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Eschatology as Occidental *Lebensform*: The Case of Jacob Taubes

Jacob Taubes, founding chair of Jewish Studies at Free University of Berlin from 1962 and ordained rabbi, was one of the most controversial figures in West-Berlin. Not only did he understand how to polarise opinions in various academic and non-academic debates, but he put theological thought on the same level as philosophy, without negating the insights of the Enlightenment, instead tracing them back to the religious horizon from which they once emerged from. This article examines Taubes' eschatological thinking and political theology, and shows how his study of religious and biblical texts was interwoven with events in politics, and with ideas of salvation and redemption. The article's focus is twofold: first, I will examine Taubes' dissertation, Occidental Eschatology (1947), a phenomenology of the Apocalypse and apocalypticism as the foremost expression of Western religious thought that has always been characterised by two poles, revolution and its repression; and second, I will discuss the radical thinking of the apostle Paul, as portrayed in Taubes' late Heidelberg lectures on the Letter to the Romans, where he shows how deeply Paul was anchored in the rabbinical mindset.

Scientific method is distinguished by the fact that,
in leading to new objects, it develops new methods
(Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*)

1 Text Becomes (Hi-)Story

In 1947, a dissertation in philosophy was published in Bern. It came to only 60 pages, which was not unusual at the time.¹ It comprised the first three chapters of what would later become *Abendländische Eschatologie (Occidental Eschatology)*, vol. 3 of *Beiträge zur Soziologie und Sozialphilosophie*.² The series was edited by the sociologist René König, a German Catholic émigré who had left the University of Cologne in 1938 due to his strong opposition to the Nazi regime (in 1949, he returned to Germany and also to this university). König had come to Switzerland, as many like him did or tried to do.³ The title, *Occidental Eschatology*, is an “austere

¹ Taubes, *Studien zur Geschichte und System der abendländischen Eschatologie*.

² Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie*.

³ König stayed in loose contact with Taubes. Their correspondence is kept in the literary estate of Taubes (EJT) at the Leibniz-Center for Literary and Cultural Research (ZfL) Berlin.

conjoining” (*harte Fügung*), juxtaposing a theological term with a cultural-historical one. The work has since become well known, even programmatic, at least among those interested in the dialectics of secularisation and in the German philosophy of religion of the mid-twentieth century; they are many.⁴ The dissertation’s author was Jacob Taubes (1923–1987).

The only son of the rabbi of Zurich, Taubes was born into a family originally from Galicia, a *Kronland* of the Habsburg Empire until 1918. The Taubeses and Edelsteins (the family on Jacob’s paternal grandmother’s side) were deeply rooted in both Hasidism and the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, linking mysticism with Haskalah, the Jewish form of Enlightenment.⁵ Taubes’ father made a name for himself in Switzerland and within the wider Jewish community by his efforts to rescue the “remnant of Israel” (*sherit Israel* in Hebrew) from Hungary during the last years of the Second World War, activities in which Jacob participated.⁶

Rabbi Taubes’ son was trained at the universities of Zurich and Basle, where he attended not only classes in philosophy, history and Semitic Studies but also in Christian theology. He was a student of the Protestant Karl Barth, and was also in touch with the Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar, who provided pastoral care to the university’s Catholic students at the time. Both were already or would become great figures and personalities within their respective congregations. Taubes was also ordained a rabbi, receiving his *semihah* at the *yeshivah Etz-Haim* (Hebrew for “Tree of Life”), a strictly orthodox rabbinical school in Montreux, founded in 1927. There he studied under Rav Yerahmiel Eliyahou Botschko, a “Litvaker” originating from the Lithuanian branch of Jewish orthodoxy famous for combining deep piety with strong rationality in their Talmudic studies. Taubes later corresponded regularly with the rabbi’s son, Moshe, who succeeded his father in the 1950s.

But the story did not end there: a group from the Montreux *yeshivah* made *aliyah* (Hebrew for the immigration to Palestine/ Israel) in 1985 and founded *Heikhal Eliyahou* (Hebrew for “Elijah’s Temple”), named after both rabbi Botschko and the biblical prophet Elijah, who did not die but ascended into heaven. His reappearance inspires prophetic visions and auditions, and even triggers the coming of the messiah himself. This *yeshivah* is located in Kochav Yaakov, a settlement in the West Bank, some fifteen minutes by car from Pisgat Zeev, a post-1967 settlement that now forms part of Greater Jerusalem. Kochav Yaakov means “Star of Jacob”, a strong messianic allusion taken from the Torah. In one of the oracles of the diviner Balaam, who was first hostile towards Israel but then, called by God as a newly chosen

⁴ Currently there are translations of *Abendländische Eschatologie* into Italian (1997), Hungarian (2004), Croatian, French, English (all 2009) and Spanish (2010).

⁵ Cf. Stimilli, *Jacob Taubes*; Trembl, “Reinventing the Canonical;” Kopp-Oberstebrink, “Jacob Taubes;” Muller, “Reisender in Ideen.”

⁶ Cf. Kranzler, *George Mantello, El Salvador, and Switzerland’s Finest Hour*, 244–245.

prophet, proclaims “What I see for them is not yet; What I behold will not be soon: A star rises from Jacob, A sceptre come forth from Israel.”⁷

I mention these theopolitical implications to draw attention to two things that matter very much in discussing Taubes and his eschatological thinking. Firstly, Carl Schmitt’s influence on Taubes concerning political theology might have been less important than hitherto assumed, because much in Jewish thought points in a similar direction.⁸ Secondly, I hope to show, at least in the case of Taubes’ *yeshivah*, how the study of religious or biblical texts has become interwoven with events in politics. Such texts do not simply document what has happened in the world and in history; what is written is also desired to be fulfilled, thus transforming history. The first is the historiographical or historiosophical function of texts, while the second might be called their prophetic or messianic impact. Viewed from the latter perspective, historical concepts are never a question of mere categorisation nor solely the product of inner mental and intellectual activities. Within different religious cultures, they are linked to redemption as well as salvation; they are interpreted as evidence for the fulfillment of prophecies and revelations. In this way, the theological term “eschatology” implies a very political programme; it becomes a theopolitical weapon, with sometimes lethal consequences in (not only modern) Israel’s history.⁹ The name of this programme is apocalypticism; as Gershom Scholem (one of Taubes’ teachers in Jerusalem) has it, “there remains no doubt about the entry of apocalyptic tradition into the House of Study” – into that of the rabbis of Antiquity and of academia of the twentieth century.¹⁰

The genealogies and locations of the rabbis with whom Taubes studied and corresponded are not only parts of a family tree or a geographical map but also elements of Israel’s history of salvation, as it intersects with the topography of the Holy Land. In Judaism, religion has been a family affair as well one of the land since Abraham, the first of the patriarchs.¹¹ He left his native country, went into exile at God’s calling and was, despite his high age, rewarded with a son and the assignment of land “as a possession.”¹² Yet he was a wanderer most of his life. Liturgically, he is remembered by the prayer line “My father was a fugitive Aramean”;¹³ this

7 Numbers 24:17.

8 The relationship between Taubes and Schmitt (usually including Walter Benjamin) has been the subject of a constantly growing wave of secondary literature in several languages for several decades. This industry was admittedly started by Taubes himself and later supplemented by Schmitt. The singular 1930 letter of thanks from Benjamin to Schmitt has played a central role in it. I would rather suggest concentrating on the study of the sources and the actual encounters and correspondence between them. For this, see Taubes and Schmitt, *Briefwechsel*, eds. Kopp-Oberstebrink et al.

