IS SCRIPTURAL REASONING SENSELESS?: A RESPONSE TO STEVEN KEPNES

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I want to thank Steven Kepnes for offering us two rich texts. First, of course, is the set of passages from Genesis that he has read, very closely, but second is his own commentary. About the Biblical texts I have little to say; Kepnes has taught me a reading of these texts that is so impeccably elegant that anything I will say about these texts from now on will simply repeat things that he has already said. But I do believe that Kepnes has not fully realized what is at stake in his own commentary; its implications do not only have a healing effect for the relationship between the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael, but also for the relationship between these children of Abraham and the world of Western reason, a relationship which Kepnes— like Yamine Mermer in her response to Basit Koshul that appears earlier in this issue— insists on reading as essentially inimical. The depth of Kepnes's reading of the texts on Ishmael and Hagar shows us the messiness of religion in all of its burdensome glory, or its glorious burden (in Hebrew, the words for "weight" and "glory"— *k'vedut* and *kavod*, come from the same linguistic root). How messy is the picture that Kepnes has drawn for us in his very precise reading of the text? It is one in which the Torah is fundamentally about a boundary between one people and its others which is constantly drawn, erased, redrawn, re-erased, etc. It is one in which Hagar— who because she is Egyptian is not Israel— is also Israel because she is the stranger, just as the people of Israel are. And as a result, it is one in which the children of Hagar are both, as Steve put it in his title, others and ourselves.

The relationship between self and other in this text is thus simultaneously one of the deepest intimacy and the denial of that intimacy: I am you! I'm not you! I am you! I'm not you! This is almost too dizzying to respond to. I would like to try and make sense of it, but this is a tall order. On the one hand, if I do try and make sense of it, perhaps using that great sense-making tool called "philosophy," I will perhaps only succeed cleaning up the mess,

and so I will do nothing more than describe something that does not actually exist. On the other hand, it is impossible to revel in the mess, because such a situation does not give any clear orientation. If religion is really just something messy— something senseless— then it becomes far more difficult to articulate why its structures and commands would remain compelling. In short, I am up a tree, as I always am when I am called upon to do theology, as I am at this moment, having been asked to respond to Kepnes's reading of these texts. This is something that I want very much to do, on the one hand because I want to honour a friend, and on the other because ultimate matters are useless if they are foreign to discourse. But for the reasons I have just laid out, this is something that I cannot do. So let me continue by describing one other messy aspect of the structure that Kepnes has laid out.

About halfway through his talk, Kepnes describes his reading of the Hagar and Ishmael narrative as an example of scriptural reasoning. As an act of reasoning based in the particularity of a scriptural text, and thus detached from universalist foundations, Kepnes's paper exemplifies a mode of thinking which for him is at least distinct from Western philosophical reasoning, if not completely opposed to it (because "scripture is not beholden to modern secular standards of … philosophic coherence"). Nevertheless, in his paper, we hear many good things about three philosophers of the twentieth century: the Jewish existentialist Martin Buber, the Jewish rationalist Hermann Cohen, and the founder of American pragmatism Charles Sanders Peirce. Perhaps Kepnes reads these three figures as qualitatively different from a more predominant trend in philosophy. Perhaps he judges Hegel, Kant, and/or Plato, as having deleterious effects which Western philosophy essentially might always risk running, but only achieves in certain times and places. But it is Plato who teaches us in the *Sophist* about the intimacy of the mixing together of categorical kinds.[311] It is Kant who teaches us in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that speculative reason can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God and thereby that philosophy can make room for faith.[312] It is Hegel who argues in the *Philosophy of Right* that the universalism of the state is nothing other than the complete

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[311] *Sophist* 253b ff.
[312] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* B xxx.

development of the particular interests of singular persons.[313] Any account of a horizon that is broader than that of the particular (in other words, what passes for "universal") that ends up omitting or abolishing one particular interest, or that refuses to see particular interests as potentially analogous and thus relatable to each other, is therefore on Hegel's account simply incomplete, false, and the result of bad thinking. All of these are points that I believe Kepnes wants to accept, taken apart from whatever Kant or Hegel said about Judaism and Islam, or from the role which people have often assigned to Greek philosophy in putting religion in its alleged subservient place.

