

Review Essay of Jacob Taubes' *The Political Theology of Paul*



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With *The Political Theology of Paul*,¹ Jacob Taubes has left us with what amounts to a condensed manual of his thought. In it, he has attempted to weave together a large number of the major themes that occupied him throughout his scholarly career. It is an odd work, often difficult to understand, at times incomprehensible. The text is based on a lecture series delivered by this Jewish philosopher of religion when he was already seriously ill. Many of the references are cryptic, much is merely hinted at. Although the text has been scrupulously edited by Aleida Assmann, the commentary remains indispensable. The German edition of 1993 is supplemented by an index of terms by Aleida and Jan Assmann that does full justice to the text without imposing any set interpretations on the reader.

Given the sheer incomprehensibility of the text, it is all the more astounding that this cryptic manual has, in recent years, begun to exercise a kind of underground influence on the intellectual scene “after postmodernity.” The discussion of “Paul as the founder of Universalism,” launched by French philosopher Alain Badiou² and subsequently taken up by Giorgio Agamben in his commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans,³ leaves

¹ Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, ed. Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann, Horst Folkers, Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, and Christoph Schulte, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). This is the first work of the famous German theological thinker Jacob Taubes to appear in English. It is a translation of lectures delivered at the Protestant Institute for Interdisciplinary Research (FEST) in Heidelberg, February 23–27, 1987, compiled on the basis of audio recordings by Aleida Assmann. It first appeared in German under the title *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus* in 1993.

² Alain Badiou, *St. Paul. La fondation de l’Universalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

³ Giorgio Agamben, *Le temps qui Reste: Un commentaire de l’Épître aux Romains* (Paris: Rivages, 2000).

no doubt that the impact of Taubes' theses concerning the politics of theology has become quite significant. Certain motifs that currently define the specifically Jewish understanding of Paul, as found, for example, in Daniel Boyarin's *Paul—the Radical Jew*,⁴ would also seem to have been informed by Taubes' brief essay.

The underlying hypothesis of the book is contained in the title. Taubes is concerned with the development of Pauline theology as being predominantly political in nature. This perspective entails a revision of the prevailing view of Paul, largely based on Protestant theology and scholarship, according to which his was a theology of inner contemplation and faith, critical of the law. This "Protestant" Paul was a product of Luther's criticism of the Catholic Church. Paul was someone who had taken his leave from worldly matters and arranged his relationship with God in such a way as to permit passive submission to the ruling order. The retreat into an inner faith and obedience toward the ruling authority, as preached by Paul in his Epistle to the Romans 13:1, are mutually complementary elements of this theological conception. For Luther, the Christian duty of obedience to authority was still conditioned by that same authority's duty of obedience to God. As it developed, however, the idea of a Lutheran state religion came to profess an inner faith that sought to detach itself completely from worldly politics. In the end, this religiously neutralized inner faith was to assume a character all the more political when the very same Paul, in his other guise as critic of Jewish law, *halacha*, became the dominant figure in the dispute between Protestant culture and Judaism—for better and, in the main, for the very worst. It was true that the philological purism favored by Protestant theologians led to a new appreciation of the Hebrew and Jewish sources of the Gospel. At the same time, however, their radicalized criticism of the law fed on a latent Gnosticism, which sought and found in Judaism and its religion of the law the very embodiment of the "negative" that was to be vanquished by an evangelical love that went "beyond this law."

It was in keeping with this tradition that none other than Adolf von Harnack, the doyen of liberal Protestant theology, attempted to demonstrate that the "essence of Christianity," by which he meant the "Protestant essence of Christianity," was Gnostic. In his 1921 book on Marcion,⁵ von

⁴ Daniel Boyarin, *Paul—the Radical Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Cf. Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire. Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1997); Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2004).

⁵ Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott. Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche* (Leipzig: Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1921).

Harnack—to whom Franz Overbeck once notoriously referred as Kaiser Wilhelm II’s “theological wig-maker”⁶—presents his well-known thesis of the Marcionite nature of Christianity, with its corollary that the Christian canon need no longer include any Jewish sources, especially not the Old Testament. With that, the liberal theologian provided a theological cue for the breakdown of German-Jewish culture that was already in the making. Twelve years later, in 1933, with very few exceptions (Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer), the Protestant Church gave its full support to Adolf Hitler, taking on a highly political profile as the German Church.

