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Biblical Traces of the Guest

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And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined.

And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it.

(Isa. 25.6-8)¹

In this citation, the Prophet Isaiah condenses and articulates a category which permeates the whole Bible and which, although little considered in theology, like few others leads into the very center of biblical speech about God, i.e. the category of the “guest” and the “host” respectively.² This paper will examine the traces of these words in respect to their substance – concepts are deliberately not spoken of – in the Bible, as well as in the contemporary philosophical tradition. In this endeavor, it appears meaningful that in the “guest” dwells a crucial potential against an egotistically understood concept of the person (the person as “ego”), as well as a search for identity, which is often encountered nowadays and whose reverse side consists of the exclusion of the “other.”

Abraham as the Paradigmatic Guest-figure of the Bible

Let us start the biblical search for the guest – whether or not he has already visited us the following considerations will decide – with one of the central salvation-historical figures of the Bible, who overlaps both the European-

¹ *New American Standard Bible* (La Habra, California: Lockman Foundation, 1971).

² The following reflections are crucially inspired by Hans-Dieter Bahr, *Die Sprache des Gastes* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1994). Restrictively it must be added that Bahr does not precisely deduce theological consequences from his reflections, but rather exposes classical metaphysics and implicitly traditional theology to a fundamental critique.

Occidental and the Muslim tradition: Abraham. His story starts with an exodus from his self, from his intimate identity. It is precisely in this departure that he receives the promise of progeny and land. It can already be noted, that throughout his life Abraham is a guest and respectively a stranger; both Hebrew (*gēr*) and Greek (*xenos*) use the same word for these two terms, although in German there is clearly a differentiated meaning. We should note that Abraham is never the owner or occupant of the land where he resides and in which his descendants will have a stake. If one takes a closer look at the history of Abraham, then that pericope is one of the central points, which in the widespread Catholic *German Ecumenical Bible* translation is rather spiritlessly called, "God is guest of Abraham" (Gen. 18). This is spiritless because history draws its stimulus exactly from the fact that the identifications are treated with restraint – a circumstance that will be decisive in the following reflections. History rather develops a subtle connection between YHWH – those four letters, the "Tetragrammaton," which stands in the Bible for the unspeakable name of God – and the guest/stranger. When the first sentence of a pericope denotes the following topic, in most cases, it means that in this section the appearance of God is dealt with. For this the pericope refers to the visit of three strangers, who are received by Abraham – without asking for either place of origin or names, which shows a distinctive parallel to the Greek world – with overwhelming hospitality, as is characteristic of the Orient in the ancient world.³ These guests/strangers reveal themselves very gradually to the reader, Abraham and Sara as YHWH and quite concretely promises the birth of their first offspring, who will have to take great care that the exodus into the unknown does not end in expiration, that is with the death of Abraham and his family. One surmises that God's revelation is bound to the hospitality of Abraham and Sara. To put it more succinctly: the gift of the guest, which Abraham and Sara are able to perceive as YHWH's gift, is the gift of life, whose promise is made in answer to their hospitality. The guest will therefore carry the gift of a promise, which is the pledge of life itself, whose guests are Abraham (and Sara), yet without their being able to take this gift into their possession. The degree to which the motive of the guest is central to the passage cited here reveals the progress of the narration: abruptly the scene of the changes and the narration about Abraham's hospitality is linked to the counter-story of denied hospitality, that is the story of Sodom, in which hospitality leads to a most brutal use of force against the guest. Therefore, while Abraham experiences through his hospitality the promise of life and encounters YHWH, Sodom suffers the death

³ In the Homeric epics (*Odyssey* and *Iliad*), the guest is also hosted at first before he must reveal himself, as we see not least in the *Odyssey*, which refers to the hospitality granted to Ulysses by the Phaiakians.

of its own inhospitality, which finds its physical embodiment in the salt desert, where no life is permitted (Gen. 19).

A manifold acceptance meets Genesis 18 in Exodus 32.30-34.9. This passage lies formally, as G. Borgonovo has shown,⁴ in the center of the Torah and also of the five books of Moses, which show a strict chiasmic structure (A, B, C, ... C', B' A'). It is embedded in a dialogue between Moses and God/YHWH, in which the question is pursued; how far the glory of the name of God can be made visible and where the limit of man's knowledge of God lies. That the passage not only lies stylistically in the center, but rather substantially constitutes the center of the Bible is proven by the fact that the name of God/YHWH – at the pinnacle of the proceedings in Exodus 34.6 – is highlighted by a double notation, "YHWH YHWH." The whole dialogue, including the revelation of God, is focused on the self-explication of YHWH as "compassionate"; a sin-forgiving and healing God. It should be noted that above all the fourth gospel of the Christians, the Gospel according to John, essentially represents a meditation on the name of God, as it is shown in Exodus 32-34. Relevant to the discussion here, it should be noted that Exodus 32-34 provides us with many keywords ("realize," "to find mercy in the eyes of YHWH," "to pass by").⁵ This represents the continuation and consolidation of Genesis 18; the definite proof of God as guest. Mercifulness as the key to the Tetragrammaton YHWH originates from an affective and liberating openness of the self in contact with the other, whose origin outlines the hospitable reception.