I do not make this claim simply because I want to persuade Kepnes that he can be— and already is— friends with someone who has an apparently different view of philosophy than he does. I do it because it is the only way that I can deal with the inability to find analogies between Kepnes's remarks and those that Basit Koshul made earlier today. What has occurred today is that two active members in scriptural reasoning— the act in which members of Abrahamic traditions read each other's sacred texts together— have given quite different accounts of the relationship between scripture and philosophy. Kepnes describes scriptural reasoning as something that is neither fundamentalism nor a "shallow reflection of Enlightenment ideals," but rather some third creature that is definitely neither anything like either pole nor a mixture of the two. On the other hand, Koshul took the messy path of the mixture when he described prophetic witness as both dissenting from as well as affirming the Enlightenment tradition. The relationship between Kepnes's paper and Koshul's comes out best if one considers that Koshul's paper might well have been titled "Enlightenment as our Other, Enlightenment as Ourself"; for Kepnes, Enlightenment is only Other. At such an impasse, it seems that the activity of scriptural reasoning, which both Kepnes and Koshul claim to represent, has no clarity about its aims.

For this lack of clarity, one can only thank God, for it is only out of this lack of clarity that scriptural reasoners can continue to engage the process of giving and asking for reasons as to why they read sacred texts in a particular way. If scriptural reasoners had clarity— in this case, if Kepnes and Koshul

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[313] G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, paragraph 260.

had agreed about whether the future of certain religious structures and concepts in the West is secure or not, or if Kepnes and myself were to agree on the relationship between Judaism and Western philosophy— there would be no reason whatsoever to talk to each other. One does not need to speak to someone whom one knows fully; the universality of conceptual reasoning would make speech unnecessary. But why thank God for the ability to talk to each other? To be blunt, this ability participates in the work of redemption. Such a claim, perhaps, will not seem at first blush to be defensible. However, although it may seem amusing to say that a conversation— especially one that ends up seeing print in an academic journal— could have such a redemptive end, I mean it with all seriousness.

The way to defend such a claim is, I think, to narrate briefly what occurs in a scriptural reasoning session. Kepnes illustrated some of these things in his paper. In talking, we ask questions. What is it with this text? What's distinctive about it? What is at stake in the words that it chooses to express its ideas— words that cannot have been whimsically chosen? What do these words mean in other places? Do the narrative details of the text mesh perfectly with each other? What do later authorities say about this text? How do those understandings augment or constrict, harmonize or conflict with, what we think the surface of the text states? How does the text defend its claims? Now these kinds of questions are not in and of themselves anything special; they occur all the time in seminary classrooms, or university classrooms— places that we might not think of as interfaith or even intrafaith scenes. So narrating *what* occurs in scriptural reasoning isn't enough. One must also focus on *who* is asking the questions. More often than not, the people who are asking questions of the texts are foreigners to the texts' logics. This has a very basic consequence, but one that to my mind is key for scriptural reasoning: foreigners ask questions that "natives" have forgotten should be questions at all.[314] Having foreigners— strangers in a land that is not theirs, to bring us back to the text of Genesis 15— read a text with you brings in all that messiness that is easily evaded when one is reading sacred

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[314] For example, I have learned the most about modern Jewish philosophy by teaching it in classrooms that are populated mostly with evangelical Christians, because they ask questions that are in their horizon but not mine, and they focus on issues that I never thought about when I learned how to read these books many years ago.

texts only with other natives. The expression of identity in those native contexts is, far more often than one would like, disturbingly smooth; it reflects little more than participants' desires to formulate a religious identity that does not take them too far from the comfort zones of a broader culture.[315]