Against the background of this traditional view of Paul, the thesis of the essentially political nature of his theology must be seen as a radical departure. Such a view requires, moreover, that Pauline theology be seen as following a dual strategy. As Taubes develops it, Paul’s political theology must be considered both in its external political dimension and in its internal Jewish dimension, in order to redefine the relationship between the two. The Protestant Paul, calling for political obedience while channeling civil disobedience into a form of anti-Semitism, becomes, in Taubes’ thesis, the proponent of a political theology of liberation, preached by a Jew in opposition to the Roman Empire. By placing specific emphasis on the Apostle’s apocalyptic views concerning *nomos* and the law of the Roman Empire, Taubes succeeds in placing Paul’s criticism of “the law” in a universal context. The immediate consequence of this is that his criticism of Jewish law loses some of its pointedness. Paul’s theology is, in this view, a deconstruction of imperial, political *nomos*. This is achieved by overturning its whole system of values by introducing the image of a crucified king and messiah. Paul’s Christology is not merely a phenomenon of inner piety. It is a public, cosmological event, heralding the end of all political-imperial power through the martyrdom of love. Love, as the messianic fulfillment of the law, is seen as the means by which all law, be it Roman or Jewish, will be overcome and replaced by a true community of man, united in solidarity. In his views on salvation, Taubes thus finds himself completely within the political-theological tradition of Ludwig Feuerbach, which seeks “to establish the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth.” Salvation, in this sense, becomes a highly political concept for placing the “false nature” of politics, as authority to rule, in suspension.

In Taubes’ conception, Paul’s Christology, as a revolutionary formula for nation building, thus elevates the commandment of love to the level of a universal constitution, founding a new political order. In this new

⁶ See Jacob Taubes’ beautiful introduction to Franz Overbeck, *Selbstbekenntnis* (Frankfurt: Main, 1966).

order, the individual character of Judaism would remain untouched and would no longer be subsumed under an abstract concept and, in fact, obliterated. Taubes is interested in showing how Judaism's specific identity, along with other specific identities (Greek, man, woman, etc.), is integrated into St. Paul's transcendent order. It is precisely for this reason that he wishes to make Paul's foundation of a universal community, a cosmopolis, recognizable as a genuinely Jewish strategy. To this end, Taubes argues for a dramatic structure central to the history of Israel, which he develops based on the model of the nation's founding prophet, Moses. Just as Moses had attempted to speak on his people's behalf and protect Israel from divine punishment and destruction following the sin of the golden calf, so also did Paul, seeing himself as Moses' successor, follow his strategy as advocate of the people of Israel. Just as Moses had sought to avert God's punishment for the people's rejection of him, so also was Paul's theology of opening the religion to non-Jews to be understood, as a similar strategy developed in reaction to Israel's rejection of the Messiah. To prove his point, Taubes draws on a whole tradition of metaphorical images to describe the covenant between God and Israel as a bond of faith and love. The faithlessness of God's people is punished by his renunciation of his own promise of faithfulness. Accordingly, the testament Moses leaves behind just before his death comprises the fundamental elements of the contract between God and his people, whereby its annulment suffices to set in motion the logic of converting the nations. It is in this context that Taubes cites Moses' farewell address to Israel.⁷

*They provoked me with that which is not God;
They have moved me to anger with their idolatry;
But I will provoke them in return with those who are not a people;
I will move them to anger with a godless nation.*

As interpreted by Taubes, the betrayal of God's son becomes, for Paul, a second fundamental sin. The only way to atone for it is by extending the covenant with God to include "those who are not a people." What is to be achieved by this is, of course, a restoration of the true unity that exists between Jews and non-Jews. Taubes makes use of a very nice midrash, from Brachot 32a, to present Moses as the true advocate of his people, who not only employs all the rhetorical means at his disposal to plead for Israel in its sin, but even goes so far as to refuse God's offer to destroy Israel and make Moses the leader of a new nation. In this light, Taubes' comparison appears all the more astounding, since it is precisely disloyalty to Israel that characterizes Paul's strategy. In contrast to Moses, who refuses to

