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Modern Jewish Philosophical Approaches to the Apostle Paul: Spinoza, Shestov, and Taubes

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Introduction

Jewish attitudes towards the Apostle to the Gentiles have been the subject of a number of studies in recent years. These have tended to focus on New Testament or Pauline studies, on theologians and religious leaders.¹ This is because those conducting the surveys have been interested primarily in interfaith dialogue and the theological issues, not least the question of what to make of Paul's apparent hostility towards the Law. For those interested in Jewish-Christian relations in a wider cultural context, however, this theological bias is unfortunate. After all, by remaining in the realm of interfaith studies, one is very often excluding so-called marginal Jews who, for obvious reasons, are uncomfortable championing their community's received traditions and dialoguing with representative members of the Christian fraternity. There are many ways to define Jewishness, and an exploration of the intellectual worlds of those who regard themselves as Jewish, in some sense, even if they are not committed to any kind of Judaism, is arguably every bit as

¹ For example, Daniel R. Langton, "Modern Jewish Identity and the Apostle Paul: Pauline Studies as an Intra-Jewish Ideological Battleground" in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28.2 (2005): 217-258; Daniel R. Langton, "The Myth of the 'Traditional Jewish View of Paul' and the Role of the Apostle in Modern Jewish-Christian Polemics," in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28.1 (2005): 69-104; Pamela Eisenbaum, "Following in the Footnotes of the Apostle Paul" in Jose Ignacio Cabezon & Sheila Greeve Davaney, eds., *Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004), 77-97; Stefan Meissner, *Die Heimholung des Ketzers: Studien zur jüdischen Auseinandersetzung mit Paulus* (Mohr: Tübingen, 1996); Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, "The Essential Heresy; Paul's View of the Law According to Jewish Writers, 1886-1986," PhD thesis, Temple University (May 1990); Donald A. Hagner, "Paul in Modern Jewish Thought" in Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris, eds., *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980), 143-165; Halvor Ronning, "Some Jewish Views of Paul as Basis of a Consideration of Jewish-Christian Relations" in *Judaica* 24 (1968): 82-97.

valuable for understanding the modern history of Jewish-non-Jewish inter-relations.² Furthermore, such a restrictive program automatically excludes those Jewish thinkers who might have alternative reasons for reading Paul's writings and who believe that he has relevance for other kinds of scholarly discourse. For those engaged in philosophical endeavors, for example, the attraction to Paul appears to be his implicit critique of society in the construction of the church, composed of both Jews and Gentiles. In the philosophical writings of Baruch Spinoza, Lev Shestov and Jacob Taubes, the claim is made that the Church has seriously misunderstood the apostle and has failed to recognize the threat that he represents to the established social order. What follows, then, is not a survey of Jewish Pauline scholarship or contributions to interfaith dialogue by recognized Jewish theologians, but rather a study of the place of Paul in the Jewish politico-philosophical imagination. We will begin with a figure who features in every book of Jewish philosophy but whose interest in Paul is rarely commented upon.

Baruch Spinoza

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) was born of Portuguese Jewish parents in Amsterdam and died in poverty, reviled for

² The approach adopted here is deliberately non-essentialist, an approach that does not pre-determine the outer limits of 'Jewishness' and that allows one to take into account the rich variety of Jewish experience; 'deviancy' or 'marginality' are terms with no useful meaning in this context. Alternative approaches tend to essentialize by classifying phenomena as 'Jewish' only in so far as they conform to the assumed essence of a 'normative Jewishness' (which may or may not be related to theological criteria such as matrilineal descent, conversion to a particular tradition or set of beliefs, adherence to a certain body of law, or non-theological criteria such as racial or cultural definitions); all else is to be excluded as deviant.

his free thought and largely unrecognized for his profound contributions to modern western philosophy, political theory, and biblical criticism. Expelled from the synagogue and estranged from the Jewish community, many commentators have concluded that his Jewishness was of little relevance to him or to his philosophical work. Certainly, one of his chief aims was to free philosophy from religious authority, and in *A Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670)³ he attempted to place religion on a new basis, one far more natural and political than traditional and theological. From this perspective, his view of the Law as a product of the Jewish people (and not vice versa) amounted to its abrogation.⁴ On the other hand, more recently, other commentators have noted that his writings represent a continuous dialogue with the Torah, the Prophets, and philosophers such as Maimonides, that he sought the transformation of the Jews rather than their conversion, and that he himself never converted to Christianity. From this point of view, Spinoza should be regarded as a forerunner of the modern emancipated secular Jew and credited with the emergence of a critical attitude to tradition within Jewish thought.⁵ While we

³ *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (Hamburg: Apud Henricum Ku nraht, 1670), published anonymously. The edition used here is Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R.H.M Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), a reprint of R.H.M Elwes, *Works of Spinoza*, I (London: G. Bell & Son, 1883).

⁴ Such luminaries as Herman Cohen, Emmanuel Levinas, and Leo Strauss have regarded Spinoza as a self-hating Jew, anti-Jewish, and demeaning of Judaism. See Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 16-20, 166-196, for an excellent overview of previous Jewish (and non-Jewish) appreciations of Spinoza.

⁵ Perhaps the most convincing presentation of such a view is offered in Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Smith argues, "Spinoza put Jewish concerns and problems at the forefront of his thought in order to exercise a profound transformation of them. Not conversion but secularization was the final aim of the *Treatise*. It was an attempt to turn Judaism from an

possess no definitive evidence of his self-understanding,⁶ few nowadays would dismiss entirely the idea that it included a Jewish dimension.