So focusing on the *who* of scriptural reasoning allows us to see how articulating the messiness of sacred texts— in other words, the odd contours of the relationship between religious identity and a modern identity— displays a key element of why scriptural reasoning is different from apparently similar conversations in other settings. Yet it still remains to ask exactly what is the effect of this messiness that seems to be so constitutive for scriptural reasoning, a messiness that is present in the Book of Genesis (as Kepnes has shown) and duplicated in the attempt to read Koshul and Kepnes together. Here, it is key to reflect on what happens in the encounter with the foreigner who reads your text. All of a sudden, one hears the text approached from new angles— not from beliefs about what does or does not constitute the "fulfilment" of the texts, but with an eye to different textual elements, or from a viewpoint that shows the text in a new light (a strong sense of divine command, perhaps, or a quasi-Marxian attentiveness to the material culture described in a text). This is *lovely*. The questions one was asking shift. No longer is one simply asking what is going on in this text and why. One now is also asking, "How did you learn to read that way? Tell me more about yourself. Stay for awhile." Friendships begin that are not rooted in a pre-determined agreement on the meaning of a certain text. Similarly, as one reads another's text, being led and leading others through it, that tradition— as well as its interpreters who are at the table alongside one— takes on the qualities of loveliness (without undoing participants' commitments to their own traditions). As Nick Adams has perceptively stated in a forthcoming

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[315] Again, I think of some of my students, for whom the difference between the attributes of Jesus of Nazareth and those of Dr. Phil, or, as in a few bizarre cases, between the attributes of Oprah Winfrey and those of Ariel Sharon, appears to be less and less with each passing year. While the fact that I teach in the American South does skew matters somewhat, I believe that my students are signs of a broader current in contemporary America, in which it is philosophy—even "Enlightenment reason"—that now takes the place of the counter-culture.

book, scriptural reasoning involves "acknowledging that God is great: greater than language, greater than traditions, greater than scripture."

We are still not quite at redemption yet, however. Acknowledging that God is great does not necessarily give me confidence that the life of a scriptural reasoner— one that oscillates fitfully between saying "I am you," and "I am not you," as Kepnes so patiently showed— is not a senseless life, a life of madness which might be better described as "doom" than as "redemption." How can one show that this kind of life of intimate relationship betwixt the Abrahamic traditions, and between the Abrahamic traditions and modernity, is any better than the life typified by the clash of civilizations?

Here, it helps to point out that what Adams has said has been said before. The assertion that scriptural study can lead to the acknowledgment of God's transcendence echoes a statement that the German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig made in the 1920s: "The unlimited refuses to be organized."[316] Rosenzweig said this in the context of his desire to re-energize Jewish life in Germany through structures of Jewish learning that updated the classical institution of the study-house.[317] Rosenzweig's claim is that the idea that something higher than ourselves (such as religion) could be reduced to an ideological program or a canon of propositions is an absurd one, because by its very nature religion transcends the language we use to talk about it. This means that all we have is a readiness for the heights of religious life— a desire to know what's at stake in proclaiming a religious identity, a desire to be able to articulate cogently the relationship between the parameters of the interior world and the parameters of the exterior one, whether this be the world of the Enlightenment or the world of another religious tradition. In short, all we have is a desire for home, a place where everything is just so. Such a desire cannot possibly be fulfilled by human means; if it could, that would be an act of organizing the unlimited, of violating divine transcendence. So what keeps this desire from collapsing into hopelessness?

[316] Franz Rosenzweig, "Of *Bildung* there is no end," trans. Michael Zank in Zank, "Franz Rosenzweig, the 1920s and the "moment of textual reasoning," in *Textual Reasonings*, eds. Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene (London and Grand Rapids, MI: SCM/Eerdmans, 2002), 235
[317] See Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 69–99.

Rosenzweig hints at an answer: "wishes are the messengers of confidence."[318] This is a difficult sentence, perhaps the most difficult sentence in modern Jewish philosophy. I believe it means something like the following. "Wishes" refer to the desire on the part of those who walk into a study-house— or any place in which sacred texts are read— to forge a link to the past that seems to be irrecuperable in the context of modernity. (Rosenzweig saw this only as a problem for German Jews. But today, the problem of how to relate to the West shows itself to be a broadly Abrahamic one.) Neither simply rejecting modernity not simply accepting modernity seem to be options, for the reasons Kepnes laid out at the end of his remarks. "Confidence" is the faith that these wishes can bear fruit, that a home that has its roots in sacred texts and the contemporary world at the same time is really possible. But what of this messenger service to which these wishes belong? Rosenzweig gives a fuller account in a letter to the chemist Eduard Strauss in which he describes a study-room. In reading the quote below, I will purposefully detach it from the specific Jewish context, taking the risk to substitute the word "religious" where Rosenzweig uses the word "Jewish."

