

Prologue

In the beginning [*Be-resbit*],
God created heaven and earth.
Genesis 1.1

The Bible is the book of childhood—for each one of us, at whichever age we discover it. The Bible is the book of childhood because it presents itself as the book of beginnings, and we like to believe it is, or to pretend we do. It is precisely this illusion that Judaism tries hard to dispel.

Here, to begin with, is a first illustration.

The beginning, if ever there was one, is before. It is elsewhere. It is something else. The Bible “begins” with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet—the initial *bet* of *Be-resbit*—not with the first, *alef*.¹ The “beginning” to which it refers is at best a relative beginning—only the start of the process of creating heaven and earth—not an absolute beginning. But is it even a relative beginning? Perhaps *resbit* simply means something else.

First interpretation: *resbit* is really the Torah*,² the Law given by God to Israel, which is the Bible itself but also much more and other than the Bible alone. In Proverbs 8.22, the Torah calls itself *resbit*: “The Lord created me at the beginning [*resbit*] of His course / As the first of His works of old.”³ It is by and for the Torah, the only really absolute beginning, that God created this world. The Torah, which was the model for it,⁴ and is also its end.

Second interpretation: *resbit* is also Israel. As it is said in Jeremiah 2.3: “Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits [*resbit*] of His harvest.” This world was created for Israel, and in this, as in everything else, the end—
Israel—is the true beginning.

Besides, the Bible should have begun, not with Genesis 1.1, but with another verse: “This month shall mark for you the beginning⁵ of the

months . . .” (Exod. 12.2). Why? Because this verse from Exodus introduces the first of the commandments given to Israel as a people, the sacrifice of the paschal lamb.⁶

Question: in that case, why begin the Bible with the account of the creation of the world? To integrate Israel’s history into a universal narrative: the history of the world and of the human race? Perhaps not. Perhaps the exact opposite. Maybe God just wanted to remind the nations that, being the omnipotent creator of this world, he was free to dispose of it as he wished, and that through a free, sovereign, and legitimate act of will, he would take the Land, always destined for Israel, from the peoples who occupied it “in the beginning.”⁷

This suddenly makes the Bible different from what it was for us as children: the book of the history of absolute beginnings. It simply ceases to be history and becomes revealed Law. It places the beginning at a different time and place from the ones we imagined. And it tears us away from abstract universality to speak of the particular mission of a single people. A singular mission, indeed, though with an ultimately universal scope. According to the third-century Jewish teacher Resh Lakish, if Israel had refused the Torah (when God presented it on Sinai) that would have sufficed for the world He created “in the beginning” to return to outright chaos.⁸



The subject of this work is the special link that the Jews formed with the Bible. It was an unstable, ambiguous link—and if there is another illusion we need to shake off in these pages, it is the one that makes us think of the Bible as the “founding book” of Judaism. It is not the book of the beginnings, nor is it the book of the foundations. In any case, much more than the Bible itself, it is the unstable, ambiguous link they have formed with it that has made Jews and Judaism what they are.

So, the reader should not be taken in by the deceptive—biblical, one might say—simplicity of the title of this work, *The Jews and the Bible*. The “and” joining the two terms hides a dense undergrowth packed with lures and traps. We shall see the Jews define themselves in various times and places *with* the Bible, *without* the Bible, *against*

the Bible. With the Bible, but not with it alone. Without the Bible, but never completely without it. Against the Bible, but at the same time always “right up against it.” We shall see the Bible itself escape any unambiguous definition. One book, or a disparate library? Text or object? Divine revelation or national myth? Literature or legislative code? Space of dialogue or field of battle? Pretext for all regressions or springboard for all changes? For the Jews, over the past two thousand years or more, the Bible has been all that and much else besides; the various metamorphoses of the Jews themselves are there to be read in the Bible and in the sundry relationships they have constructed with it. Not that the metamorphoses of their opponents or rivals have been less numerous: indeed, the Bible has also been brandished *against* the Jews to convince them of their error, to convert them, to demonstrate the supposed baseness or mediocrity of their nature.