9 Cf. Schmidt, “Die theopolitische Stunde;” Lebovic, “The Jerusalem School.”

10 Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” 9.

11 Cf. Mosès, “Figures de la paternité biblique.”

12 Genesis 15:7.

13 Deuteronomy 26:5.

confession is recited annually in the Passover Haggadah, which calls to mind not only the arch-patriarch but also God's sparing of Israel from its persecutors in history and, it is hoped, in the present.

2 Messianism between Destruction and Liberation

The entry of messianism into history is always dramatic, as it brings it to an end and opens up the vista of a post-history. The rabbis radically distinguished between this world (*ha-olam ha-ze*), the existing one, and the world to come (*ha-olam ha-ba*). "The harmony which it (the world to come, M.T.) reconstitutes does not at all correspond to any condition of things that has ever existed even in paradise, but at most to a plan contained in the divine idea of Creation."¹⁴ This primordial idea of a direction from the beginning, which is lost to sin and can only be realised by one, the messiah, is present in both Judaism and Christianity, even if, of course, redemption happens differently in the two religions: in the world in the former, beyond it in the latter.¹⁵

The figure of the messiah already underwent significant changes in the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament). Whereas it was first designed to secure the hoped-for continuity of the dynasty of King David – the genealogy of Jesus of Nazareth still testifies to this aim – it then became linked to eschatological events during the exile of the Jews. The messiah thus no longer belonged to history, as such, with the history of salvation instead in the foreground. Nevertheless, the messianic figure should be thought of in the old terms of royalty, as an anointed king who was almost divine (as in Egypt) and possessed the highest, superhuman qualities: justice, wisdom, military prowess, but also a willingness to suffer, even to die (which eventually became the role of the so-called Messiah ben Joseph, the forerunner of the final and successful Messiah ben David).¹⁶

Again, it was Gershom Scholem who studied the idea of the messiah. His epochal essay *Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism* starts with a sharp distinction between Judaism and Christianity that deserves to be quoted at length:

¹⁴ Scholem, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," 13.

¹⁵ The term "messiah" comes from the Hebrew *mashiah*, meaning the "anointed one", and was originally part of the phrase *ha-melekh ha-meshiah*, "the anointed king", describing the coronation ritual. The kings of Judah and Israel were not crowned, but anointed with oil ritually poured over them, indicating that they now took possession of the sacred office as leader, protector and – if necessary – liberator of the people, a ritual which, by the way, was common to the political ritual of the ancient Eastern Mediterranean. The kings of Egypt had been instituted in the same way.

¹⁶ Cf. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*.

Any discussion of the problems relating to Messianism is a delicate matter, for it is here that the essential conflict between Judaism and Christianity has developed and continues to exist. [...] A totally different concept of redemption determines the attitude to Messianism in Judaism and in Christianity; what appears to the one as a proud indication of its understanding and a positive achievement of its message is most unequivocally belittled and disputed by the other. Judaism, in all its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. It is an occurrence which takes place in the visible world and which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance. In contrast, Christianity conceives of redemption as an event in the spiritual and unseen realm, an event which is reflected in the soul, in the private world of each individual, and which effects an inner transformation which need not correspond to anything outside.¹⁷

Scholem thus divides messianism into an “outward”, political one – which is Jewish – and a Christian one, which is “pure inwardness”.¹⁸ It is exactly this criterion of the internalisation of the messianic experience that poses a problem for Taubes. In his essay *Scholem’s thesis on Messianism reconsidered*, originally delivered as a lecture to the World Congress of Jewish Studies (held every four years in Jerusalem) in 1981 and then published under two different titles in three different versions,¹⁹ he reaches the opposite conclusion to Scholem. According to Taubes, messianism is ruled by a dialectic process between the world and the redemption from it. He considers

the dialectics in the Messianic experience of a group at the moment when prophecy of redemption fails. The ‘world’ does not disintegrate; but the hope of redemption crumbles. If, however, the Messianic community, because of its inward certainty, does not falter, the Messianic experience is bound to turn inward, redemption is bound to be conceived as an event in the spiritual realm, reflected in the human soul.²⁰

In any case, the realm of messianic inwardness is opened up by the mystic response to the necessarily outer failing of the messiah, “the symbolic transformation of the ‘scandal’ of his earthly life. It is in the interpretative context that the Messianic message is to be found, not in the life-history of a person, which is as opaque as all earthly events usually are.”²¹ According to Taubes, all messiahs must be considered to be paper tigers – but this is a very modern point of view. One could even say that while the different attempts to implement Jewish messianism failed, the Christian one was born of failure itself. But did it really fail? From a later Christian perspective – but perhaps *only* from it – this new creed which has become Christianity and the

17 Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” 1.

18 Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” 2.

19 Cf. Taubes, “Scholem’s Thesis on Messianism Reconsidered,” 665. Taubes, “The Price of Messianism,” and Taubes, “The Price of Messianism.”

20 Taubes, “Scholem’s Thesis on Messianism Reconsidered,” 669–670.

21 Taubes, “Scholem’s Thesis on Messianism Reconsidered,” 672.

dominant religion by Emperor Constantine's choice might be the religion to last, the end of old Israel, *to telos tou nomou*, "the end of the law", as Paul has it.²²

Here Scholem (and Taubes) would disagree, the former ending his essay with a somewhat baffling link to the present that portrayed certain aspects within current Zionism as a deliberate enactment of messianic freedom. Redemption became unleashed liberation – not so much of the individual as of the people and the land. "Little wonder that overtones of messianism have accompanied the modern Jewish readiness for irrevocable action in the concrete realm, when it set out on the utopian return to Zion. It is a readiness which no longer allows itself to be fed on hopes. Born out of the horror and destruction that was Jewish history in our generation, it is bound to history itself and not to meta-history."²³ Taubes opposed this direct connection to Zion as the land, and he did so against the background of the right-wing government of Menachem Begin, the first prime minister not coming from the Labor Party.