One of Spinoza's purposes in writing *A Theologico-Political Treatise* was to make the case for freedom of thought as a stabilizing force for society.⁷ He maintained that the people were controlled by the clergy whose authority was built on irrational and superstitious teachings, observing that

authoritative body of revealed law into what today would be called a modern secular identity." He also observes, "The *Treatise* is, to my knowledge, the first modern work to advocate the restitution of Jewish sovereignty and a Jewish State." Ibid, xiii, 19. See also Yosef Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Indeterminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 10, where Spinoza is held up as the first example of the modern secular Jew.

⁶ The evidence is notoriously ambiguous. Taking just one letter as an example, Spinoza can be understood to express pantheistic, Jewish and Christian sentiments: "I hold an opinion about God and Nature very different from that which modern Christians are wont to defend. For I maintain that God is, as the phrase is, the immanent cause of all things, but not the transcendent cause. Like Paul...I assert that all things live and move in God...I would dare to say that I agree also with all the ancient Hebrews as far as it is possible to surmise from their traditions, even if these have become corrupt in many ways...I say that it is not entirely necessary to salvation to know Christ according to the flesh; but we must think far otherwise of the eternal son of God, that is, the eternal wisdom of God, which has manifested itself in all things, more especially in the human mind, and most of all in Christ Jesus." Letter from Spinoza to Henry Oldenburg (November or December 1675), reproduced in Franz Kobler, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Letters: Letters from the Famous and the Humble II* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1953), 553.

⁷ The subtitle of the *Treatise* reads "Containing a number of dissertations, wherein it is shown that freedom to philosophize can not only be granted without injury to Piety and the Peace of the Commonwealth, but that the Peace of the Commonwealth and Piety are endangered by the suppression of this freedom."

in despotic statecraft, the supreme and essential mystery be to hoodwink the subjects, and to mask the fear, which keeps them down, with the specious garb of religion... [T]he ministries of the Church are regarded by the masses merely as dignitaries, her offices as posts of emolument – in short, popular religion may be summed up as respect for ecclesiastics. The spread of this misconception inflamed every worthless fellow with an intense desire to enter holy orders, and thus the love of diffusing God's religion degenerated into sordid avarice and ambition...[F]aith has become a mere compound of credulity and prejudices – aye, prejudices too, which degrade man from rational being to beast, which completely stifle the power of judgment between true and false, which seem, in fact, carefully fostered for the purpose of extinguishing the last spark of reason! Piety, great God, and religion are become a tissue of ridiculous mysteries.⁸

He argued that by allowing people to think and philosophize freely the foundations of society would be established more securely. Contrary to his enemies' aspersions, his famously unorthodox identification of God with 'nature' did not lead him to reject religious practice altogether. Rather, he believed that religious observance should be protected by a sovereign who required of his subjects adherence only to a simple creed which was acceptable to a wide variety of existing sects, and who otherwise respected freedom of conscience.⁹ In this way, the influence of the clergy would be minimized and philosophers such as himself would be able to concentrate on the advancement of knowledge and the betterment of society without concern for the constraints of traditional authority. In this ambitious project, the apostle Paul was to prove useful to Spinoza in a number of ways.

⁸ B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 5, 6-7 (Preface:18, 25-29).

⁹ B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 211-212 (16:100-110).

Firstly, Paul bridges the gap between the religious and the philosophical in that, according to Spinoza, "none of the Apostles philosophized more than did Paul."¹⁰ By this he meant that Paul appeared to favor rational argument to a greater extent than did the other disciples whose claim to authority more often appealed to divine revelation. In this context, Moses, too, was also compared unfavorably to the Apostle to the Gentiles.

All the arguments employed by Moses in the five books are...not drawn from the armory of reason, but are merely modes of expression calculated to instill with efficacy, and present vividly to the imagination, the commands of God...Thus Moses, the chief of the prophets, never used legitimate argument, and, on the other hand, the long deductions and arguments of Paul, such as we find in the Epistle to the Romans, are in nowise written from supernatural revelation.¹¹

While he was prepared to take seriously both the Old and New Testaments (after applying rationalist criteria to their reading) Spinoza was a good deal more skeptical of the authority of contemporary priests. Their authority was founded upon tradition and unverifiable claims to special knowledge of the divine will. Scholastic assertions that "the natural light of reason" could teach nothing of any value concerning salvation could be dismissed easily for, as decriers of reason, they were not entitled to use it to defend their non-rational views; their insistence on something

¹⁰ Spinoza puts this down to Paul's need to find a language appropriate for the Gentiles. He goes on, "other Apostles preaching to the Jews, who despised philosophy, similarly adapted themselves to the temper of their hearers (see Gal 2.11) and preached a religion free from all philosophical speculations." B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 164 (11:56).

¹¹ B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 159 (11:18-20).

superior to reason was “a mere figment.” As Paul himself suggested, the shortcomings of their worldview would be clear for all to see.

But there is no need to dwell upon such persons. I will merely add that we can only judge of a man by his works. If a man abounds in the fruits of the Spirit, charity, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, chastity, against which, as Paul says (Gal 5:22), there is no law, such an one, whether he be taught by reason only or by the Scripture only, has been in very truth taught by God, and is altogether blessed.¹²

Thus Paul was not only a model of philosophic integrity whose teaching method was superior to those of both Christian and Jewish founding fathers, but also a potent weapon to wield against the contemporary enemies of reason.

