I took my title from a brief, but central passage in *Difficult Freedom*: ‘The spirit is free within the letter, and it is enslaved within the root’.¹ I shall not comment on the immediate context of this phrase where Levinas takes exception to Simone Weil’s ‘hatred’ of the Bible which, as he remarks, “she knows poorly” (136/193) and “only in translation” (135/191). Nor will I spend much time analyzing the underlying dispute with those who believe that with Christ spirit has overcome and freed itself from the letter to which the Jews would have remained “stubbornly attached” (49/76). The hyphen in ‘judaean-christianity’ which sees in the Old Testament a mere ‘prefiguration’ of the New (161/226) covers up the deep differend between both positions.² Whether one chooses to speak of a freedom within or a freedom from the letter, ultimately derives from whether or not one


believes in God’s incarnation in Christ. Levinas speaks for Judaism when he writes that “God never takes body”\textsuperscript{1} and stresses that the Talmud should be seen as the commentary on the Old Testament (116/226). God, that is, is “real and concrete not through incarnation but through Law” (145/205); he is “not incarnate, to be sure, but somehow inscribed” in the Torah: “(his) life, or a part of it, is being lived in the letters: in the lines and between the lines and in the exchange of ideas between the readers commenting upon them – where these letters come alive and are echoed in the book’s precepts […] to answer in justice to one’s fellow, that is, to love the other”.\textsuperscript{2}

It wouldn’t take much effort to link these and other passages to what Levinas wrote elsewhere, in \textit{Totality and Infinity} for example, on the primacy of ethics and on the Other as “the very locus of metaphysical truth […] and indispensable for my relation to God” (TI 78/51). There can be for Levinas “no ‘knowledge’ of God separated from the relationship with men” (TI 79/51). Ethics is the “spiritual optics” (TI 78/51): “[it] does not prepare us for the Divinity, [but] is the very accession to [it]”.

This last quote is from \textit{Difficult Freedom} (102/147). It is followed by a warning – “All the rest is chimerical”. Here I hesitate and this hesitation, to which I shall return later, brings me to my subtitle which, again is borrowed from Levinas: “Man, after all, is not a tree, and humanity is not a forest” (23/41). Or elsewhere: “A humanity with roots […] with the sap rising from the earth, is a forest or a prehuman humanity” (137/195).

Again, the stakes here are relatively clear: man is not properly human as long as he is rooted like a tree. He only becomes human when his roots are severed. And for this he needs the Other. Put technically: only the Other can make me break my bond with my being. As long as I am on my own, I am the centre of my world, the one to whom everything else appears in a light it borrows from me. This egocentrism is involuntary and implied in my having to conjugate the verb ‘to be’ in the first person singular: as soon as I am, \textit{I} am the measure of things and I cannot be otherwise. Such is the law of ontology, which Levinas refers to by such terms as ‘darwinism’,