Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy

Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy contests the ancient opposition between Athens and Jerusalem by retrieving the concept of meontology – the doctrine of nonbeing – from the Jewish philosophical and theological tradition. For Emmanuel Levinas, as well as for Franz Rosenzweig, Hermann Cohen, and Moses Maimonides, the Greek concept of nonbeing (understood as both lack and possibility) clarifies the meaning of Jewish life. These thinkers of “Jerusalem” use “Athens” for Jewish ends, justifying Jewish anticipation of a future messianic era, as well as portraying the subject’s intellectual and ethical acts as central in accomplishing redemption. In addition, Kavka argues that this formal structure of messianic subjectivity is not simply an acculturating move of Judaism to modern or medieval philosophical values, but it can also be found in an earlier stratum of the Jewish tradition, particularly in an ancient midrashic text discussing a group that refers to itself as the Mourners of Zion.

This book envisions modern Jewish thought as an expression of the intimate relationship between Athens and Jerusalem. It also offers new readings of important figures in contemporary Continental philosophy, critiquing previous arguments about the role of lived religion in the thought of Jacques Derrida, the role of Plato in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, and the centrality of ethics in the thought of Franz Rosenzweig.

Martin Kavka is an assistant professor of religion at Florida State University. He is the author of articles on philosophy of religion and modern Jewish thought appearing in Religious Studies Review, Journal of Religious Ethics, Cross Currents, and other leading journals.
Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy

MARTIN KAVKA
Florida State University
To Dan Casey, my Mašıah,
the measure which reflects the highest good
and thereby makes salvation possible
## Contents

| Acknowledgments | page ix |
| List of Abbreviations | xi |

Introduction: From Athens to Jerusalem
- The Thesis and Two Corollaries
- A Preliminary Sketch of the Argument
- A Note on Gender

1. The Meontological Conundrum: Emmanuel Levinas and Emil Fackenheim on the Athens–Jerusalem Conflict
   - Critical Meontology: Emmanuel Levinas
   - Dialectical Meontology: Emil Fackenheim

2. Beyond “Beyond Being”: Nonbeing in Plato and Husserl
   - The Problems of Middle Platonism
   - The Inadequacy of Unisifted Definition
   - Nonbeing, Otherness, and the Coherence of Disparate Elements
   - Phenomenology and Meontology

3. Nonbeing as Not-Yet-Being: Meontology in Maimonides and Hermann Cohen
   - Return
   - Maimonidean Meontology
   - The Extermination of the Passions in Maimonides
   - Meontology in Cohen’s *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*
   - From Teleology to Messianism: Cohen’s Interpretation of Maimonides
   - The Integration of the Community: Religion of Reason
   - Conclusion
Contents

4 Nonbeing Ensouled, Nonbeing Embodied: Levinas versus Rosenzweig on the Role of the Other in Messianic Anticipation 129
   The Soul, Faithful in Pathos 135
   The Body, Faithful in Eros 157

Conclusion: Deepening the Roots of the Jewish Meontological Tradition, or contra the Derridean “Messianic” 193
   Mourning Between Introjection and Incorporation 195
   The Mourners of Zion, hadomim lo 207
   Swallowing Tears 217

Works Cited 222
Index 233
Acknowledgments

In the years that I have been working on the issue of negation in Jewish philosophy, I have had the benefit of support from numerous professors, colleagues, and friends. All of these individuals have been my teachers, and it will take me more than a lifetime to demonstrate my worthiness of the attention and care they have shown me.

My passion for this material is rooted in the inspiring pedagogical and intellectual gifts of Robert Gibbs, whom I encountered in a seminar at Princeton University in the fall of 1991. (The passion of the other seminar participants—including Jen Bajorek, Leora Batnitzky, Ruth Gerson, Elise Harris, Ariel Kaminer, and Viv Soni—was infectious.) Later, David Novak guided me toward refining the rigor of my thinking. He has since become a jewel of a conversation partner. And through her enigmatic nature and wily graciousness, Edith Wyschogrod made it possible for my years at Rice University to be challenging, productive, and happy beyond my wildest dreams.