3 A Text and its Discontent

Let us return to Taubes and his dissertation. The book, though well written, was not well received and soon more or less forgotten in academic circles. It was first mentioned again among an inner circle of Jewish émigrés, where the accusation of plagiarism was raised against the author. Rumour had it that Taubes took whatever he could from others books without acknowledging his borrowings. This charge is first known to have been raised against him by Hans Jonas, whose 1934 dissertation, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* ("Gnosis and the Spirit of Late Antiquity"), had opened a new chapter on the understanding of Late Antiquity. In his memoirs, he reported that, in 1949, Karl Löwith (or in English Lowith), the author of *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* (*Meaning in History*), having been asked about the quality of Taubes' book, had told him, "it's a very good book. And that's no accident – half of it's by you, and the other half of it's by me", and he, had agreed.²⁴ Yet he somehow liked Taubes and, in a letter to Hannah Arendt, Jonas even admitted that he was not so bad a thinker.²⁵

Indeed, in addition to the works of Jonas and Löwith, parts of Taubes' dissertation were copied from Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*

²² Romans 10:4. The phrase can also mean "the goal of the law", which it most probably does in Paul, at least in a non-biased, non-Christianising reading.

²³ Scholem, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," 35–36.

²⁴ Jonas, *Memoirs*, ed. Wiese, 168. Cf. Lowith, *Meaning History*; Cf. Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* (the German original appeared later than its English translation).

²⁵ Jonas, *Memoirs*, 168–169, and letter of Hans Jonas to Hannah Arendt, February 22, 1954. I want to thank Mimi Howard (Cambridge/Berlin), who informed me about this letter, which she found in the archives of the New School of Social Research (New York).

(“The Apocalypse of German Soul”), Alois Dempf’s *Sacrum Imperium* and Oswald Spengler’s *Untergang des Abendlandes* (“The Decline of the West”)²⁶ – all of these books were classics in their respective fields.

In all these cases, Taubes acted as a plagiarist in the modern sense. Yet I understand him as an eager commentator and even pious student of great masters in the premodern sense, because he not only transmits but also enriches their teachings. He wrote as if the author (a figure later so vehemently attacked as a mere construction by Michel Foucault) had not yet been born.²⁷ Taubes might claim a place in the chain of traditionally trained Jewish scholars and their operative modes and textual techniques.²⁸ He lived in the world of the *yeshivah*, where teachers and students operated in the kind of symbiosis typical of all traditional religious cultures. The most gifted of each generation would most probably become brilliant teachers themselves; until then, they had to humbly revere the master whom they would succeed, respecting a certain way (*derekh*) of interpretation and also of instruction. Commentaries were most highly appreciated within the tradition; the genius of this favoured genre was Rashi (1040–1107), one of the greatest Halakhic authorities and the most important Torah and Talmud commentator, whose remarks continue to be printed in every rabbinic edition of the Bible (Chumash) and the Talmud until today. In Rashi’s world, the bourgeois concept of intellectual property was still unheard of.

In a letter to an American-Israeli friend and rabbi, Aharon Agus, Taubes stated the importance of Rashi from another perspective, explaining that “I do not think we can go on in commentaries to texts, that has been done in a canonic way by Rashi (you know that I consider Rashi the greatest genius of the Jewish spirit).”²⁹ And he was convinced of the truth of Kafka’s statement that “Judaism has always produced its sufferings and joys almost simultaneously with the corresponding Rashi commentary” (“Das Judentum bringt seit jeher seine Leiden und Freuden fast gleichzeitig mit dem zugehörigen Raschi-Kommentar hervor”)³⁰.

Taubes’ religious beliefs certainly appear to have been genuine. This is supported by the testimony of none other than Leo Baeck, the rabbi of Theresienstadt and one of the most important spiritual leaders of the German Jewry under National Socialism. When he was asked about Taubes by Louis Finkelstein, the president of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York – the flagship rabbinical seminary of American Conservative Judaism, where Taubes stayed for two years as a re-

²⁶ Cf. Balthasar, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*; Dempf, *Sacrum Imperium*; Spengler, *Untergang des Abendlandes*.

²⁷ Cf. Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” ed. Bouchard. On the relationship between Taubes and Foucault see the contribution of Christian Zolles in this volume.

²⁸ Cf. Scholem, “Tradition and Commentary as Religious Categories.”

²⁹ Letter of Jacob Taubes to Aharon Agus, November 11, 1981, EJT.

³⁰ Letter of Taubes to Agus; Taubes here quotes Kafka, cf. Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, ed. Brod, 202. (My translation). As far as Kafka was concerned, psychoanalysis was the *Raschi-Kommentar* of his own time.

search student in the late 1940s – he answered: “I got to know him to be gifted and to have learned many a thing, sometimes maybe too many a thing, in the old and new fields of learning. Indeed his mind is yet fermenting somewhat but I think he is most promising. Furthermore he is a fine character and a truly religious one. I feel sure you will enjoy having him your pupil.”³¹

After years in Israel and the USA, Taubes came to the Free University of Berlin in 1962 to accept the Founding Chair for Jewish Studies – only the second one to be established at a public university in a German-speaking country (the first was at the University of Vienna, four years earlier). His dissertation had by now acquired a high reputation, even if only very few people could actually have read it, seeing as it was almost impossible to access a copy in the university or in any public Berlin library at the time. By the 1980s, most existing copies had either been stolen or had mysteriously disappeared. Those interested could register in a waiting list to see the book, but as only three positions were available on the list, one already had to wait before even being put on it – Kafka says hello!

A reprint of his dissertation was resisted by Taubes, perhaps because of the criticism of Jonas and others mentioned above, and only became possible some years after his death, in 1991, due to combined efforts of his second wife, the philosopher Margherita von Brentano, and his publisher, Axel Matthes (a *Freigeist*, who also made works of the French radical thinkers Antonin Artaud and Georges Batailles available to German readers).³² Yet *Occidental Eschatology* only began to be fully appreciated once Jewish Studies finally became popular at German universities and, above all, when the book was translated into English in 2009. The latter was published by Stanford University Press in the prestigious series *Cultural Memory in the Present*, edited by Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries.³³

4 The Structure of *Occidental Eschatology*

Taubes begins his book with a phenomenology of the Apocalypse and apocalypticism as the foremost expression of Western religious thought, which has always been characterised by two poles, by revolution and its repression.³⁴ All other events in history are merely contingent, fleeting episodes that might have a great impact on real history (*Realgeschichte*) but never relate to the deep and underlying structure of history as such. If God is the master of history, his ways remain obscure.

³¹ Letter of Leo Baeck to Louis Finkelstein, October 24, 1947. I want to thank Markus Krah (Potsdam), who found the letter in the archives of JTS.