Secondly, Paul's universalistic teachings are of great interest and are drawn upon early on in the treatise to demonstrate that God cannot be delimited by any creed or claimed as the property of any one people. Once again, it is Moses, together with his parochial descendents, who is contrasted negatively with Paul. Contemporary Jewish teachers, to whom Spinoza refers as Pharisees, claimed that the divine gift of prophecy or revelation had been given only to the Hebrew nation. To prove this, they pointed to the passage in Exodus where God makes a covenant with them as a result of Moses' petition. After a sideswipe at the Jews as a “rebellious...stiff-necked people” whose “disposition and spirit” provoked Moses' plea for “the special election of the Jews,” Spinoza offers a plain reading of the story to argue that nothing in the text indicated God's refusal to reveal

himself to other nations.¹³ Intriguingly, he admits that Paul seemed to disagree with him.

I confess that in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, I find another text which carries more weight [than Exodus 23 and 34], namely, where Paul seems to teach a different doctrine from that here set down [by Spinoza], for he there says (Rom 3:1): “What advantage then hath the Jew? Or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles [or prophesies] of God.”¹⁴

It is revealing that such is his predilection for Paul that Spinoza is prepared to gloss over this apparent discrepancy as an anomaly. Instead he places greater emphasis on the universalism in Paul's thought and continues by demonstrating how the apostle made no distinction between different peoples when it came to the human condition of sin, consciousness of which accompanied knowledge of the law. And since all mankind experienced this sin, the ‘law’ that accompanied it, and which was also familiar to all, must refer to a universal sense of right and wrong rather than to the Mosaic Law developed by the ancient Hebrews.

But if we look to the doctrine which Paul especially desired to teach, we shall find nothing repugnant to our present contention; on the contrary, his doctrine is the same as ours, for he says (Rom 3:29) “that God is the God of the Jews and of the Gentiles”...Further, in chap. 4 verse 9, he says that all alike, Jew and Gentile, were under sin, and that without commandment and law there is no sin. Wherefore it is most evident that to all men absolutely was revealed the law under which all lived –

¹² B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 80 (5:91-97).

¹³ B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 52-53 (3:73-80).

¹⁴ B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 53 (3:81-82).

namely, the law which has regard only to true virtue, not the law established in respect to, and in the formation of a particular state and adapted to the disposition of a particular people...So that Paul teaches exactly the same as ourselves.¹⁵

Spinoza has no difficulty taking the next step and suggesting that the internal sense of ethical behavior possessed by all peoples was possible precisely because all men could come to know God's laws through rational thought and observation of nature. This idea was an important one to Spinoza (and to later Enlightenment thinkers and deists) and, once again, he chooses to justify it by reference to Paul.

[W]e must by no means pass over the passage in Paul's Epistle to the Romans, 1:20, in which he says: "For the invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse, because, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were they thankful." These words clearly show that everyone can by the light of nature clearly understand the goodness and the eternal divinity of God, and can thence know and deduce what they should seek for and what avoid...¹⁶

And what were the practical implications of such a natural law? For Spinoza, the just society would base its laws on those common ethics that inculcated good relations between men. In a section headed, "It is shown that scripture teaches only very simple doctrines, such as suffice for right conduct," Spinoza drew upon Paul to argue,

¹⁵ B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 53 (3:83-88).

¹⁶ B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 67-68 (4:95-96).

Furthermore, as obedience to God consists solely in love to our neighbor - for whosoever loveth his neighbor, as a means of obeying God, hath, as St. Paul says (Rom. 13:8), fulfilled the law - it follows that no knowledge is commended in the Bible save that which is necessary for enabling all men to obey God in the manner stated, and without which they would become rebellious, or without the discipline of obedience.¹⁷

Thirdly, Spinoza argues that a close reading of Paul's writings suggests the proper approach to the sacred scriptures, the interpretation of which was conventionally regarded as a priestly prerogative. The readiness of the apostle to distinguish between teachings revealed through prophecy and his own teachings demonstrates the need to discern between revelation and other forms of knowledge.¹⁸ Paul himself is capable of making this distinction, and Spinoza is quick to point out that "Paul speaks according to his opinion and [that as a result of human error] in many passages we come across doubtful and perplexed phrase"; he also has no trouble finding examples where the apostle "corrects himself as speaking merely humanly and through the infirmity of the flesh."¹⁹ Using the epistles to suggest that the language of the Bible is a flexible tool adapted in different ways at different times for the purposes of effective communication could, he believed, also lead to a more profound understanding of, amongst other things, the very nature of God.²⁰

¹⁷ B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 176 (13:10).

¹⁸ Spinoza's conviction is that "the Bible leaves reason absolutely free, that it has nothing in common with philosophy, in fact, that Revelation and Philosophy stand on totally different footings." B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 9 (Preface:42).

¹⁹ Spinoza offers 1 Cor 7:25,40; Rm 3:5,28; 6:19; 8:18. B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 40 (2:118), and 157 (11:4).

²⁰ Paul is only one of the New Testament disciples who adapted their message as necessary. "[L]est its novelty should offend men's ears it had

Spinoza's conception of the deity is notoriously problematic, not least for the difficulty in reconciling it with the God of biblical tradition. Whatever the precise meaning Spinoza retained for the term 'God', it was to some extent synonymous with 'nature', a power without a personality, closely related to the universal, deterministic laws of the cosmos. It therefore comes as something of a surprise to find him claiming Paul in support of this idea.