⁷ Deuteronomy 32:21.

renounce his responsibility for Israel even in this exceptional situation, Israel's rejection of the Messiah leads Paul to the exact opposite conclusion, namely, to the abandonment of his own people in favor of "those who are not a people," that is, the non-Jews. Taubes now claims, however, as already noted, that Paul, by the very act of overstepping the bounds of the law, is acting not merely as the proponent of a universalistic political theology. On the contrary, his sole reason for betraying his people is to protect what he considers his own true Jewish people from God's punishment. His betrayal hereby acquires a messianic legitimacy, which, for Taubes, seems plausible in retrospect, foreshadowing the Sabbatean logic of antinomianism and apostasy. Here Taubes analyzes Paul's theology in the light of Scholem's monumental research on the mystical-messianic origins of antinomianism: just as the false messiah Shabtai Tzvi, with his antinomian attitude and his apostasy, had cleansed the vessels of evil for the sake of Israel's salvation, so also was Paul's act to be understood, as a desperate attempt to rescue Israel for its own salvation. The ultimate act of disloyalty, which Moses rejects, becomes transformed under these messianic circumstances into an ultimate act of loyalty. Taking this perspective as his point of departure, Taubes then reconstructs chapters 9 through 11 of the Epistle to the Romans fully in keeping with the generally accepted view of them as an attempt by Paul to interpret the Jewish rejection of the Messiah as an act necessary for the extension of God's grace to non-Jews. In the Midrash, the rejection of the Torah by the gentiles is what gives the Jews their privileged status; in Paul, it is an act of refusal by the Jews that creates the conditions that allow for the inclusion of the gentiles, without, at the same time, entailing a rejection of Israel. According to Taubes, this dialectic reaches its pinnacle in Epistle to the Romans 11:28, where Israel is described as being both enemy and beloved nation. The juxtaposition of these attributes leads Taubes to speculate on Jesus' injunction to love one's enemy, as pronounced in the Sermon on the Mount:

As concerning the Gospel they [the Jews] are enemies for your sakes:
but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes.

There can certainly be no doubt that the intent here is not simply to present Paul, both in his political theology and as a Jew, as a utopian model of true universality in which specific individuality is not impinged upon. Taubes is also launching a direct attack on the political theology of Carl Schmitt. Taubes allowed himself to be both fascinated and shocked by Schmitt, and he returns to him repeatedly in his works. For Taubes,

Schmitt was both the apostle of truth as regards “the political” and, at the same time, the archetypal enemy of Judaism. Although Schmitt compromised himself through his avowal of National Socialism, Taubes had dedicated the first volume of his large, three-volume anthology entitled *The Prince of This World: Carl Schmitt and the Consequences*⁸ to the German legal scholar, and he had done the same with a small, highly personal book, in which he describes himself as the personification of Schmitt’s “antipodal destiny.”⁹

In 1967, after Alexander Kojeve, who was in Berlin for a lecture, announced that he would be going to Plettenberg to pay a visit to the now ostracized Carl Schmitt, Taubes, too, abandoned his own personal boycott of Schmitt and took steps to arrange a meeting with him. Taubes repeatedly referred to this encounter in idealized terms as a kind of mystical, even apocalyptic summit between the heads of two enemy secret services. He used to claim that it would be impossible for him to express what took place at this encounter. At the same time, he also seems to have had some difficulty in remaining silent about it. In *The Political Theology of Paul*, he mentions going on a long walk with Schmitt in Plettenberg, during which a specific passage from the Epistle to the Romans (11:28), that which describes the Jews as beloved enemies, comes up for discussion:

And now comes this powerful sentence about which I deliberated with Carl Schmitt. This is where an almost ninety-year-old man sat with someone who was a little over fifty and spelled out 9-11. That’s when we came to the sentence: “As regards the gospel they are enemies”—enemies of God! Enemy is not a private concept; enemy is *hostis*, not *inimicus*, that’s not my enemy. When it says, “Love your enemies”—yes, perhaps, I’m not sure what it means there in the Sermon on the Mount. Here, in any case, we are not dealing with private feuds, but with salvation—historical enemies of God. “Enemies for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their forefathers” [11:28]. (p. 51)

The philological arguments Taubes here employs are aimed at the very heart of Carl Schmitt’s political theology. Schmitt had based his well-known theory of “the political” on the “exception” that permits the

⁸ J. Taubes, ed., *Der Fürst dieser Welt: Carl Schmitt und die Folgen* (Munich: Fink, 1983).