This gives us full measure of the task lurking behind that little “and.” To dare take it on, it was necessary to be unthinking, foolhardy, even presumptuous. No doubt such a subject called for a *summa*: a vast, ambitious historical fresco, a kind of grand “Book on the Book.” But was that reasonable? Was it within the powers of one individual? Would it indeed be useful? Perhaps an essay would have been more appropriate: an essay that, to be sure of affecting its contemporaries, would have centered on some of the burning issues of the day. I am not unaware of those burning issues: they will be touched upon here and there in these pages. But I did not want to make them my chief focus.

Whatever radical secularists say, the Bible is not only a war cry, a firebrand, a weapon in the hands of fundamentalists of every ilk. In fact, the Bible is nothing in and of itself. No one can claim to be restoring its “original” meaning. Its “literal” meaning does not exist: only “a-theologians” in a hurry think that it does, and only fundamentalists try to make us believe it. Like the Koran, the Bible has never been anything other than what its readers make of it. And after all, in more than two millennia of tireless interpretation, the Jews have made of it a thousand other things than, for example, the absolute reference for a violent ultranationalism obsessively attached to the least West Bank hillock. I was not going to begin with that—even to win over my readers.

Neither a *summa* nor an essay, then. I chose a different option: a freer, more sinuous, more meditative path that sets out to inform, in-

struct, and enlighten. But it will also leave some things out and question others, sometimes disturb, even go astray from, shattering truths that are taken for granted, and enable others to be recovered. It will strengthen and deepen, sometimes also abolish, the sense of familiar strangeness that the Bible inevitably arouses in all of us, whether we are Jews or non-Jews, whether we believe in Heaven or not.



Abraham breathed his last . . . and was gathered to his kin.

Genesis 25.8

The Bible, I said, is the book of childhood. It was the book of my childhood too. And the book of my father. So the present work is also, more than indirectly, a homage to my childhood—and to my father. In my childhood, apart from the Bible, and apart from my father, I had almost nothing to attach me to Judaism. Of course, I knew very early on that there was some connection between the Old Testament and the New, or some hiatus where (since my mother was not Jewish) I myself was situated. To my child's eyes, however, the link between the Bible and my father was clear—especially as it was he who, having decided to brush up his own knowledge of Hebrew, taught me the basics of it when I was around ten, so that I became vaguely capable of deciphering and stumbling through my first verses without really understanding them.

I, a child, discovered Judaism in the Bible, and I then spent the rest of my life discovering, understanding, and finally teaching that Judaism was something other than what I, as a child, had discovered in the Bible. That discrepancy—between what we think the Bible tells us about Judaism and what Judaism actually tells us about the Bible—is precisely the ground explored in this book.

I do not know what the Bible meant to my father during his childhood in prewar Algeria. He never told me, and I never asked him. What I do know, though, or anyway guess, is what it meant to him in the final years of his life.

For my father devoted those years to a curious activity, which he admitted to me only grudgingly, as though it were a secret garden, to be kept truly secret. On large blank sheets of paper, which he carefully

filed in plastic folders, he first copied out almost the entire text of the Hebrew Bible, in a fine, rounded cursive script, word by word, letter by letter, without omitting a single vowel sign. Then, feeling that this was not enough, he enlisted the help of all the existing versions in French for his most ambitious task yet: to translate the text into his native language. But that, it is clear, was still not sufficient. Drawing on the Jewish library he had amassed over the years, he set out to produce a commentary of his own, at least on certain passages.

This huge enterprise left behind an impressive pile of folders, which I looked at almost incredulously and skimmed rather than actually read. In any event, my father did not finish anything: neither the copy nor the translation nor the commentary. His labors, performed outside any constituted “Jewish community,” were addressed mainly to himself, in the little village where he lived with my mother and was the lone Jew.

I did not ask my father what all this really meant to him. But his incomplete translation, his fragments of commentary, never had value except for himself. His copy has importance only as the single tangible trace left by his own hand. It was a peculiar pastime that accompanied my father in the years up to his death. Peculiar? Perhaps not. It may simply be that, after a long life spent far from the Jews and Judaism, this was the means he had found to reestablish the link, to reinsert himself into a genealogy, perhaps mythical and strangely disembodied, but a genealogy all the same. His end had brought him back to a kind of beginning.

A few hundred kilometers away, his son was teaching Judaism in Paris, home to one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe—teaching Judaism and beginning to plan this book.