³² Cf. Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie. Mit einem Anhang*. The third edition, containing an afterword by myself, published in 2007.

³³ Cf. Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*.

³⁴ For another (hi-)story of apocalypticism, cf. Zolles, *Die symbolische Macht der Apokalypse*.

For Taubes, Gnosis was key to meaning in history. “What is Gnosis? The Greek word means ‘knowledge’,” and it is the noble name of the revolutionary “emancipation of man’s self from the bondage of the natural powers of the cosmos and social powers of the human ‘world’.”³⁵ Gnosis thus refers not only to a chapter in the religious history of late Antiquity that possesses a rich mythology as well as complicated systems of both revelation and redemption. It is also the deepest expression of the suffering soul longing for salvation and liberation. It would become a central metaphor in mid-twentieth-century German philosophy, not least because of Taubes.³⁶ The ontological dualism of Gnosis is directed against the cosmos both as creation and order: “The cosmos was desacralized and demonised.”³⁷ Creation thus became the dark realm of fallen angels or devils, and the creator was viewed as a *deus malignus*, an evil god. But Gnosis also led to a new anthropological understanding by creating the “Gnostic Idea of Man”. “Man, reduced to the last residuum of his own being, to his non-worldly, non-natural self, to his *pneuma*, discovered that with his fellow-man, his brother – even with the vilest of men – a community of ‘brotherhood’ was possible.”³⁸

Taubes understands Gnosis as the continuation and radicalisation of apocalypticism, “this forward looking expectation” of a “passionate people”, Israel.³⁹ And it is Israel in exile, “a situation which is parallel to their wanderings in the wilderness. The Exile is the wilderness of the nations, where there is no sense of being rooted to the land or any adherence to a state.”⁴⁰ Yet it would be wrong to limit this experience to “Israel according to the flesh” (as the apostle Paul would later have it).⁴¹ The experience of estrangement from the world was ubiquitous. “It is incorrect to brand the Jewish nation in Exile as an exception. It is true that the Jews in Exile are a nation without land, but – and this is the decisive factor – they are surrounded by nations in a similar position.”⁴² For all of them, liberation must be the combination of spiritual freedom with independence from the evil powers both of the world and of heaven. From Jesus seeing “Satan falling from heaven like lightning”, it is only a short way to the vision of John the Apocalyptic proclaiming “a new heaven and a new earth”.⁴³

Eschatology as the general programme of the end of the world in Western religions is grounded in the revelation of divine truths. For Taubes,

35 Taubes, “The Gnostic Idea of Man,” 90.

36 Cf. Styfhals, “No Spiritual Investment in the World as It Is”

37 Taubes, “The Gnostic Idea of Man,” 90.

38 Taubes, “The Gnostic Idea of Man,” 94.

39 Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 21.

40 Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 24.

41 1 Corinthians 10:18.

42 Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 25.

43 Luke 10:18 (cf. Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 50), and Revelation 21:1.

[r]evelation is the fire which casts light upon the clearing (*Lichtung*) between God and the world. The burning fire reaches the center of heaven; the world is darkness and gloom. The voice of God, which is the very essence of revelation, is to be *heard* in this fire, but has no visible form. It sprays flames of fire. Mankind cannot break through to God without being scorched (*versengt*). It can only see God from behind, but not face to face. Nobody can see the face of God and live.⁴⁴

This imagery alludes to the repeated appearance of Yahweh to Moses as fire in the Bible (as a burning bush, as lightning on Mount Sinai, as a fire-cloud in the desert during the exodus of the people of Israel from their Egyptian exile).⁴⁵ Taubes uses a language deeply rooted in, or borrowed from, Martin Heidegger, Franz Rosenzweig and Eugen Rosenstock Huessey, who were all existentialist *and* religious thinkers, though each in his own, sometimes peculiar way. Thus Taubes not only describes or analyses occidental eschatology but also performs it. Particularly in the book's first part, *Vom Wesen der Eschatologie* ("On the Nature of Eschatology"), the sentences are short and laconic; they are set in a strict order and phrased in a very self-assured way. Yet there is also a tune to the language that sings a song of great hope and even provides visionary insights. Taubes' prose turns into *gebundene Rede* (bound speech); he makes use of all the means the German language has to offer to make a prose text resemble poetry, as by rhythm and alliteration; this has, of course, always been a stylistic strategy employed by prophets. Finally, such a style is aimed at orality and holds the address to the community to be the ideal act of speech.

These stylistic elements make Taubes the very last Jewish philosopher of German expressionism, itself an eschatological movement between catastrophes, be they authoritarian or liberating. This effect is more or less lost in the existing translations, meticulous as they are. To my knowledge, there is only one exception, Dana Hollander's translation of Taubes' late Heidelberg lectures on the apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans, in which she transforms Taubes' spoken German into an English prose equivalent to that which Taubes might have spoken on such an occasion.⁴⁶

Eschatology was born in ancient Iran, and further elaborated in Israel in the second century BCE (the biblical Daniel is "the first Apocalypse to come down to us in complete form").⁴⁷ By the time of Jesus, it had become a universal phenomenon – at least according to Taubes, in keeping with the doctrine of ancient religious history that prevailed in the first half of the twentieth century: "The historical place of revolutionary apocalypticism is Israel. Israel aspires and attempts to 'turn back' (*Umkehr*). Turning back on the inside has a parallel effect on the outside. The pathos or revolution defines Israel's attitude to life."⁴⁸ Yet the final point of this

⁴⁴ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 7.

⁴⁵ Cf. Exodus 3:2 (burning bush) and 19:18 (lightning), Numbers 9:15 (fire-cloud).

⁴⁶ Cf. Taubes, *Political Theology*.

⁴⁷ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 43.

⁴⁸ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 15.

urge for revolution, its apex, was reached in the post-apocalyptic Germany of the 1920s, and Taubes proves to be its finest echo and mouthpiece.