The Splendor of the Messianic Palace

Narrations of granted and denied hospitality permeate the Bible in the following sections. Israel is at first a guest in Egypt, only in order to be identified latterly as a stranger and to be denigrated in turn. Where the guest functions as the slave of one's own expectations and needs, he will be brought to disappear and he mutates into the stranger and unhomely enemy.

In the desert, Israel gains the experience of the divine guest/host in the tent of meeting. At the culmination of the Sinai-events, Moses, Aaron (and also Nadab and Abihu) and the seventy eldest representatives of Israel are invited by God/YHWH to a banquet (Ex. 24.9-11). This is referred to in the

⁴ Gianantonio Borgonovo, *Torah e Storiografie dell'Antico Testamento* (Torino: Elledici, 2012), pp. 215-392, especially p. 217.

⁵ Kurt Appel, "Trinität und Offenheit Gottes," in *Glauben denken – Zur philosophischen Durchdringung der Gottesrede im 21. Jahrhundert*, eds. Klaus Viertbauer and Heinrich Schmidinger (Darmstadt: WBG, 2016), pp. 19-46.

passage of Isaiah cited in the opening of this paper. As a result, Israel has to realize that the promise of land is tied not least to behavior toward the stranger/guest and that it has not been pledged the land for any egotistical disposal, but that it is Israel's share and promise as guest people (Lev. 25.23) of the promised land to grant universal hospitality to other peoples, wherefrom the Zionist tradition gives witness, as it is most fully expressed in Isaiah. How greatly the authors of the New Testament grasped Isaiah's intention is shown merely alongside: in the Book of Isaiah it is said that the domicile of the expected Messiah is splendid (Isa. 11.10), this could at first sight be understood to the effect that the arrival of the "Scion of Israel" in the stables would be a mockery of the expectation and it would deliver a strong argument for the view that the newborn is not the Messiah. However, with these considerations one would overlook that the splendor of the (not harboring) "harborage" which Joseph and Mary must find lies exactly in the fact that it is open and that means to be a hospitable place for all (peoples), but especially for those whom according to mundane standards, splendid dwellings are usually off limits. Even the shepherd and the homeless have entry to the stable and there is no need for a patronizing "day of the open house," upon which exclusion would inevitably follow.

God's Being as Guest

Since here is not the appropriate space to demonstrate all the stories about the guest in the Bible in detail, let us discuss only four further testimonials, whose common tenet is that they are posited at the exit of the Bible, respectively the gospels. One of these examples can be found in the last discourse of Jesus, as it is passed down by Matthew; the elucidation of the Last Judgment (Mt. 25.31-46). The Italian philosopher, Massimo Cacciari, cites in a reflection on the paradigms of (the utopian) Europe, as well as on the Greek logos, whose essence is the commandment of self-reflection; Christian behavior towards the stranger. Thereby he sees the following proprium of the Christian tradition:

The second paradigm stems from the biblical tradition. The Greek God protects the stranger. Hospitality is a universal value, acknowledged in Hellenism, a value of Zeus himself. But the stranger with whom the host starts a relationship was, however, considered a foreign figure, of a descent 'abroad'. A stranger/guest could not be the one who grants hospitality and who protects the stranger/guest. In the biblical tradition as well, God protects the stranger/guest conspicuously, he clothes him, he nourishes him and he commands to love him. The biblical tradition

knows also that the stranger/guest (hospes) potentially always as well a foe (hostis), who is ever damned as well. But in this biblical tradition is to be found an expression which is infinitely stronger: and that is that God IS the stranger/guest. Really, God is THE STRANGER/GUEST. HE reveals himself to those who sit on his right side: I was a stranger/guest, I was revealed to you in the 'body' of the excluded, the expelled – and yet you haven't recognized me.⁶

