational, religious and secular, theological and philosophical, philosophical and literary... The reason, conception, knowledge, thinking, the *dianoia* of the lawyer, which is as fully intended by the two questions which Jesus puts to him as is his good faith, is not found in the Greek or any other extra-biblical tradition. (4) The Bible is neither pre-modern (religious) nor post-modern (secular) but is modern, both religious and secular, from beginning to end. Modernity is created by the neighbor who, at once faithful and rational, constitutes the law of writing as the critical law of reading: And who is my neighbor? (5) Interpretation does not exist outside its writing (the Bible), and writing (the Bible) does not exist outside its interpretation. Greek or any other extra-biblical „texts“ cannot be interpreted; for, where there is ignorance of the neighbor's existence

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<sup>7</sup> I make the difference between what one could here call the „unwritten“ (and the „unreadable“) law of contradiction and the „written“ (and the „readable“) law of paradox central to my conception of interpretation.



(where the neighbor does not exist), there is no writing, no letter, no reading, no spirit: interpretation does not exist in the ignorance of the neighbor.

Before closing, it will be fruitful, I think, to reflect briefly on basic ideas of two thinkers which bear significantly on the questions which Jesus puts to the lawyer. The first thinker is early modern, the second late (if not post-) modern. Both thinkers are Jewish, although it is not clear to me that their thinking would properly be characterized as Jewish. Nor would it be clear to me that, although I was baptized and brought up in a family for which church attendance was a significant part of weekly life, my thinking would be properly characterized as Christian. One might, however, typify the thinking which is involved here as Jewish or Christian secularism; or one might simply call it, more cannily, biblical, at least in the case of two of us. In any event, Spinoza and Derrida, for they are the two thinkers whom I have in mind, address the questions which Jesus puts to the lawyer in powerfully arresting terms.

Spinoza is the first and also the last of the great modern thinkers to show that biblical interpretation, how we read the Bible, is absolutely central to philosophy, to both ontology and political theory, to the ethical life of democracy understood as the intellectual love of God. With his basic hermeneutical rule that the Bible, the written law, is to be read (interpreted) from itself alone, Spinoza responds to the questions which Jesus puts to the lawyer – how do you read what is written in the law? – in terms of his concept of sovereignty, which, for him, is at once ontological and political, both philosophical and theological. With his concept of sovereignty – the Bible is sovereign, the reader is sovereign, God is sovereign, the community (of readers) is sovereign, the individual (reader) is sovereign – Spinoza deconstructs all hierarchies, all binary oppositions, above all, the dualism between dogmatism, which subordinates the Bible to reason (the position of Maimonides and his followers), and skepticism, which subordinates reason to the Bible (the position of Maimonides' opponents). Indeed, in explicitly making his aim in *The Theologico-Political Tractatus* the separation of philosophy from theology, what Spinoza demonstrates is that the separation between philosophy and theology can be truly effected only insofar as each is conceived as sovereign, without subordination to the other. In other words, the separation of philosophy from theology (and of theology from philosophy) can be effected solely from a position which is neither philosophical nor theological. For, if the separation between philosophy and theology were effected philosophically, then philosophy would once again be claiming the position of mastering the presence of theology. The same thinking equally applies to theology and to all the other binary opposites or, more simply, dualisms. The sovereign Bible demands a reader who is at once faithful and rational, just as the sovereign reader demands a written law which is at once faithful and rational; and it is precisely this which Jesus demonstrates to the lawyer. The fundamental inadequacy of the weak readings which Strauss and Yovel give of Spinoza is their

failure to recognize that Spinoza is first and last a biblical thinker for whom the neighbor, at once faithful and rational, is the subject and the object of all thinking.<sup>8</sup> It is the neighbor who puts to us the question of how we read what is written in the law.

Perhaps no thinker in our time has posed in more acute terms than Derrida the question of how one reads what is written in the law.<sup>9</sup> He wields with uncanny dexterity and verve the plasticity (the dialectic) inherent in writing as law and in law as writing: the law of writing as what is written in the law. His claim that there is no(thing) outside the text, no(thing) outside writing, no(thing) outside what is written in the law (of writing) appears to be consistent with Spinoza's hermeneutical principle that there is nothing outside the Bible, that the sovereign, biblical text is to be read from itself alone – by the sovereign reader alone. Still, it is not so obvious that Derrida intends or understands either his interpretative principle of self-referentiality to encompass and to be encompassed by the neighbor or the principle that there is nothing outside the love of God and neighbor to constitute the ontological argument for existence. What Derrida does not see is what the lawyer, in conversation with Jesus about how one reads what is written in the law, comes to see, which is that the one thing that cannot be lawfully thought – written – without existing is the sovereign neighbor, whom one is commanded, by the law of writing, to love beyond all others as oneself. Thanks to (*grace à*) the dialectic of writing and law, in which the sovereign reader is totally implicated, Derrida is able to deconstruct with great effectiveness the binary opposites whose originary (immediate) presence constitutes the idolatry of theologocentrism. But he fails, nonetheless, to escape the ultimate binary opposition, that between philosophy and theology, faith and reason, this failure doubtlessly reflecting his Heideggerian blindness to how Spinoza reads what is written in the law as the separation of philosophy from theology.