Occidental Eschatology leads the reader through the material in a threefold way. Firstly, it starts from the later, post-prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), before passing on to Jesus, Paul and early Christianity, finally reaching Augustine and Joachim of Fiore as the two most visible proponents of the ecclesiastic historiosophy that consists in either the neutralisation or reanimation of chiliastic speculations. And again Taubes finds in them traces of the anthropological shift which he called the “Gnostic Idea of Man”, now firmly rooted in the new creed. “In the Christian community the man of Late Antiquity blots out his own ego in favour of the superego (*Über-Ich*), which, coming from beyond, descends to the people. This superego is one and the same in each member of the community, so that the community represents a collective of the spirit (*so dass die Gemeinde das pneumatische Wir darstellt*).”⁴⁹

Secondly, Taubes discerns in early modernity the laboratory of eschatological thinking in which political theology became possible in many different but always radical ways, particularly in left-wing Protestantism and, above all, among the Anabaptists. The theopolitical culmination achieved in the process was described in Ernst Bloch’s *Thomas Müntzer as Theologian of the Revolution*, written shortly after the First World War.⁵⁰ Taubes made use of this “ecstatic writing” (Leon Wieseltier) in his dissertation.⁵¹ He writes: “In Müntzer’s theology the soul dissociates itself from all the dross of the external world, overrides all earthly powers, attaches no value to any sacramental institution, and has the most profound and intimate understanding of grace as its own abyss, as the advent of faith.”⁵² All this is performed within a scenario of utmost catastrophes, which Judaism knows as the “birth-pangs of the messiah”, a period of “transition or destruction”.⁵³ These elements can also be found in Puritanism “already under Cromwell, and such tendencies are even stronger in the American colonies”.⁵⁴ This eschatological drive had come to an end within theology by the eighteenth century.

Thirdly, Taubes recognises that in the weakness of theology there lies the triumph of philosophy, a field into which apocalypticism entered by way of Lessing. Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel transformed it further, but it was Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Søren Kierkegaard who made it the spiritual engine of our time, if in different forms: an ironic, a revolutionary and an inner, unseen one, respectively. Everyone who does not follow these three masters would necessarily end in nihilism.

⁴⁹ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 65. (Display in the original).

⁵⁰ Cf. Bloch, *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution*.

⁵¹ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 210.

⁵² Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 114.

⁵³ Cf. Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” 8.

⁵⁴ Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 119.

This nihilism is not the negativism of Franz Kafka and his concept of “minor literature”.⁵⁵ Taubes once called him “the Rashi before Auschwitz”;⁵⁶ to compare the writer from Prague to Rashi was quite something, but Taubes was not the only one who associated Kafka with important positions of Jewish theological thought. Harold Bloom once stated: “Kafka’s revelation [...] returns always to its own nothingness, yet this is the *ayin* of *Ein Sof*, a nothingness which is everything.”⁵⁷ *Ayin* is a letter of the Hebrew alphabet which is not spoken (linguistically, it is a glottal stop), and *Ein Sof* (the first letter of which is *ayin*) is the name of the *deus absconditus* (the literal meaning of which in Hebrew is “no end”) in the Kabbalistic speculations of the mid-sixteenth-century mystic Isaac Luria, who “deeply injured Judaism.”⁵⁸ Kafka’s nothingness is – as the apostle Paul might have said in his correspondence with the Corinthians – but “all in all”, at least according to Taubes’ interpretation (I will not dwell on this topic here, as it would deserve an essay of its own).

Taubes’ apocalypticism envisages a new epoch after history, a messianic post-history. One of his interpreters explains that “the End of Time is only conceivable as salvation. The end of history is indeed the transition from temporality to eternity, that is, from godlessness to God, and from evil to good.”⁵⁹ Salvation is found in immediate proximity to God, or, as Paul has it: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”⁶⁰ Only when the Messiah comes, will everything become clear.

Here the apostle Paul competes with Moses, who, within Judaism, always stands by himself and above all others. He is the first teacher of Israel, “Moses, our rabbi” (*Moshe rabbenu*), according to his traditional title. Most probably, Paul here refers to an on-going debate among scholars and scribes commenting on Numbers 12:6–8, a difficult, highly poetic section, “which contrasts Moses’ prophetic experience with that of all other prophets. Whereas other prophets receive revelation through visions and dreams, Moses experiences the presence of the Lord face to face.”⁶¹

This debate continued among rabbis in later times. In *Leviticus Rabbah*, a fifth-century *midrash* (a rabbinic interpretation of the Bible), the question of how God

55 Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*.

56 Letter of Jacob Taubes to Aharon Agus, November 11, 1981.

57 Bloom, “Gershom Scholem as Poet,” 9.

58 Cf. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 244–286, 251.

59 Styfhals, “Gnosticism and Postwar German Thought,” 41.

60 1 Corinthians 13:12. The *Festschrift* marking Taubes’s 60th birthday alludes to this passage, cf. Bolz and Hübener, *Spiegel und Gleichnis*. Its contributors include not only colleagues from Berlin or Germany but also Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy from France, Moshe Barasch and Avishai Margalit from Israel, and Edmund Leites and Rodolphe Gasché from the USA. The final article is written by Emile Cioran, a Romanian writer living in Paris.

61 Beale and Carson, eds., *Commentary on New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 739.

actually communicated with Moses is discussed. As usual, the authors were interested in the tensions or ambiguities in the biblical text where God says that “with him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly (*mar’e*) and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord.”⁶² Now the rabbis read *mar’e* as *mar’a* (which is, of course, possible, as the biblical text contains no vowels), meaning “mirror”, but also “vision”, as in Num. 12:6 at the beginning of this section).⁶³ On the reception of prophetic visions, they concluded that “through nine mirrors did the prophets behold them [...], but Moses beheld them through one mirror.”⁶⁴ But this was not enough, so the rabbis stated further that “all the other prophets beheld them through a blurred mirror [...], but Moses beheld them through a polished mirror.”⁶⁵ The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians that nobody will need any mirror at all in the eschatological age to come. His interpretation is different from that of the rabbis on this point (as he opposes the idea of any intermediary but Christ); yet both share a playful hermeneutic in the best sense, and it is all about reflection as a way of mirroring, but also as a form of thinking and producing knowledge.

Interpretations like this show how deeply Paul was anchored in the rabbinical mindset. In Taubes’ view, it is the Jewish, not the Christian Paul, who is relevant. He claimed that “the word ‘Christian’ [...] doesn’t yet exist for Paul.”⁶⁶ In fact, “the first known occurrence of the term ‘Christianity’ is in Ignatius, writing in the early second century.”⁶⁷ But Judaism did not exist as a fixed entity either. Taubes brought Paul back to Judaism; he was one of the first among the moderns to do so, but not the only one; in fact, Krister Stendahl, a Swedish Lutheran theologian (whom Taubes got to know at Harvard in the late 1950s), placed Paul “among Jews and Gentiles” (as the title of one of his books runs); and finally, Daniel Boyarin made a similar, yet different and in itself radical effort only one year later and without any knowledge of Taubes.⁶⁸

For the apostle Paul, Christ is the Messiah, but his agenda is a blurred one. Faith, as demanded by Paul, is directed to the Messiah, not to God, and the love of God is sublated by the love of the neighbour.⁶⁹ The Messiah is the focus of Paul’s sermon and mission. Both, the sermon and mission, prove to be signs of the conversion that has taken place through the redeeming death of Christ on the cross, the baptism into death carried out in his name finally sealing this conversion for everybody, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. [...] There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for

⁶² Numbers 12:8.

⁶³ Cf. Beale and Carson, eds., *Commentary on New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 739.