> People will be coming, people who, by the very act of coming into the speaking space of the [study room] give testimony to the fact that the religious human being is alive within them. Otherwise they would not come. For the time being, let us ["us" meaning Rosenzweig and Strauss] offer them nothing at all. Let us hearken. And from that hearkening, words will grow. And the words will grow together and be united into wishes. And wishes are the messengers of confidence. Wishes that find each other, human beings that find each other, religious human beings— let us attempt to create what they desire.[319]

The engine of the study room's messenger service would thus appear to be the act of listening. In listening to others, we come to learn that we are not alone in not knowing who we are, and in striving to forge an identity. This is what gives confidence. My desire for home is only a hopeless one if I think that it is only my desire, or only the desire of my narrow community. In

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[318] Rosenzweig, 237.
[319] Ibid.

a claim that only I (or a small we) want something, the object of that desire becomes less secure, for in such a situation, it always remains possible that someone else could come along and render my world completely chaotic by, say, enacting laws or supporting customs that make that pursuit more dangerous or more difficult, and thereby throw my identity and self-image into upheaval. The more people who come together, listen to each other, and recognize the possibility of those chains of reasoning that articulate that desire for home, the fewer outsiders there are to destabilize that identity. In other words, my wish means nothing objectively unless you confirm it for me, by agreeing that I am entitled to be the person that I have committed myself to being.[320] And in order to come to that agreement, we must first listen to what those claims are, and to how people infer the structures and ways of being religious from those texts that they view as sacred. We cannot confirm each other's identities unless we evaluate them, and we cannot evaluate them unless we hearken.

It is important to note that your confirmation that I am entitled to the identity to which I have committed myself is not at all the same thing as your agreeing with what I say. The conversation that takes place in study does not have to lead to convergence on the content of what one believes. Indeed, the conversation that takes place in study can lead to claims in which you show me, through your reading of my texts, how some of my commitments don't mesh with each other. So while conversation does not necessarily lead to convergence, neither is it necessarily a static structure in which the participants cling stubbornly to their identities for dear life.

The act of reading together, or thinking together, performs what the philosopher of language Robert Brandom calls a "game of giving and asking for reasons."[321] In that game (on which everything hangs), there is agreement on what counts as possibly valid claims, and on the validity of the various patterns of reasoning that underlie those claims. But this is all one needs for what Rosenzweig described as confidence. One only needs verification of the

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[320] For more on the co-implication of commitments and entitlements in linguistic practice, see Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 157–80.

[321] Ibid., 230 (to cite one page amongst many).

belief that one's identity is not invalid. When wishes come together, it is only insofar as the desire for a home is something that all participants in the activity of study share. What that home looks like (how it is decorated, so to speak) can be bracketed off. But in recognizing that there is a common striving to articulate in a tidy form how a religious identity, whatever that identity may be, fits in with the contemporary world, people come alive. They come to be more than the faceless attributes and predicates that one might ordinarily ascribe to them from a distance. And in entitling others to their commitments, they— excuse me, *we*— become committed to each other. This gives hope that the possibility to articulate how Abrahamic identities fit into the contemporary world is not a sham, because I am neither alone nor am I only with my co-religionists. But if this is what I have confidence in, then I also have confidence that doom will not and does not necessarily win out over redemption; I have confidence that when time comes to an end, justice will win out. This is what I mean when I say that the ability to talk to each other— to share our wishes and recognize each other as wishing subjects, to recognize the validity of the language in which those wishes are expressed— participates in the work of redemption. Becoming committed ensures that there is a path forward, a path toward something that very well might be an image of redemption or the last things to which I am personally committed.