In these lines Cacciari not only draws attention to the Christian apprehension according to which God reveals himself as the guest/stranger, but he also points out that with this act the boundary between "territorial lord" and the "stranger" is forced open. Because God as guest/stranger is not simply the one whose place is beyond any border, rather he is as guest (the one who receives hospitality) host (the one who gives hospitality) as well. In this way he is – like the guest – as the other of the self the center of the self. It is implied that the subjectum, that is the foundation from which we have to understand ourselves, is not one's own introspection or self-reflection, neither is it one's own self-design, the I of the self, but rather the guest, whereby the conduct in relation to him gives the measure for the self-determination of the individual and the total order of society. An etymological relationship between the word *ipse* and *hosp(it)es* as it is given in the Indo-Germanic, perhaps points in that direction.⁷ In any case, in Matthew 25 the central concept shines through that no definite gift must be expected from the guest or the stranger – with this one would remain within the logic of exchange – but rather that the guest/stranger is himself the gift, that is, that being the guest is HIS gift, to which Christians have to expose themselves and which represents the cornerstone of Christian existence.

The Guideline (pre-giving) of the Guest as the Last Symbolic Action of Christ

The second passage, to which I will pay more attention, is the last symbolic act which Jesus performs before his death on the cross and his resurrection, namely the Last Supper with his disciples; the twelve apostles as representatives of the eschatological Israel. In the sacramental-theological discourses of the Roman Catholic Church about the challenge of a faithful *memoria* of

⁶ Massimo Cacciari, "L'invenzione del'individuo," *Micromega, Almanacco di filosofia* no. 9 (1996), pp. 121-127 (translation by the author).

⁷ Cf. Bahr, *Die Sprache des Gastes*, pp. 41-42. Bahr cites in this context the Indo-European institutions of Émile Benveniste.

this central sacramental action, the question was raised as to whether the character of the feast or the character of the sacrifice stands in the foreground of the celebration of the Eucharist. However, this alternative does not arise in a closer look into the background of the category of the guest. The common meal is situated at the very center of hospitality in ancient cultures and therefore it is no surprise that in his parables and symbolic actions Jesus time and again brings into conjunction "the kingdom of God" with images and realities of the Last Supper (Mk. 2.15; 6.31; Lk. 14.14-24). In the Old Testament the reader learns that God takes dwelling in the praise of his people of Israel, freed from slavery, who meet at Zion for the feast. The meal of Jesus together with the apostles (are they not determined to become messengers of his hospitality?) for the praise of HIM and his memory blends into the horizon of understanding and yet renders a further dimension; because the eschatological table fellowship in which Jesus functions as the host radicalizes the meaning of gift. In bread and wine is present the spiritually elevated creation and with it God's creaturely reality, as it is committed to man in order to be "cultivated" and "guarded" (Gen. 2). Yet the gathered Christian community recognizes in the memory of the sign of Jesus, that the ultimate gift of creation which unites men among themselves and with YHWH is Jesus Christ's giving up of his own life, in whose acceptance Jesus becomes guest (and host) and YHWH's passage (as essence of his divinity) occurs (Gen. 18; Ex. 34). Both in the interpretation of the Eucharistic symbolic action of Jesus as sacrifice and in the interpretation of a common feast, therefore, the essence is of a pre-giving (as a guideline) of the guest to which all peoples are invited and which costs all or nothing.

The Non-identifiability of the Guest

In the context of motifs, both the initially discussed Abraham pericope and the eschatological feast to which Jesus invites his disciples, stands also the pericope which gives an account of the loss and the regaining of the dwelling of God, which Christians suffer on the traces of the Son of God; that is the story of the passage from Jerusalem to Emmaus and back (Lk. 24.13-35). Both protagonists, one of whom remains anonymous precisely because any reader might be able to find himself in him, have left and lost the place of salvation, Jerusalem, because this city apparently has not proven to be the place of messianic advent. As with Abraham, a stranger faces them who functions as a carrier of promise. From him they receive an interpretation of the Holy Scripture; more specifically the stranger gives them the hermeneutic key to understand its deepest intention. The reader of today does not immediately experience what the stranger has said, yet the corresponding

answer by both is known: exactly like Abraham they extend an invitation and become a guest of their guest. One will by all means be able to say that they have recognized the Lord (*Kyrios*), not only in the breaking of bread, but in the relation of hospitality which the Holy Scripture disclosed to them. Luke points in this passage to a decisive fact: as they recognize Him (that is to say the guest), as their eyes are opened they don't see him any longer (in a physical sense). The guest therefore remains unidentifiable. He will not be confined in one's own noetic and practical disposal and is therefore neither to be located within the one's own boundaries, nor excluded as a stranger. The recognition lies as it were in this "not-more-seeing" which disagrees so much with the contemporary ethos of identification.