What Derrida fails to realize is that his notions of the supplement (trace), iterability, difference (*différance*), undecidability ... all involve the freedom to choose – the neighbor. Choice is not between binary opposites, between good and evil, philosophy and theology, theory and practice, self and other, male and female, the secular and the religious, faith and reason. Choice is always of the good, and thus the question of what one shall do to inherit eternal life becomes, with Winnicott: is the reading good enough?<sup>10</sup> How, in other words, do we (good enough) read (good enough) what is written (good enough) in the (good enough) law? Evil (sin) exists, not because it is

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<sup>8</sup> This is also the fundamental inadequacy of the strong reading which Norris gives of Spinoza.

<sup>9</sup> I discuss Derrida's conception of writing in my study „Tragedy Is – Scription Contra-Diction.“

<sup>10</sup> Winnicott makes the „good enough mother“ central to the trusting environment supportive of the infant child. The „good enough mother“ reads in the infant what is originally and eternally written in the inherent law of life: the neighbor.

chosen, which is impossible, but because it is not chosen. Evil exists precisely because it is the good which is always chosen; and it is the good, as chosen, which reveals how good or evil our choice is. If the good chosen or desired is not the neighbor, then it is evil. It is only in willing the good of the neighbor that the evil of the world is revealed. As Spinoza says, something is good because we desire it. We do not desire it because it is good.<sup>11</sup> (It is not the good, as the original presence of theologocentrism, which determines desire.) Truth (desire, love, the neighbor...) is its own standard, the standard both of itself and of its idols. Truth as its own standard is the neighbor whom you are commanded to love as yourself. The standard of truth is the law of writing which commands you to love, to choose, to desire the other as you would have the other love, choose, and desire you.

Notwithstanding his cunning insight into theologocentrism as harboring the presence of binary opposition, wherein one side of the dualism is privileged over the other, Derrida makes two elementary errors, both typical of (they are found only in) the biblical tradition and both having been, always already, deconstructed by Spinoza. First, he fails to see that the structure of what he calls writing and difference is biblical. What Derrida views as the original sin of identifying the law of writing with presence is for the Bible the contradictory idolatry of reading what is written in the law as other than the paradoxical presence of God and neighbor. Second, he also fails to see that the structure of writing and difference, involving the supplement, trace, iterability..., is not found outside the Bible. The ancient Greek world, like the entire extra-biblical world, is ignorant of the paradox that there is nothing outside the written law, which (who) is my neighbor as the standard of truth. It is uniquely and universally monotheism – the love of the sovereign neighbor – which constantly falls into dualisms whose idols, the binary opposites, reduce either what is written in the law to reason (dogmatism) or reason to what is written in the law (skepticism). For, just as there is nothing outside writing, the law, the biblical text, there is equally nothing inside the text. For the text is at once, and undecidably, inside and outside, always already a supplementary trace, a paradox whose iterability is unthinkable outside, not to mention inside, the Bible.

To recognize that there is no outside the Bible, precisely because there is no inside the Bible (say, with the ignorance of the Socratic *daimon*), is to recognize that the Bible is – undecidably, freely, lovingly – both inside and outside itself. Scripture is closed, for there is the finite, particular Bible which I am reading; yet Scripture is open, for the question of what I shall do to inherit eternal life as the story of the written law is, always: How do you read, know, live, enact, *now*, this very moment, what is written in the law? Writing is limited (closed), for the question – And who is my neighbor? – always involves judgment, decision, limit. Writing is open, different,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ethics*, III. 9. Scholium.

undecidable, supplementary, other, the subject of desire and free choice. There is a time for closure and a time for openness, and that time is history as the inheritance of eternal life.

There is no writing outside Scripture – this is what Spinoza sees and what Derrida fails to see – and there is no Scripture outside writing – including the writing of Spinoza and Derrida. The paradox of the Bible is that, precisely as it is limited to, closed within, what is written in the law, the law of writing, which is the neighbor, it is the limitation to loving God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind and your neighbor as yourself which is infinitely explosive, liberating, revelatory, indeterminable, risky, guilt-producing... The Bible (like its God, its covenant, its people) can be true to itself as its own standard of truth only insofar as it creates, fosters, supports, and encourages difference; but difference, if it is not to fade indiscriminately into indifference or to become hardened into the difference of racial, gender, or class discrimination, is always identifiable, notwithstanding its thousand faces, as the neighbor whom one is commanded to love, whatever the consequences.

Interpretation is constituted by the paradox that reading is both enclosed within yet encloses within itself what is written in the law. Interpretation is both what is written in the law and how one reads what is written in the law. For, indeed, the writing and the reading of the law are undecidably different and identical; for there is no first writing which is not, always already, a final reading, and there is no final reading which is not eternally a first writing. What is first and last, in both writing and reading, is the neighbor. There is no(thing) outside the written law of Scripture. There is (no)thing outside the law of writing. There is no(thing) outside interpretation. Where there is interpretation, there must the Bible be. Where the Bible is, there must the neighbor be. Where the neighbor is, there must interpretation be. Interpretation is the paradox of the neighbor whose scriptural inheritance constitutes the eternal response to the questions: What is written in the law? How do you read?

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