[Paul] never himself seems to wish to speak openly, but, to quote his own words (Rom 3:6, and 6:19), "merely humanly." This he expressly states when he calls God just, and it was doubtless in concession to human weakness that he attributes mercy, grace, anger, and similar qualities to God, adapting his language to the popular mind, or, as he puts it (1 Cor 3:1, 2), to carnal men. In Rom. 9:18, he teaches undisguisedly that God's anger and mercy depend not on the actions of men, but on God's own nature or will... We conclude, therefore, that God is described as a lawgiver or prince, and styled just, merciful, etc., merely in concession to popular understanding, and the imperfection of popular knowledge; that in reality God acts and directs all things simply by the necessity of

to be adapted to the disposition of contemporaries (2 Cor 9:19,20), and built up on the groundwork most familiar and accepted at the time.' B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 163-164 (11:55). Supernatural imagery was one way of accomplishing this, and Paul was by no means the only biblical writer to engage in this kind of language. "[T]he prophets perceived nearly everything in parables and allegories, and clothed spiritual truths in bodily forms, for such is the usual method of imagination. We need no longer wonder that Scripture and the prophets speak so strangely and obscurely of God's Spirit or Mind (cf. Numbers 11:17, 1 Kings 22:21, &c.), that the Lord was seen by Micah as sitting, by Daniel as an old man clothed in white, by Ezekiel as a fire, that the Holy Spirit appeared to those with Christ as a descending dove, to the apostles as fiery tongues, to Paul on his conversion as a great light. All these expressions are plainly in harmony with the current ideas of God and spirits." B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 25 (1:121).

His nature and perfection, and that His decrees and volitions are eternal truths, and always involve necessity.²¹

While other Jewish thinkers might have drawn upon Maimonides,²² here Paul is brought to bear in an argument that the biblical language which endows God with a personality is a necessary evil, a concession to untutored minds, which no philosopher need take seriously. Rather, God appears as something akin to the stuff of the universe, whose nature we glimpse only through the eternal laws and predetermined mechanisms of creation.

According to Spinoza, then, Paul and the biblical authors in general were prone to error, constrained by the conventions of their times, and consciously adapted their language to their specific audiences – to such an extent that the very nature of God had been profoundly misunderstood. In all this, Spinoza implies, the Bible should be read with a willingness to recognize what is authoritative and what is not. He looks forward to the day when this critical approach would free religion from unauthoritative teachings, which he calls superstitions.²³ Ultimately he argues that, for the

²¹ B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 65 (4:73-76).

²² Spinoza was disinclined to draw on Maimonides as a result of the twelfth-century philosopher's attempt to equate Judaism with rationalism. As Feld put it, "The first six chapters of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* are an extended argument with Maimonides: Spinoza many times explicitly indicates that Maimonides is the one who holds the position he is seeking to demolish. It is the Maimonidean identification of Judaism and rationalism which takes the full brunt of his criticism and his argument that prophets are not philosophers is offered to free philosophy from its religious connection." Edward Feld, *Modern Judaism*, 9:1 (1989), 109.

²³ Spinoza believed that "many quarrels and schisms distracted the Church, even in the earliest times, and doubtless they will continue so to distract it for ever, or at least till religion is separated from philosophical speculations, and reduced to a few simple doctrines taught by Christ to his disciples... How blest would our age be if it could witness a religion freed

purposes of a just society based on solid rational foundations, only those biblical teachings that encourage right conduct are necessary.

Of course, Spinoza would have been quite capable of making the arguments outlined above regarding the importance of reason, the universal conception of God, and his proto-biblical-criticism without reference to Paul. Why is it that the apostle featured in such a positive way in the alternative vision of society described in *A Theologico-Political Treatise* – especially considering that Spinoza was forced to overlook those aspects of Pauline theology with which he was at odds? The answer lies in the difficulties of articulating his political theory in the dangerous historical context in which he wrote, a context in which power remained in the hands of Christian authorities. If Spinoza had called for a “universal religion of human reason that transcends the historical differences between the revealed faiths and that can serve as an ethical basis for a free, open and tolerant society,” as has been suggested,²⁴ then this would explain both his apparent anti-Judaism and his apparent high regard for Paul. On the one hand, in order to undermine the authority of revelational religion in general, he had launched a polemical attack on Judaism in particular, ostensibly contrasting Christianity favorably; and yet many of his Christian contemporaries had realized that his criticisms could just as easily be applied to their own faith. On the other hand, Spinoza himself suggested that it was useful to support his arguments from scripture; and certainly, for the majority of his audience who belonged to one Christian

also from all the trammels of superstition.” B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 163-164 (11:56-57).

²⁴ Smith argues persuasively that Spinoza was not denigrating Judaism in order to champion Christianity but was just as concerned to undermine Christianity's claims to revelational authority. S. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*, 105-118, 197.

church or another, it is clear that Paul functioned as a familiar and powerful figure of biblical authority.²⁵ Thus the seventeenth-century marginal Jew made a conscious effort to clothe his arguments in the apparel of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Or, as he once put it,

[L]est its novelty should offend men's ears it had to be adapted to the disposition of contemporaries...built up on the groundwork most familiar and accepted at the time.²⁶

Lev Shestov

While Spinoza had valued Paul for his rationality, the Russian Jewish philosopher and bitter critic of Spinoza, Lev Shestov (1866-1938),²⁷ was attracted to Paul precisely because he regarded him as part of a long-term Judeo-Christian *critique* of western rationality. Although the professor of Russian literature at the University of Paris produced no dedicated study, the apostle is frequently in Shestov's thought, informing his language and reinforcing his arguments throughout a wide selection of his writings.