⁶⁴ Leviticus Rabbah 1:14.

⁶⁵ Leviticus Rabbah 1:14.

⁶⁶ Taubes, *Political Theology*, 21.

⁶⁷ Dunn, “A New Perspective on the New Perspective on Paul,” 159–160.

⁶⁸ Cf. Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, and Boyarin, *Paul and the Politics of Identity*.

⁶⁹ For this sublation, cf. Welborn, *Paul’s Summons to Messianic Life*, 2–3.

you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁷⁰ This is the great movement of totalisation in Paul; all will become one – eschatologically. Albert Schweitzer (who was not only a medical missionary in the tropics but also a profound theologian) called this “‘being-in-Christ’ [...] the prime enigma of the Pauline teaching: once grasped it gives the clue to the whole.”⁷¹ Taubes thought very highly of Schweitzer’s book, because it proved that “Paul marks the exact turning point from Christian apocalypticism to Christian Gnosis; eschatology and mysticism meet in him”.⁷²

5 Paul as another Moses

That the key concepts of this revolutionary, Gnostic apocalypticism could be found in the sermon of Paul became a kind of dogma for the late Taubes; he even identified himself with the apostle, because he recognised him as the great master of eschatological thinking.⁷³ The lectures that Taubes, suffering from incurable cancer, gave in Heidelberg a few weeks before his death in March 1987 are well known; they are published under the title *The Political Theology of Paul*. According to the publisher, they are heavily edited;⁷⁴ nevertheless, it is what we are left with, so we must consider and interpret it as is.

In these lectures, two concepts dominate: one of time as finite (*Frist*) and the other of salvation. The first is an eschatological notion, but – as Taubes stresses elsewhere – “today it has certainly become overwhelming and common due to the contingent threat of the nuclear annihilation of the human world”.⁷⁵ This was in the late 1980s; nowadays climate disaster is the catastrophe commonly anticipated, and is similarly charged with hope of salvation and fear of the end. Taubes’ ideas on the expiring of time have been comprehensively studied and further developed by Giorgio Agamben, who even dedicated his book to Taubes *in memoriam*.⁷⁶ But there is still much more to say about the latter’s thinking on salvation.

Taubes’ concept of salvation is deeply rooted in Paul’s theology of crisis. Paul divided the Jews between those who believed that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and those who did not. The first group represents the remnant (*sherit*) of Israel; only it will be saved.⁷⁷ This, Paul hoped, would see the remnant escape the wrath of God

⁷⁰ Letter to the Galatians 3:26 and 28.

⁷¹ Schweitzer, “Eschatological Mystic,” 389 (= Portions from chapters 1 and 14 of Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*).

⁷² Cf. Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 68.

⁷³ Cf. Trembl, “Die Figur des Paulus in Jacob Taubes’ Religionsphilosophie.”

⁷⁴ I want to thank Raimar Zons (Paderborn) for this information.

⁷⁵ Interview mit Jacob Taubes, ed. Rötzer, 318. (My translation).

⁷⁶ Cf. Agamben, *The Time that Remains*. For a discussion of Taubes’ and Agamben’s ideas on Paul, cf. Kroeker, “Recent Continental Philosophers,” 447–452.

⁷⁷ Cf. Romans 9:27.

arising from the absolute sinfulness of mankind.⁷⁸ As Taubes states, “for Paul, the task at hand is the *establishment and legitimation of a new people of God*”.⁷⁹

One has to understand that the biblical concept of God’s devastating Judgment Day is, of course, very much overdetermined; who knows that he or she will be saved and not condemned?⁸⁰ All of us must live in fear and, as especially Protestantism would have it, in faith. Real experiences of historical destruction merge with fantasies of death that oscillate between fear and wish. Taubes also spoke often about this issue from a personal perspective, and he participated regularly in associated rituals: in Paris, he used to pray at the synagogue on Rue Notre-Dame-de-Nazareth at Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur (the most solemn feast days of Divine Judgment and, finally, Pardon). He would then throw himself to the ground and, completely covered by his large prayer shawl, cry and weep incessantly.⁸¹ Messianic activism appears to be a panic reaction, a *Kurzschlusshandlung*, in which what should be a matter of hope and ritual (as in the case of Taubes in Paris) is often violently acted out collectively (an observation not only made from the perspective of Western Christianity and its secularisation).

The same ambiguity prevails with regard to God’s main attributes. In Western religions, God is one; he may (or may not) be three persons, but he possesses, in any case, two attributes: his punishing justice and his loving grace. While the latter is reason for joy and gratitude, the former invites fear and horror. The defusing of this most terrible *Angst* (while at the same time creating a new one) was not only Luther’s aim but also the declared goal of all founders of religions, theologians and reformers, from Moses to Muhammad, Paul to Augustine and any ancient (proto-) rabbi to Jacob Taubes.

That divine violence is best expressed and overcome by cults and rituals is an age-old experience common to all religions. The same is true for the salvation from it. Taubes recognises the destructive and the redemptive powers inherent in the evening service (*eref*) before Yom Kippur (the Great Day of Pardon and Atonement), called *Kol Nidre(i)* (Aramaic for “all vows”). There, the annulment of all formulas and the exemption from all vows made between man and God during the past year is proclaimed in a solemn antiphony between cantor and congregation.

The recitation must begin while it is still daylight and must be prolonged until sunset. It is the custom to repeat *Kol Nidrei* three times in order to accommodate latecomers. [...] Not formally a prayer, *Kol Nidrei* nevertheless became the most beloved ritual act of the Day of Atonement. It alleviated anxiety which was especially intense in the Rosh Ha-Shanah season because of possible violation of the sanctity of pledges.⁸²

⁷⁸ Cf. Romans 9–11.

⁷⁹ Taubes, *Political Theology*, 28 (display in the original).

⁸⁰ In Revelation 21:4, there is a strong hint that only those who have tears in their eyes will be saved. I wish to thank Jürgen Manemann (Berlin) for this information.

⁸¹ I wish to thank Eva-Maria Thimme (Berlin), once Taubes’ *Hilfskraft*, for this information.

⁸² Kieval and Bayer, “Kol Nidrei,” 276 (display in the original).