The Heavenly Jerusalem as an Open City

The last narration of hospitality to which I will refer denotes the end and sealing off of the Bible; it deals with the end of John's Book of Revelation. The reader will, as he enters the last book of the Bible, be involved in the great vision of the downfall of the inhospitable powers conjoined with the spectacle of an open city, "the doors of which would not be closed the whole day" (Rev. 21.25) and whose openness designates God's dwelling, which consequently does not call any demarcated temple its own anymore. Those are listed in the guest book who open themselves to the gift of the guest and who do not harden their heart in respect to hospitality. One therefore will not go too far when one interprets the last great letter of the Bible in that the behavior towards the guest (host) opens the seal for the corresponding reading of the scripture (or closes it for good).⁸ One must not forget that – in the context of the revelation by John – the addressees of this book are those who have experienced the fundamental vulnerability and exposure which is tied to the status of the guest themselves (and his potential denial). The shelter of the divine guest giver (host) and the openness of the divine Jerusalem are permanently tied to the experience of being exposed.

Is There a European Heritage of the Guest?

In the following section, I will look briefly for a scene concerned with perceptibility of the guest within the contemporary occidental philosophical

⁸ Jürgen Roloff, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1984).

tradition. It is often said that Judeo-Christian heritage holds ready Europe's narration of depth and its specific rationality as it is formulated in contemporary philosophy. Therefore, when the narration about the guest had a special weight in the biblical tradition, it should be asked, where would it find itself in its (philosophical) transformations? In the first instance, the guest is still the one who has always been excluded. Europe invented the identity card to classify the guest as a foreigner and where applicable to deport him. Europe covers and surveys the world⁹ and alongside the search for areas of hospitable encounters, the search for one's own limitable and controllable fundament crops up. This represents, as it were, the mastery of *knowledge*, which is to be found in the (excluding) definition of the other and it deals less with a *faith*, which tries to live according to a guideline (the pre-given) of the possibility of an *encounter* which will have been occurred.

Before bringing this search for the guest to a close, we should ask once more what amounts to the word that the guest gives: strangely enough there is no conceivable antonym, nor can an adjective be drafted ("hospitable" denominates the host).¹⁰ The word guest strays into the vicinity of the word "God" – in theology the adjective "godly" was thoughtlessly drafted while dismissing the circumstance that in the strictest sense one will never be able to join it with a quality (since from what could godly be demarcated?). This proximity also refers to the fact that the guest is moved to the sphere of the Divine – the ancients expressed this by maintaining that the right to hospitality was the most sacred right – insofar as the violation of the guest like the desecration of a sanctuary would be accompanied by his total disappearance. Perhaps under the consideration of this observance of the proximity of the guest to the non-identifiable and non-definable, to that which is in the center of one's own without ever being in one's possession, one can find traces of a deposit in the great philosophical traditions of the European modern era whose still to be transformed spiritual consequence will only be hinted at here.

⁹ Taking the measurement of the world as Occidental-contemporary heritage and its failure under the surface is hauntingly described in: Thomas Pynchon, *Mason and Dixon* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997).

¹⁰ Cf. Bahr, *Die Sprache des Gastes*, pp. 25-30, especially p. 28.

The Perpetuation of Hospitable Thinking:

Leibniz, Kant, Hegel

Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716) pointed out that the world has sufficient reason in God,¹¹ yet in order to add immediately that God cannot be located on the same level; he reasoned, "The sufficient reason or the last reason (God) must therefore lie outside the context of the row of the particular and accidental things (...)." ¹² Leibniz does not mean a total context of justification that is a sort of closed justification microstructure, which would not leave any room for freedom and wherein everything were subsumed and had a secure fundament. Rather he initializes the intuition that our world lives from an open guideline (pre-given), without which being would not be conceivable as a meaningful coherence. The world in itself is not sufficient, but rather there is a kind of gap which initially closes and thereby renders it free and meaningful. God, understood in this manner, is a blank space – which corresponds to the blank space of the guest never to be integrated into the own identity – in the midst of being, a place which is neither the other (in the sense of a "beyond"), nor can it be integrated into mundane structure.