Shestov's particular brand of existentialist philosophy is notoriously difficult to articulate, not least because language

²⁵ In a discussion about the nature of apostolic authority, Spinoza writes, “If we call reason to our aid we shall clearly see that an authority to teach implies an authority to choose the method. It will nevertheless be, perhaps, more satisfactory to draw all our proofs from Scripture; we are there plainly told that each Apostle chose his particular method...” B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 163 (11:49-50). For the same reason Jesus appears frequently in the *Treatise*, where he is also presented positively as a philosopher.

²⁶ In fact, Spinoza is here describing Paul's own approach. B. Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 163-164 (11:55).

²⁷ Born Yehuda Leyb Schwartzman in Kiev of a wealthy Jewish family, he emigrated to France in 1921 and remained in Paris until his death.

was part of the system that he wanted to critique. Fascinated by paradox and the subjective experience of the individual, he was convinced that the western tradition of rational philosophy was bankrupt. This was because rational thought tries to describe the world in generalizations and unchanging laws that delimit what is and is not possible. Drawing upon European philosophy and literature, with which he was intimately familiar, Shestov tried to show how mankind experienced despair and loss of freedom as the result of having embraced the intellectual restrictions of the scientific worldview. The very attempt to rationalize suppressed the raw experience of lived reality and failed to address the most meaningful questions of individual existence.²⁸ What, then, was the alternative? Shestov eventually came to believe that the biblical tradition best captured the frightening yet liberating insight that everything was possible, that nothing was fixed or certain, and that, ultimately, all was beyond man's control.²⁹ This way of understanding life as potentiality, which he described as 'faith', was 'biblical' in the sense that its God was not the God of the philosophers, the unmoved mover, but rather the capricious God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and of the apostle Paul. Shestov's 'religious existentialism', which is most famously given expression in

²⁸ “[Modern philosophy] sweeps away beauty, good, ambition, tears, laughter, and curses, like dust, like useless refuse, never guessing that it is the most precious thing in life, and that out of this material and this alone, genuine, truly philosophic questions have to be moulded. Thus the prophets questioned, thus the greatest sages of antiquity, thus even the Middle Ages. Now only rare, lonely thinkers comprehend this.” L. Shestov, *In Job's Balances*, II:16

²⁹ “The business of philosophy is to teach man to live in uncertainty - man who is supremely afraid of uncertainty, and who is forever hiding himself behind this or the other dogma. More briefly, the business of philosophy is not to reassure people but to upset them.” Lev Shestov, *Apotheosis of Groundlessness: An Attempt in Adogmatic Thinking* (St. Petersburg: Obshestvennaia Pol'za, 1905), I:11, reprinted in Bernard Martin, ed., *All Things are Possible & Penultimate Words and Other Essays* (Ohio University Press, 1977), trans. S.S. Koteliansky.

In Job's Balances (1929)³⁰ and his magnum opus *Athens and Jerusalem* (1938),³¹ can therefore be understood to combine a radical skepticism with a profound religious sense.³²

Shestov's interest in the Bible began relatively late, after he had left revolutionary Russia for France in the 1920s and two decades since he had first begun his crusade against reason.³³ One commentator has suggested that it was partly

³⁰ Leo Chestov, *In Job's Balances: On the Sources of the Eternal Truths*, trans. Camilla Coventry and C. A. Macartney (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1932). Originally published in Russian (*Annales contemporaines*: Paris, 1929).

³¹ Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, ed. § trans. Bernard Martin (Ohio University Press, 1966). Originally published in French and German *Athènes et Jérusalem; Essai de la philosophie religieuse* (Paris: 1938); *Athen und Jerusalem: Versucht einer religiösen Philosophie* (1938).

³² Shestov's dismantling of all philosophical edifices has been described as “an anguished religious quest, casting away all forms of idealism – indeed, of all moral and epistemological certainty and reassurance – in order to encounter the living God: unpredictable, irrefragible, absurd.” Michael Weingrad, “New Encounters with Shestov” in *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 11:1 (2002), 49.

³³ Initially, there was nothing religious about his existentialism. From early on in his career Shestov had been convinced of the failure of philosophy to provide solace to individuals in despair, illustrating his argument by means of poetic truths penned by Shakespeare, among others. Thus the turbulent experiences of Hamlet and King Lear culminated in increased knowledge of their own inner worlds, he argued, ³³ “[Modern philosophy] sweeps away beauty, good, ambition, tears, laughter, and curses, like dust, like useless refuse, never guessing that it is the most precious thing in life, and that out of this material and this alone, genuine, truly philosophic questions have to be moulded. Thus the prophets questioned, thus the greatest sages of antiquity, thus even the Middle Ages. Now only rare, lonely thinkers comprehend this.” L. Shestov, *In Job's Balances*, II:16

³³ “The business of philosophy is to teach man to live in uncertainty - man who is supremely afraid of uncertainty, and who is forever hiding himself behind this or the other dogma. More briefly, the business of philosophy is not to reassure people but to upset them.” Lev Shestov, *Apotheosis of Groundlessness: An Attempt in Adogmatic Thinking* (St. Petersburg:

to make his philosophy more intelligible to a European audience that the Hebrew Bible began to feature in Shestov's work. In any case, his conception of biblical faith emerged as a positive compliment to his negative evaluation of logical positivism. A non-practicing Jew who eschewed orthodox tradition, Shestov was wary of institutional religion and collective religious experience. In his Bible, which appeared to consist primarily of Genesis and some of the prophetic writings, Shestov found a powerful precedent for his idea, for the ancient texts told of various individuals' direct experience of a living God whose sovereign rule over

Obshestvennaia Pol'za, 1905), I:11, reprinted in Bernard Martin, ed., *All Things are Possible & Penultimate Words and Other Essays* (Ohio University Press, 1977), trans. S.S. Koteliansky.