So in short, we make identities for ourselves in conversation with other people. Finding ourselves at home depends on finding others, and hearkening to them; in the case of scriptural reasoning, this means reading others' sacred texts. Now it is burdensome to need others. But if we only study with people who claim to have the same exact home, the same exact understanding of the text, that we do, then no confidence will result. How will I feel at home in the world if I have the sense that only a narrow group is wishing with me? Therefore, it is necessary to go outside of the realm of who we think of as "ourselves," to others, and talk so that the sense of who we are— wishers, seekers for a home— broadens outside the narrow circle of "ourselves." The need for confidence in the possibility of redemption requires this mixture of the translatability and untranslatability of worldviews that Kepnes has shown to be the primary characteristic of scriptural reasoning.

What I have striven to do is give a fuller explanation of that mix of us and them, ourselves and other, outside and inside, affirmation and critique, that we find in both Kepnes's assertion that Hagar is Israel and Koshul's analysis of the rituals of the Hajj as affirming certain Western Enlightenment values. But the way that I have tried to explain why this occurs— why scriptural reasoning fundamentally lacks clarity— has not been a scripturally-based argument. It could not have been; there was no scriptural basis that was available to me to reconcile the differing views of Kepnes and Koshul without foisting a foreign scriptural context onto one of them. In order to show how each of them works with an analogue of the other's messiness, I needed philosophy, or at least thick empirical description. For this reason, I resist the conclusion that Kepnes has made that scriptural reasoning exists on some conceptual plane that is wholly exterior to Western philosophical reasoning; rather, it seems to me that scriptural reasoning iterates the messiness that is characteristic of part of Western philosophical discourse. One brief example: in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*— so often misunderstood as a one-dimensional account of universalism that erases diversity and plurality— Hegel describes the movement of recognition by which self-consciousness comes to know itself as "the exposition of a spiritual unity in its doubling … a many-sided intersection of a correlation between multiple meanings."[322] The reference to "multiple meanings" shows that the "doubling" in Hegel's account of the self-other relation is not the duplication of a Xerox copy; the language of analogy seems to be closer to what Hegel wants to say.[323] Hegel's articulation of intersubjectivity, like the articulation of a scripturally-based identity, is complex— far more complex than Kepnes's description of the standards of secular philosophic coherence allows. In Hegel, and in scriptural reasoning, both self and other exist as self *and* other, as a member of both "us" *and* "them." There is difference *and* a recognized likeness. Only in this way, by attending to what happens in the conversational dynamic of scriptural reasoning, and thereby coming to see that it is not simply opposed to philosophy but also at one with philosophy, can we make sense of the following three claims: (1) Kepnes's claim that Islam is both the "ourselves" and the "other" of Israel, (2) Koshul's claim that Islam both

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[322] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, paragraph 178. I have used Robert R. Williams's translation in *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 50.
[323] See Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 149–60.

affirms and critiques the West, and (3) both Kepnes and Koshul are scriptural reasoners. Without explaining such messiness in the process of the giving and taking of reasons— in other words, without participating in the discourse of "Western" philosophy— all of these claims are simply contradictory signs, and therefore signs of a fundamental meaninglessness to existence from which there is no good reason to believe we can be redeemed.

But with this explanation, reading scripture together opens itself up as the possibility of a *rapprochement* with the West, since philosophy shows that the "clash of civilizations" model is a bad description of the situation, both in terms of scripture and in terms of philosophy. What is a good analogy of this? At this moment, after listening to Steve, I offer that it is Genesis 21:19: "Then God opened Hagar's eyes and she saw a well of water." In reading together, our eyes are opened and we see a source of sustenance that will carry us into the future— others who are not (and are) us. For Hagar is (and is not) Israel, Israel is (and is not) Hagar, and both are (and are not) the West. These are burdensome things to say; history has shown repeatedly how both secularized nations as well as religious communities have failed to bear these truths. But without bearing this burden, and without the philosophical knowledge that this burden makes sense, a glorious future seems to me to be impossible.