⁹ J. Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt—Gegenstrebige Fügung* (Berlin: Merve, 1987). See also J. Taubes, “Carl Schmitt—ein Apokalyptiker der Gegenrevolution,” *Die Tageszeitung (taz)* (Berlin), July 25, 1985.

sovereign to deal with his enemies. In his *Political Theology*,¹⁰ published in 1922, he at first tried to deduce the existence of this political sovereignty from the analogy to divine sovereignty. Later, however, in *The Concept of the Political* (1927/32),¹¹ it is explained simply by the existence of a real danger of confrontation with the enemy. “The political” is, in this sense, nothing more than the act of deciding who is a friend and who an enemy. Schmitt here draws a very precise distinction between the political or public enemy and the personal or private one, thus succeeding in delegating to the private domain the enemy whom one is commanded by the Gospel to love. It is the *inimicus* (personal enemy), he explains, and not the *hostis* (public enemy), to which the Gospel refers. With that, the theological command to love one’s enemy becomes, for Schmitt, devoid of all political significance. Accordingly, it is up to the Church to act in keeping with the principle of “the political,” that is, to fight the public enemy just as would any other political group.

The philosophical revelation contained in Taubes’ reference to Romans 11:28 lies in the fact that the term actually used in this passage is *inimicus*, so that the (Jewish) enemy and beloved is, in reality, according to the Gospel, unquestionably a public figure—since it is the enemy of God who is referred to in this passage, and this, Taubes explains, can be understood only as a public enemy. Taubes here opens a philological abyss, as a speculative response to Schmitt, in order to reopen the question of the enemy in political theology. Schmitt’s political theology had posited an enemy that needed to be combatted and, in keeping with his commitment to National Socialism, this enemy was the Jew. In place of this, Taubes provides a philological basis for applying the commandment to love one’s enemy also to the public enemy and for establishing this as a “political-theological principle.” Viewed from the position of the Jews in Paul, it is a principle that can be fulfilled only through martyrdom.

The reader who manages to make his way through the cryptic labyrinth of Taubes’ thinking will find much that can stimulate, provoke, or even shock. Many of the themes introduced only fleetingly in *The Political Theology of Paul* are found in a more fully developed form in the shorter essays collected in the second part of the book under the title “Paul and Modernity: Transfigurations of Messianic Thought.” Treated here, for example, is the question of modern attitudes toward Gnosticism, as raised in the debate between Hans Blumenberg and Eric Voegelin and recorded

¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1922).

¹¹ Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996).

in Blumenberg's magnum opus *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.¹² As suggested above, it is in his critique of Adolf von Harnack and the latter's Marcionite theories that Taubes expresses his thoughts on political Gnosticism, applying his political-theological interpretation of Pauline theology in order to free it of all Gnostic (and anti-Jewish) tendencies. At the same time, Taubes' position on Gnosticism remains far from unambiguous. One need only consider his foreword to the second volume of the three-volume *Gnosis and Politics*,¹³ where he appeals to the radical political Gnosticism of Ernst Bloch, according to whose theology—of communism as a principle of hope—Marcion is to be celebrated as representing a theology that offers hope for a complete reconstitution of the world.

