



Responsibility as Emmanuel Lvinas's Mission to the Gentiles

John Turner Kilzer

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Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) was a Talmud scholar as well as Jewish philosopher trained in phenomenology. In his conversations and writings, he spoke at times directly to Christians, challenging them to probe more deeply into the ethical nuances of responsibility. Levinas was constantly in search of an ideal of holiness, one that would become an "absolute value (in) the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself." This priority became real whenever the search for God was focused into a concern for the other, a concern Levinas shared with Christians: "When I speak to a Christian, I always quote Matthew 25; the relation to God is presented there as a relation to another person. It is not a metaphor: in the other, there is a real presence of God. In my relation to the other, I hear the Word of God." Levinas mentions how he was led to this same passage in the Gospel "where the people are astonished to hear that they have abandoned and persecuted God. They eventually find out that while they were sending the poor away, they were actually sending God himself away." Later commenting on the theological motif reflecting God's descent to earth, and how this movement is commensurable with helping the poor and feeding the hungry, Levinas brings one's attention to "the authentic Eucharist . . . when the other comes to face me." Drawing from Levinas's essays and works, this book focuses on themes and concepts and ways they convolve with responsibility. Peripheral to the presentation in this book is the steady question of how Levinas's analyses of responsibility address Christians.

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