Through this ritual, which does not refer to any oath made in commerce or in court, Israel's salvation history is solemnly re-enacted – and that is what Taubes told his Heidelberg audience, combining biblical exegesis by the rabbis and Paul with Jewish liturgy as understood by Franz Rosenzweig to make his point.⁸³

While Moses sat with God on Mount Sinai, the people worshipped the Golden Calf. He was deeply shocked, and even more so once God most aggressively proclaimed that he would now destroy Israel: “Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation.”⁸⁴ The last part of this quotation actually refers to the blessing and promise that God had once made to Abraham⁸⁵ – before it, there was only destruction and catastrophe. Yet it was also an offer to Moses to persuade him not to annihilate his people, despite their great sins – this is at least how ancient commentaries as well as Rashi understood the passage. And Moses responded with a multifarious plea.⁸⁶

Here, Taubes combines his interpretation with lengthy quotations from the Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 32a. He shows not only how different the tranquil and, despite all condensation, almost pedantic tone of the rabbis is from Paul's heated apocalyptic speech but also how much both of them follow the same agenda: that of the salvation of Israel from God's blazing anger and justice. Both make use of traditional methods of interpretation, with Paul heaping biblical quotation on biblical quotation outside any stringent context and the rabbis reading the biblical text loosely and making use of homonymias. They explained:

And Moses besought (*wa-yehal*) the Lord his God (Exod. 32:11). R. Eleazar said: This teaches that Moses stood in prayer before the Holy One, blessed be He, until he wearied Him (*hehe-lahu*). Raba said: Until he remitted His vow for Him. It is written here *wa-yehal*, and it is written there (in connection with vows), he shall not break (*yahel*) his word (Num. 30:3); and a Master has said: He himself cannot break, but others may break for him (i.e. find a reason for absolution). Samuel says: It teaches that he risked his life for them as it says, And if not, blot me (*halal*), I pray (*yehal*) Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written (Exod. 32:32). Raba said in the name of R. Isaac: It teaches that he caused the Attribute of Mercy to rest (*hehelah*) on them. The Rabbis say: It teaches that Moses said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, it is a profanation (*hullin*) for Thee to do this thing.⁸⁷

This is a play on words on the part of the rabbis, involving what seems to be the same stem of three consonants (or sometimes half-consonants) which all Hebrew verbs and nouns possess: here it is *h-l-h* and *h-l-'*, but also *h-l-l* and *h-v-l*, the stem formations of which can easily be brought close or even put together when pronounced. They mean “to calm, appease” (from *h-l-h*), “to make sick, wear out” (from *h-l-'*), “to desecrate, profane”, but also “slain” (from *h-l-l*), and “to spin, cir-

⁸³ Cf. Taubes, *Political Theology*, 28–38.

⁸⁴ Exodus 32:10.

⁸⁵ Cf. Genesis 12:12.

⁸⁶ Cf. Exodus 32:11–14.

⁸⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 32a.

cle” (from *h-v-l*). In any case, these transmutations then open up a wealth of possibilities for understanding what had happened between God and Moses at Mount Sinai and how Israel was finally saved from justified annihilation. R. Joshua ben Levi even taught that “The Israelites made the Golden Calf only in order to place a good argument in the mouth of the penitents (i.e. that true penitence effectually works), as it is said, O that they had such a heart as this always, to fear Me and keep all My commandments (Deut. 5:26).”⁸⁸

For Taubes, Paul encounters the same problem as Moses. Like him, Paul must do something to dissuade God from unleashing his wrath (*orge theou*)⁸⁹ and to save a people that do not actually deserve salvation. The apostle becomes another Moses. In a similar way, Kafka speaks of “other Abrahams” in a letter written to Robert Klopstock in July 1921, discussing how the patriarch avoided sacrificing his own son (as well as the ram) and how “rewarding the best” and “punishing the worst” have become indiscernible, both then and now.⁹⁰ Paul, in his eschatological thinking, tries to make the gap between life and death discernible again. For him, this has two consequences, as Taubes succinctly explains: firstly, that the law (*nomos*) is no longer effective, because the Messiah Jesus was executed on the grounds of it, something which should never have happened; secondly, that it is no longer possible to save the whole of Israel, but only a remnant of it – with whom, however, the heathens who have joined the messianic movement will also now be redeemed.⁹¹ Let us turn briefly to the first point. “The people has sinned. It has rejected the Messiah that has come to it.”⁹² How can it be saved? “Here is a Messiah who is condemned according to the law. *Tant pis*, so much the worse for the law.”⁹³ By abrogating the law, Paul outperforms Moses, who was the promulgator of the law, for a second time.

6 Paul and the End of the Law

During the summer semester of 1986, Taubes gave what should become his last lectures at the Free University, entitled “Paul and philosophy (for advanced students).”⁹⁴ They lasted only one hour each, not two (as it is usual at German universities), due to his already grave health problems (even if he did not yet know about his fatal disease). These lectures became his legacy to the Berlin students, and I was

⁸⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Avoda Zara 4b.

⁸⁹ Romans 1:18.

⁹⁰ Cf. Kafka, “Über Kierkegaards ‘Furcht und Zittern’,” 43 (my translation).

⁹¹ Cf. Taubes, *Political Theology*, 37–38.

⁹² Taubes, *Political Theology*, 37.

⁹³ Taubes, *Political Theology*, 37.

⁹⁴ Cf. Free University Calendar for the Summer Semester 1986, 246.

among them. He spoke about research on Paul from Spinoza to the present day, and about the First Letter to the Corinthians. Nietzsche was one of his most important topics, because the latter had held Paul responsible for Christianity's destruction of everything exquisite and noble. In order to prove this, Nietzsche turned to the First Letter to the Corinthians – as Taubes did. But in contrast to Taubes' interpretation, Nietzsche called Paul's efforts "*the very worst ones of all*" and him "the genius of hatred".⁹⁵ How and why did the apostle succeed in his reinterpretation of the message of Jesus as it can be found in the gospels?

Paul simply shifted the emphasis of this whole being, putting it *behind* that being – into the *lie* of Jesus' 'resurrection'. Basically, he had no use whatsoever for the life of the redeemer – he needed the death on the cross and something else besides. [...] Paul wanted the end, and *consequently* he wanted the means to it as well.⁹⁶

Nietzsche, on the contrary, did not aim for an end, as he feverishly expressed his favour for eternal recurrence. His "doctrine tries to combine the pagan pattern of the cycle and the biblical pattern of the arrow of eschatological history".⁹⁷ Thus, his failure to construct a non-biblical philosophy of history was inevitable.

For Taubes, the declared aim of Paul is to bring the brothers (and sisters) of the early Christian communities to unity. Already in the opening chapter of the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul demonstrates their supremacy over those who hold power over the world now but will lose it and will not live in the new aeon under Christ. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."⁹⁸ By their faith in the Messiah, the Corinthians will become the masters of those now noble, elegant or wise. Referring respectively to the Greek philosopher, the Jewish rabbi, and the Roman rhetorician, Paul asks: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?"⁹⁹ And he replies: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."¹⁰⁰ All of these intellectuals despise the brothers of Corinth. In the new aeon of Christ, God has carried out an inversion of values – something which Nietzsche understood, but he took the wrong side in the conflict (at least as far as Taubes is concerned).