Carl Schmitt comes up again and again in these essays: Carl Schmitt in relation to Karl Barth, Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt and Jacob Taubes. Finally, there is also a treatment of Adorno's school of criticism, from whose aesthetic utopianism Taubes dissociates himself. The reader will easily recognize the Taubes of the great, three-volume anthology he published in the 1980s, noted above. Recognizable in the text, however, are also the traces of Taubes' age and illness; the posturing that characterized his entire life and work becomes increasingly pronounced. Like most of Taubes' writings, *The Political Theology of Paul* is the quintessence of his constant vacillation between Jewish and Christian traditions, the latter of which was primarily represented, in Taubes' view, by the modern Catholic "Church fathers" of the twentieth century. Fortunately, these Church fathers are known to neither his Jewish nor his Protestant readership. Taubes' 1947 doctoral thesis on Western eschatology¹⁴ already owes far more than is fitting to the Jesuit Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Apocalypse of the German Soul*,¹⁵ a work that was completely unknown at the time. Similarly, *The Political Theology of Paul* evidences more than just a deep affinity with the reconstruction of Paul's Epistle to the Romans by the 1929 convert to Catholicism Erik Peterson.¹⁶ The revolution in the

¹² Hans Blumenberg, *Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996); Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

¹³ Jacob Taubes, ed., *Gnosis und Politik* (Munich: Fink, 1984).

¹⁴ Jacob Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie* (Bern, 1947).

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele (1937–1939)* (Freiburg: Academic Press Fribourg, 1999).

¹⁶ Erik Peterson, *Theologische Traktate* [1951] (Würzburg: Echter, 1994). The theological tractates present, most importantly, a brief reading of Romans 9–11, based on Peterson's major course of lectures on the Epistle to the Romans that he had developed in the 1920s. These lectures have been edited by Barbara Nichtweiss and were published in 1997 in Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Würzburg: Echter, 1997).

interpretation of Paul has already taken place in Peterson's 1923–1927 commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Taubes has simply adapted it in order to reinforce the Jewish foundations on which it is constructed. The now legendary Peterson was, in fact, the first to see in Paul the author of a political theology that questions the legitimacy of the Roman Empire, and which Peterson, in a conscious refutation of Carl Schmitt, describes in those terms.¹⁷

If Christ has truly mounted the throne and a new era has begun, then this also requires a public pronouncement. And the one by whom this public pronouncement is to be made, is none other than the apostle. As a herald, it is his task not to proclaim the faith of an obscure sect, but rather to inform the heathens that Jupiter no longer thrones in the heavens, and to inform the Jews that Christ now sits beside Yahwe on the throne and rules with him jointly... and that with him a new era has begun, which, now that the eras and empires characterized by animals have passed, is characterized only by the Advent of this Son of Man. Considering the question also from this point of view, it is clear now as well that the theopolitical act of Christ's ascension to the throne must correspond to a theopolitical conception of the apostolate. What the apostle is saying is not simply that Jupiter is no longer sitting on his throne, that Christ has taken his place—what he is saying is addressed to the Roman Empire, the political survival of which is inherently linked to the political-theological conviction that Jupiter thrones in the heavens.¹⁸

Fortunately, as stated, Taubes' Jewish readers are not aware of this. They have never heard the slightest mention of Erik Peterson or Hans Urs von Balthasar in their lives. Even the German Protestants, to whom Taubes presents his thesis, are barely aware of the existence of these Catholic theologians and much prefer to be charmed by Rabbi Taubes, who can wrap up their apostle Paul in a bundle of quotations from the Talmud. As always in Taubes' case, here too, he is merely playing the magician, pulling apocalyptic *theologomena* out of a hat—a trick that, simple as it may be, only few in his audience manage to see through.

Standing at the abyss of history, torn between a Sabbatean charade and naked desperation, Taubes formulates a political theology in which

¹⁷ Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer*. As generally known, Carl Schmitt responded in his *Politische Theologie II: Die Legende von der Erledigung jeder politischen Theologie* [1970] (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996) to Peterson's tractate *Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (Leipzig: Hegner, 1935). See B. Nichtweiss, *Erik Peterson: Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk* (Freiburg, 1992).

¹⁸ Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer*, pp. 14–15.

the trauma of destruction has been written into every line. It is a theology of desperation, even madness, that attempts to spell out in retrospect the conditionality of a potential for averting that destruction. As always with Taubes, it is all very apocalyptic and reasonably brilliant or, at least, brilliantly distorted and filled with strokes of genius—the genius of a charlatan at his very, very best.