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Book Review: Emmanuel Levinas (Seán Hand)

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Emmanuel Levinas. By Seán Hand. Pp. Xiv, 138, Routledge, 2009.

How can people ever respond to the horror of genocide? For those who have experienced it first hand and lived, the trauma is incalculable. There have been some who can openly respond in narrative. Readers may certainly be familiar with Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, or even Zvi Kolitz's poignant literary work, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*. These are compelling stories that evidence how the Shoah bears an infinite amount of meaning. In contrast, the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas portrays a different kind of response to the Shoah as an attempt to draw sense and meaning. Levinas takes up an almost biblical stance, like a prophet, to bring together phenomenology, ethical metaphysics and the Bible to rupture humanity's complacency into an expiating responsibility for the other. Breaking open Levinas' world, Seán Hand's engaging little book takes the reader on a journey to discover the various contours of how a philosopher and Talmudic scholar 'is dominated by the presentiment and memory of the Nazi Horror' and consequently inspired to develop a messianic hope and language for the good to prevail over murder, self-interest and the totality of Being.

Hand guides the reader through a choice of various articles and key texts from Levinas' vast body of writings in revealing and at times, critical ways. It is fascinating to see the way how writers on Levinas bring their own interest and individual stamp. Levinas is a famous philosopher in his own right and it is no coincidence that there are just many books out there on Levinas, each giving a different or new perspective. Indeed, one can feel a certain level of vertigo when starting out to study the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas whilst beginning

with secondary authors. In my own mind, it is better to first read Levinas' writings and then go on to critical appreciations or commentaries of his writings. But there are always some exceptions to the rule. Finding a book to introduce a reader to the world of Levinas does need some level of discernment given especially the complexity of Levinas' writings. Hand himself is very familiar with Levinas' thought, and his short, introductory book on Levinas provides a worthy starting point. But again, the reader needs to beware that one is encountering a perception or a direction (even a controlling force!) upon Levinas' writings. In effect, there is no substitute to begin reading Levinas' writings. However, again Hand's book does form almost a map to begin to explore the 'geography,' as it were, of Levinas' articles and key works, notably *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*.

Importantly, readers need to know something of Levinas' life, work, engagement with others and further developments to bring out his pure philosophical thought in clear and practical ways. Hand has a number of choices in front of him to do this. He seems to have chosen particularly the route of politics as a key means to explore Levinas' writings. The question remains for me is what might a theologian learn from Hand's approach? What I found were some key moments in the book revealing what Levinas' writings command us to do, namely, to begin to philosophise with a good sense of ethics. Embedded in Hand's commentary on Levinas are some fascinating insights about the world such as 'war which gives us the raw truth of reality' (p.37) and 'poetry ... as being the attempt to *think* transcendence' (p.75). These insights are drawn from Levinas, but they are crucially in Hand's voice. So here we see the task of the philosopher or of the theologian, for example, is to find a rational way to speak about good and evil. For the theologian, the horizon of mystery and of God must be brought into the conversation. This horizon was very important for Levinas too. But given Hand's emphasis on reading Levinas more with a thread of politics, he seems to be fairly hesitant on

Christian theological issues related to Levinas until his last chapter where he refers briefly to the work of Jean-Luc Marion.

However Hand does reserve a fascinating section on Levinas' Talmudic Readings. His last reflections in this section take the reader back to the key experience for Levinas, namely to the Passion of the Shoah wherein the (im)-possibility for infinite meaning must translate as infinite responsibility. Levinas does use the word 'Passion' to describe the Shoah, the experience of suffering, persecution and murder of Jews from 1933 to 1945. In this context, he also mentions how Catholics helped to save Jewish families. This is important for Levinas in a personal way as the 'Blackrobe' helped to save his wife and daughter during the Nazi occupation of France. Given Levinas' personal openness to Catholics and the Christian world, there is a teaching here to learn from his 'traumatic and prophetic' voice of the twentieth century: to imagine the world otherwise as being-for-the-other. And so particularly for Christian theologians, there is much to reap from Levinas' writings towards developing key areas of theology. Hand's short and thorough book on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas will help to enable the reader to possess some key horizons to begin to take hold of Levinas' word for humanity and perhaps even to be jolted into some 'non-place' and 'non-time' to behold the true goodness and gravity of agapic love.