Yet Paul does not call for an active rebellion against the Roman Empire. Instead he declares that the Messiah's coming, his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave after three days have definitely put an end to both the old aeon and

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, "Anti-Christ," 38 (display in the original).

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, "Anti-Christ," 39 (display in the original).

⁹⁷ Taubes, "Community – After the Apocalypse," 104.

⁹⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:18.

⁹⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:20.

¹⁰⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:22–24.

all of its representatives, be they political or intellectual. They had all been following the law, which saw “an apotheosis of Nomos”;¹⁰¹ this had now ended. What happened at this end, Paul, the anti-philosopher, explains philosophically, as all true philosophy sets itself at the end of all philosophy. What was “nothing” (in Greek, *me on*) has now become “everything” (in Greek, *pan*):

Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.¹⁰²

The “world” is the antithesis, but the inversion of values – that which was nothing now becomes everything – is the key motif of the First Letter to the Corinthians.

When the scribes are despised, the law they interpret, too, counts as “nothing” (even if it was “all” in other Jewish traditions). In this way, Judaism “without the law” becomes possible, a Judaism for all. This is Paul’s legacy, at least as discerned by Taubes. The end of the law does not, therefore, mean the end of Judaism. On the contrary, the end of the law does not liberate the believers, because it was never compulsive, but rather a space for memory and protection (in addition to its festive and joyous aspects). Nonetheless, the end of the law enables the heathens (*goyim*, the people or non-Jews) to become believers and join the “power of God”. Only at the very end will the “remnant of Israel” also be saved. This is the prophetic concept developed in the Letter to the Romans. For Taubes, it possessed deep apocalyptic dimensions, an interpretation that was likely influenced by the catastrophes of the twentieth century that he witnessed.

7 Eschatology as *Lebensform*

In his works, Taubes demonstrated his preeminent expertise on apocalyptic and Gnostic ideas in Judaism and their *Nachleben* from Antiquity to the present. However, paradoxically for an academic, religious history served him less as a field of scholarly research than as a repository of elements for a description of the present. In this he followed Walter Benjamin, who in his fragmentary *Arcades Project* studied the Paris of the nineteenth century not out of antiquarian interest but for the “now of recognisability” (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*), by tracing the relation of a certain text, image or event to us in the present.¹⁰³

For Taubes, Paul also served as a tool for diagnosing the condition of his own time. In 1980, he argued that

¹⁰¹ Taubes, *Political Theology*, 23.

¹⁰² 1 Corinthians 1:26–28.

¹⁰³ Cf. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 473 (here in connection with the dialectical image).

a comparison of our epoch with Late Antiquity is fitting, because today a 'bureaucratic Caesarism' reigns in different ways in East and West, as was predicted by Bruno Bauer in the nineteenth century and by Oswald Spengler in the first half of the twentieth. But today, there is no Paul in view who could give image and reality to the complete Other, the Anti-Caesar, for whom the epoch is eagerly longing.¹⁰⁴

When the rabbis stated that "there is no earlier and later in the Torah (*ein mukdam u-me'uhar ba-Torah*)", they meant that the order in which things are told in it does not necessarily correspond to the order in which they have happened – events may appear out of order or sequence.¹⁰⁵ This concept of simultaneity strongly reminds of the interpretation of the Freudian theory of the unconscious as a maternal realm.¹⁰⁶ There everything exists at the same time without negation or end – even if a lot of psychic life is actually concerned only with negation and the end: that is, with death. Perhaps the same could be said about eschatology. In speaking of the last things, the catastrophe of the end should not be a real end, but only the end of history, or the beginning of post-history. Israel should be destroyed because of its sins, but the remnant of it should live on forever. The visionary of apocalypticism hints at this when he declares: "and I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away and the sea is no more."¹⁰⁷ Such fantasies of extermination and restoration are largely avoided by the rabbis. They were determined to "make a fence for the Torah", and not to interpret arbitrarily, but freely.¹⁰⁸ They achieved the great freedom in their exegesis through hermeneutics of simultaneity and the admission of contradictions. Paradoxically enough, it is in this patriarchal world that a place was created where both paternal and maternal origins could be reflected upon.¹⁰⁹

Despite the lapse in time, Paul and Taubes have much in common; just as Paul may be called a proto-rabbi (as rabbinic Judaism was not already born), Taubes could be viewed as a post-apocalypticist. He was no prophet of doom, noting that "the Apocalypse of our generation has come and gone."¹¹⁰ What the Shoah was for Taubes, the violent death of the Messiah was for Paul, who stands at the beginning of the Christian era as Taubes stands at its end. In retrospect, he appears as a pioneer, marking the crossroads of Jewish-Christian debates beyond the principles and traps of ecclesiastic dialogue and reconciliation in a confessional sense. Taubes'

104 Letter of Jacob Taubes to Jürgen Busche, October 27, 1980, EJT (Part of it also in Taubes and Schmitt, *Briefwechsel*, eds. Kopp-Oberstebink et al., 108–109, 109. My translation).

105 Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 6b.

106 Cf. Heinrich, *Arbeiten mit Ödipus* (= edition of a lecture course at the FU Berlin from 1972). Schlesier, *Konstruktion der Weiblichkeit bei Sigmund Freud*.

107 Revelation 21:1; the first part is a quotation of Isaiah 65:17.

108 Mishnah, Avot 1:1.

109 Cf. Heinrich, *Arbeiten mit Ödipus*, 164–165 (here related to Greek tragedy).

110 Taubes, "Community – After the Apocalypse," 101.

thinking was deeply rooted in an existential choice to know, to learn, to teach. He loved to take a panoramic view of the subjects he discussed.

For Taubes, eschatology was not so much an academic concept belonging to the study of the history of religions as the occidental *Lebensform*. Through it, the certainty of a liberating revelation born out of catastrophe as well as intense discontent with contemporary culture have been transformed into both an explosive messianism within Judaism and a universal form within Catholicism. In Taubes' thinking, the enduring power of the *katechon* (a pseudo-Pauline eschatological figure, with which the late Carl Schmitt identified)¹¹¹ was set into Scholem's "blazing landscape of redemption."¹¹² It is a paradoxical encounter of duration and end which Taubes conceived of as a dialectical one bringing together destruction and liberation, letting ends meet in the dialectics of desacralisation and resacralisation. This might be considered an escape from the matters and inclinations of religion and culture after 1805, when religion finally turned bourgeois. Taubes continually opposed this appeasement, and once wrote angrily: "God isn't bourgeois and the bourgeois isn't religious."¹¹³

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¹¹¹ Cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7. For Schmitt's use, cf. Taubes and Schmitt, *Briefwechsel*, eds. Kopp-Oberstebrink et al.

¹¹² Scholem, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," 35.

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