³³ Leo Chestov, *In Job's Balances: On the Sources of the Eternal Truths*, trans. Camilla Coventry and C. A. Macartney (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1932). Originally published in Russian (*Annales contemporaines*: Paris, 1929).

³³ Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, ed. § trans. Bernard Martin (Ohio University Press, 1966). Originally published in French and German (*Athènes et Jérusalem; Essai de la philosophie religieuse* (Paris: 1938); *Athen und Jerusalem: Versucht einer religiösen Philosophie* (1938)).

³³ Shestov's dismantling of all philosophical edifices has been described as "an anguished religious quest, casting away all forms of idealism – indeed, of all moral and epistemological certainty and reassurance – in order to encounter the living God: unpredictable, irrefragible, absurd." Michael Weingrad, "New Encounters with Shestov" in *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 11:1 (2002), 49.

³³ Initially, there was nothing religious about his existentialism. From early on in his career Shestov had been convinced of the failure of philosophy to provide solace to individuals in despair, illustrating his argument by means of poetic truths penned by Shakespeare, among others. Thus the turbulent experiences of Hamlet and King Lear a knowledge that shared next to nothing with the world as described by rationalists. This experience of the individual, Shestov maintained, was frequently of greater import than the abstract logic of philosophy, even though the tendency was to set it aside as inferior. For an account of the evolution of Shestov's thought, see Brian Horowitz, "The Tension of Athens and Jerusalem in the Philosophy of Lev Shestov" in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 43:1 (Spring 1999).

existence appeared to them as arbitrary as it was absolute. Nor was the insight of the Hebrews limited to the Old Testament. The New Testament could, in this very important sense, be regarded as one with the Old, and this explains how Shestov came to see the Apostle to the Gentiles as part of a Jewish biblical tradition that questioned worldly wisdom.³⁴

As far as Shestov is concerned, Paul's message was "true Jewish thinking"³⁵ and the man himself a visionary whose teachings should be read alongside those of the Hebrew prophets themselves.³⁶ Indeed, Shestov regards the apostle as an astute interpreter of older biblical insights. He is particularly keen to stress how Paul confronted the

³⁴ "The Bible remains the book of books, the eternal book. It would be no loss to exchange the theological literature of a whole generation of later epochs against a single Epistle of St. Paul or a chapter from Isaiah." L. Shestov, *In Job's Balances*, II:7. "In the Letter to the Romans the apostle repeats the same thing and even more strongly: 'For what does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'" (Romans 4:3). The whole Bible – the Old and the New Testament – is supported by this kind of a justification, and most of the letters of the apostle Paul speak of this truth that is incomprehensible and goes contrary to all the habits of our thinking, a truth that revealed itself many thousands of years ago to a small, half-wild people." L. Shestov, *Speculation and Revelation*, 5.

³⁵ In a conversation with his disciple Benjamin Fondane (26 July 1928), Shestov mused, "I think that Hitler really has a lot of intuition – he hates St Paul: it's true Jewish thinking." When Fondane asked him whether "Paul had betrayed the spirit of the Bible when he opened to the Gentiles the privileges of the chosen people? Didn't God say: 'I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated?'" Shestov answered "Of course! And yet...in the beginning there was no such thing as Jews and non-Jews..." "Entretiens avec Leon Chestov" in Nathalie Baranoff and Michel Carassou, eds., *Rencontres avec Leon Chestov* (Paris: Plasma, 1982). Elsewhere he described Paul ironically as "an ignorant Jew" (L. Shestov, *Potestas Clavium*, preface) and affectionately as "an old Jew" (L. Shestov, *In Job's Balances*, II:5:33).

³⁶ "The prophet Isaiah and St. Paul have warned us that human wisdom is foolishness before God and that God's wisdom is foolishness in the eyes of men." L. Shestov, *In Job's Balances*, III:5.

philosophy of his own day, drawing heavily upon Isaiah and Jeremiah.³⁷ For example,

St. Paul says: Isaiah dared to say: "I was found by those who did not seek me, I manifested myself to those who did not inquire after me." How can one accept such audacious words? God, God Himself violates the supreme law of justice: He manifests Himself to those who do not inquire after Him, He is found by those who do not seek Him. Can one then exchange the God of the philosophers, the single, immaterial truth, for such a God as this?³⁸

Likewise, the story of Abraham, which Shestov himself adapts as an allegory for the philosopher's journey,³⁹ was of tremendous significance to Paul, who referred to it repeatedly in his attempt to confound the wisdom of the Greeks with the vital reality of the life of faith.