I owe thanks also to Kamila Kavka, Misha Kavka and Stephen Turner, Cornel West, Victor Preller, Elaine Pagels, Malcolm Diamond z’l, Dmitry Gorenburg, Arun Sannuti, Mun Hou Lo, Robert Scharlemann, Michael Swartz, Larry Bouchard, Jamie Ferreira, Michael Satlow, Jennifer Geddes, Kyle Fedler, Clayton Crockett, Trent Pomplun, Willie Young, Laura Levitt, Susan Shapiro, Dave and Susannah Nix, Eric and Julie Boynton, Stephen Hood and Sdenka Aguilar-Hood, Shaul Magid, my big brother Zachary Braiterman, Brian Riedel, Andrea Frolic and Sheldon Smart, Steven Galt Crowell, Cynthia Freeland, Michael Weingrad, Diana Lobel, Gerald McKenny, Werner Kelber, David Nirenberg, Oona Ajenstat, Willis Johnson, Judith Brown, Ann and Nicholas Willis, Caroline Willis, Misty Willis, Steve Kepnes, Claire Katz, Dana Hollander, Marc Lee Raphael, Gregory Kaplan, and Matthew LaGrone. Peter Ochs has shown me that my conversation partners are my family.

The friendship of Gene Rogers, Derek Krueger, Claire Kaplan, Leah Zahler z’l, Ned Brinkley, Bernard Mayes, and Mark Jordan has given me much-needed support at difficult times.

ix
Acknowledgments

I owe special thanks to four women who have forever altered the categories of my understanding. Randi Rashkover has shown me that a life spent reading and writing Jewish theology is a life of great pleasure. Beth McManus has shown me how to live the patience and generosity that I admire on the page. Nancy Levene has shown me that brokenness need not be loneliness. Laurel Fulkerson has shown me how to be professional and fabulous at the same time. They have taught me to live and love more fully, and in so doing they have improved my thinking.

My wonderful friends and colleagues in Tallahassee are the most delightful of rewards: Shannon Burkes, John Corrigan and Sheila Curran, Bryan and Amanda Cuevas, Kathleen Ernoll and Yakini Kemp, Aline Kalbian and Bob Cross, David Kangas and Inese Radzins, Nicole Kelley and Matt Day, John and Rita Kelsay, Amy Koehlinger and Charles Robinson, David and Cathy Levenson, Leo and Marvel Lou Sandon, and Barney and Pat Twiss. In the brief time I knew her, Tessa Bartholomeusz taught me many things. I miss her a great deal.

A draft of what eventually became Chapter 4 was read in 1999 at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, and a preliminary version of the Conclusion was read in 2001 at the annual conference of the International Association of Philosophy and Literature. My thanks to those who gave me helpful criticisms, including Robert Gibbs, Peter Ochs, Zachary Braiterman, Barbara Galli, Dana Hollander, and Ferit Güven. Rewriting a previous draft of the Introduction as a letter to Dirk von der Horst was enormously helpful; I am grateful for the generosity of his response. Rewriting the Conclusion in its epistolary form was therapeutic; I hope its primary addressee knows who he is. Some of my previously published articles contain interpolations of this material into very different contexts. A small part of the Introduction appeared in “Recollection, Zakhor, Anamnesis,” Cross Currents 49, no. 4 (2000); part of Chapter 4 appeared in “Saying Kaddish for Gillian Rose,” in Secular Theology, edited by Clayton Crockett (New York: Routledge, 2001), and part of the Conclusion appeared in “Textual Reasoning and Cultural Memory,” in Textual Reasonings, edited by Nancy Levene and Peter Ochs (London: SCM Press, 2002).

In preparing this manuscript for publication, I had the good fortune to respond to comments and questions from Robert Gibbs, Oliver Davies, and Diana Lobel, all of whom read the manuscript with keen eyes and a warmth that invited me to push the limits of my ability to think through these issues. This book is far clearer as a result; the responsibility for its weaknesses and faults is mine alone. At Cambridge University Press, Andy Beck has been an exemplar of patient cool; he, Helen Wheeler, and Susan Greenberg make work fun. Bob Erlewine has provided an excellent index.

Finally, the man to whom this book is dedicated is the sine qua non of these words seeing print. The debt I owe him is the greatest of all.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Abbreviations


On occasion, I have emended certain published translations. In dual citations, for example, AE 210/165, the first page reference is to the original-language edition and the second is to the English translation.