A similar phenomenon is also encountered in the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), whose highest principal of all use of reason (the "synthesis") is expressed in the tenet, "I think must be able to accompany all my representations."¹³ In the reflections here presented it is of importance that this "companion" (who, as the one who eludes a last identification, neither "is" nor "is not") must by no means – as Kant shows in the transcendental dialectics – be subjectified as a substantial I, as God in the sense of an *omnitude realitatis*, or as a world in the sense of a causal structure. Rather he designates the fundamental boundary of the use of reason (and with it our identifying thinking) and the opening of a specific rationality of practical reason. Neither as one's own nor as the other can the I according to Kant become a definable object of theoretical reason, whereby the space is opened up to understand the subjectum as a goal never to be compensated and as a challenge beyond the limit of autonomy (in the sense of a voluntary self-ascription and autopoiesis) and heteronomy.

¹¹ "Sufficient reason" does not simply mean any reason for a certain phenomenon, but expresses the fact of why the world is one way and not another. This sufficient reason, which holds together the world and prevents its falling apart into the randomness of isolated incidents, Leibniz locates in the love of God.

¹² Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Monadology," § 37.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), B 131f.

As the last great witness of the modern philosophical era, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) should be named.¹⁴ In the closing chapters of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), in the “revealed religion” and in “absolute knowledge,”¹⁵ the reader experiences, that all substance must perish in order for the subject to arise; or in other words: that the loss of the (noetic) self-affirmation of the own “I” (the self-affirmative I, that sets itself at the beginning of everything, represents the substantial moment of the modern era) is the fundamental moment of Christianity. Corresponding to this loss of self-affirmation is, as the depth-structure of rationality, the acknowledgement of the Other who is not adaptable to our thinking, but rather whom we have to expose ourselves to in order to be able to perceive him as a subject. Following Hegel, this thought is the true spiritual foundation of an ethical and Christian vision of the Occidental modern era. With the disappearance of the substance, therefore, first and foremost the claim of validity of the I is meant, a claim that leads to the fact that we perceive/form the other within certain representations, by which he is delineated and defined. In this way, it is meant to recognize him, yet not to acknowledge him. Conceived theologically, the demise of substance as substantial abandonment of the I denotes the sacrifice and passing of Jesus, in which YHWH becomes the actual subject of man (Gal. 2.20). Hegel again points out that Christ himself must not be rendered positive, but that he has his *topos* in the spirit as the deepest reason, to enable the acknowledgement of the other. The I is therefore not the center of our existence, and personality can therefore not be understood as the self-positing and acting empowerment of the world, but it lives in answering to a succession of a spiritual event which is prior to it, which remains an uncatchable pre-

¹⁴ My thesis which cannot here be expounded would be that Kant basically affirms and systematizes the central ideas of Leibniz, that further quasi any line out of Kant’s critique is assimilated in both major speculative works of Hegel (*Phenomenology of the Spirit* and *Science of Logic*), whose thought is again in striking proximity to Levinas’ insights, above all on what concerns the issue of the “other.” Hegel would therefore not primarily be the thinker of the system, but the one who showed its limit; he would be the thinker who in his own way incorporates the Kantian program to mediate knowledge in order to reach faith. Cf. Kurt Appel, *Zeit und Gott. Mythos und Logos der Zeit im Ausgang von Hegel und Schelling* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2008).

¹⁵ In respect to the interpretation of revealed religion and absolute knowledge as the demise of any substantiality in the sense of a validity claim cf.: Appel, *Zeit und Gott*, pp. 276-298; Thomas Auinger, *Das absolute Wissen als Ort der Ver-Einigung. Zur absoluten Wissensdimension des Gewissens und der Religion in Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003).

cept. This thought can possibly be mediated by means of the category of the guest. Man is the guest of a spiritual event, which in Christianity bears the name Jesus – as a transfer of the name YHWH – whereby however the decisive moment would lie in the circumstance to keep this name open as an inviting guideline and not to take possession of it as the last self-protection of one’s own noetic world. In this way, his character as the guest is safeguarded in the way that he “never ceases to give himself.”¹⁶

At the beginning stands, therefore, the reception of the guest which challenges and questions the self. The gift of the guest is not something, but He himself. Therein “we” – in all vulnerability, exposure, and tangibility – become guests of a spiritual event; it emerges (perhaps) a participation in the joy, in the suffering and above all in the question of the other. Perhaps we also become part of a narration of a hospitable encounter, without ever being able to possess it. This encounter – for which humanism, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and the secular will have to give testimony to – may flow “into the learning to be human,” receiving the narrative of a universal hospitality,¹⁷ which will have to write ever anew a text of invitation comprising the past, present, and future.

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¹⁶ Bahr, *Die Sprache des Gastes*, p. 445.

¹⁷ Gianni Vattimo, *Jenseits des Christentums. Gibt es eine Welt ohne Gott?* (Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2004), pp. 128-142, especially p. 138.

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