It would be too easy to multiply quotations to prove that what St. Paul said of Abraham, who went he knew not where, would have appeared to the Greek thinkers the height of folly. And even if Abraham had arrived at the

³⁷ "The basic motif of Paul in all of his letters is as follows: 'But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise' (I Cor, 1:27). He constantly cites the most enigmatic and mysterious sayings of the prophets, and the more audacious the prophet the more joyfully does the apostle welcome him. 'Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord"' (I Cor, 1:31), he repeats after Jer 9:24. And after Is 64:4: 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him' (I Cor, 2:9). I could write out quotations from the letters of Paul endlessly but, indeed, there is no need for this; all know them without me." L. Shestov, *Speculation and Revelation*, 5.

³⁸ L. Shestov, *In Job's Balances*, III:7.

³⁹ "St. Paul says that when Abraham went to the Promised Land he departed without knowing where he was going. This signifies that only he attains the Promised Land who takes no account of knowledge, who is free of knowledge and of its truths: where he arrives will be the Promised Land." L. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, II:14.

Promised Land, his act, in the judgment of the Greeks, would have been as absurd as if he had not arrived anywhere. What vitiates his act, in their eyes, is precisely what confers its immense value upon it, according to the apostle [Paul] and the Bible: Abraham does not ask reason, he refuses to admit the legitimacy of the pretensions of knowledge...What strikes and charms the apostle [Paul] in Abraham, what he sees in him as the highest virtue, appears to Plato as a truly criminal frivolity. How indignant he and Socrates would have been if it had been given them to read what St. Paul writes in the Epistle to the Romans: "For what saith the Scripture? 'Abraham believed God and this was imputed unto him for righteousness.'" (Rom 4:3)⁴⁰

The still more ancient story of the tree of knowledge was another example from the Hebrew Bible that Shestov found to be in accordance with both his own and St. Paul's teachings.⁴¹ Fired by his all-consuming philosophical agenda, Shestov could not but see the same truth repeated a thousand times – and what difference did it make whether one read it in the story of the Fall or in an epistle from the Apostle to the Gentiles? Ultimately, knowledge, death, sin

⁴⁰ L. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, III:6.

⁴¹ "But 'knowledge' and 'works' - if one accepts the mysterious Biblical legend [of the Fall] - were precisely the source of all evil upon earth. - One must redeem oneself in other wise, through 'faith' as St. Paul teaches, through faith alone, i.e. through a spiritual exertion of quite peculiar nature, which we describe as 'audacity.' Only when we have forgotten the 'laws' which bind us so fast to the limited existence, can we raise ourselves up above human truths and human good. To raise himself man must lose the ground under his feet." L. Shestov, *In Job's Balances*, II:7. "Faith, in the prophets and apostles, is the source of life; faith, in the philosophers of the Middle Ages educated by the Greeks, is the source of the knowledge that understands. How can one not recall in this connection the two trees planted by God in the Garden of Eden?" L. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, III:6.

and the law were all terms relating to the same phenomenon. As he explained,

The knowledge of good and evil, as well as of shame, came to [man] only after he had tasted the fruits of the forbidden tree. This is incomprehensible to us, just as we do not understand how these fruits could bring him death. And relying on the infallibility of our reason, we wish with all our powers that the mind should be dormant in the man who does not know the difference between good and evil. But the Bible does not say this. The Bible says, on the contrary, that all the misfortunes of man come from knowledge. This is also the meaning of the words of St. Paul...‘all that does not come of faith is sin.’ In its very essence knowledge, according to the Bible, excludes faith and is the sin par excellence or the original sin.⁴²

From this we see that, at the same time as viewing Paul as a faithful transmitter of the core teachings of the ancient Hebrews, Shestov readily acknowledged that the author of the epistles offered him a new vocabulary with which to communicate his idea. Indeed, he believed that Paul’s abrogation of the Law had become one of the classic expressions of a tradition of anti-rationalist thought.⁴³ Thus, when the apostle had exclaimed “The law entered that offence might abound” (Rm 5:20) what he had meant was

⁴² L. Shestov, *In Job’s Balances*, II:14.

⁴³ Shestov identified this tradition with a Christian antinomian one. “There is a tradition of thought, or a question, that has run back from St. Augustine, and past St. Augustine to St. Paul, past St. Paul to what Paul found in certain passages of Isaiah, and in the Biblical story of the Fall. The same question which had confronted Luther a century earlier, presents itself to Pascal: Whence does salvation come to man? From his works, that is to say, from his submission to eternal laws; or from a mysterious force which, in the no less mysterious language of the theologians, is called the Grace of God?” L. Shestov, *In Job’s Balances*, III:7.

that the Law was “a hammer in God’s hands, that he may break man’s assurance that living beings are ruled by eternal, immaterial, and sovereign principles.”⁴⁴ Shestov was also very quick to adopt Paul’s language for his own purposes more generally: to speak of ‘grace’ as the only hope,⁴⁵ to warn against the eternal threat of rationality as “the enemy [who] is alert, skilful, cruel and watchful,”⁴⁶ and to recognize that even though one might “understand all mysteries, and [have] all knowledge...[yet] knowledge, it shall vanish away.”⁴⁷ And so Shestov takes the remarkable position as a Jew and as a philosopher that Paul’s emphasis on faith (so often contrasted negatively with rationality or knowledge) is the correct one, and that his teachings concerning freedom from the ‘law’ (here understood as immaterial and eternal truths to which one subjugates oneself) could be counted amongst mankind’s most important insights into the nature of existence.

⁴⁴ L. Shestov, *In Job’s Balances*, III:8.

⁴⁵ “Augustine, quoting St. Paul and the prophet Isaiah, spoke of grace.” L. Shestov, *In Job’s Balances*, II:4:28.

⁴⁶ Here Shestov actually paraphrases Peter’s admonition (1 Pt 5:8), mistakenly thinking it to be Paul’s: “the last warning of an old Jew, the Apostle Paul, in whose name they were speaking. The enemy is alert, skilful, cruel and watchful. If one yields to him all is over.” L. Shestov, *In Job’s Balances*, II:5:33.

⁴⁷ “Arithmetic has power only in the ‘ideal’ world subject to man, chiefly and perhaps even exclusively because this world was created by man himself and consequently obeys its author. But in the real world a different hierarchy prevails: there that which in the ideal world is smaller is ‘greater.’ The laws in general are different there; it may even be that there cannot be any question of laws there, that one wishes to know nothing about our laws there. St. Paul teaches: ‘Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing...Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away’ (I Cor. 13).” L. Shestov, *Potestas Clavium*, preface.

Furthermore, Shestov employed Paul's own life-story to support his privileging of individual experience over abstract philosophy and to show how certain assumptions (or 'theory') could blind mankind to the deeper truths of inner knowledge (or 'facts'), which were too often discounted as unreal. History, he argued, "agrees to admit only what is important for a large number of people." St. Paul's revelatory experience on the road to Damascus held an honored place in history precisely because "St. Paul was always persuaded that he had really seen the Christ," because he had managed to persuade people to believe his account, and because he was concerned to have the memory of his vision preserved. But what of the many others down through the centuries who had been less persuasive, or who, unlike Paul, had come to doubt their own experiences? Posterity had forgotten them. Shestov believed that Paul would have agreed with him that "the *theory* of fact hides from men the most important realm of being, and that those facts which theory does not admit are precisely the most precious and the most significant."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ L. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, IV:4:38. Earlier he explained, "We have no right to reject an unusual experience, even though it does not agree with our *a priori* notions. I have already shown that Nietzsche underwent a similar experience, and from it he derived the idea of his 'beyond good and evil,' which is simply a modernized translation of Luther's *sola fide*. And unless we are much mistaken, St. Paul's vision on the road to Damascus was another instance of the same thing. To St. Paul, who was persecuting Christ in the name of the 'law,' it became suddenly clear that 'the law entered that the offence might abound'...Oh, how precious are these 'sudden' findings, and how little does philosophy know how to make use of them, thanks to its traditional methods and its fear of the irrational 'ego'! It is difficult to realize the shock that a man experiences when he makes such a 'discovery,' and still harder to understand how he can go on living." L. Shestov, *In Job's Balances*, III:7.

Insofar as the apostle added credibility to Shestov's lifelong rage against reason,⁴⁹ Paul was also useful in attacking Shestov's opponents, both ancient and modern. The Greeks would have despised the ignorance of those, like Paul, who privileged faith over reason. As Shestov put it,

The Greek wisdom could admit neither Abraham, the father of faith, nor St. Paul, nor the prophets of the Bible to whom the apostle constantly refers. The indifference, the 'proud' scorn of knowledge, would be pardoned neither in this world nor in the other. St. Paul and his Abraham are only pitiful 'haters of reason,' who must be fled like the plague.⁵⁰

Part of the reason for the hostility of their heirs towards Paul lies in the diametrically opposed views of how salvation is to be achieved. Traditionally, Paul's faith had been set in contrast to works-righteousness, but the real dichotomy is between faith and knowledge.

For the Greek philosophy...believed that knowledge was the only way to salvation: "To him who has not philosophized, who has not purified himself through philosophy and who has not loved knowledge, it is not given to unite himself with the race of the gods." If

⁴⁹ Camus described Shestov's writings, obsessed as they are with his one idea, as "wonderfully monotonous." Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, New York, 1955, Vintage Books (originally published in France in 1942 by Librairie Gallimard), 19. Against the charge that he misrepresented the views of ancient authorities so as to strengthen his own position, Shestov freely admitted another might criticize his choice of texts as highly selective, over-emphasizing the accidental or throw-away comment. "But the goal of these reflections," he insisted, "consists precisely in seizing and saving from oblivion the 'accidental'." L. Shestov, *Potestas Clavium*, Preface.

⁵⁰ L. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, III:6.

Abraham and St. Paul are not ‘thinkers,’ if they do not love and seek knowledge, they will never obtain salvation. The Greeks knew this well and they would never have agreed to grant anyone the right to raise and resolve the question of knowledge and the salvation of the soul: Aristotle has told us that philosophy itself resolves all questions.⁵¹

Thus Paul’s arrogant declaration that “All that does not come of faith is sin” (Rm 14:23) sets him forever at enmity with the classical philosopher, who cannot accept the terrible idea that a lifetime of rational speculation was a lifetime wasted. Shestov delights in acknowledging that “most of the ideas that [Paul] develops in his epistles and the quotations from the Old Testament with which his reflections are interspersed can awaken in educated people only feelings of irritation and revulsion.”⁵² Significantly, Shestov developed his diatribe to include the attempt by theologians to reconcile faith with reason.⁵³ Thus the apostle could be held up as a corrective to the pursuits of the giants of modern theological rationalism, including amongst others, Spinoza.

The fundamental opposition of biblical philosophy to speculative philosophy shows itself in particularly striking fashion when we set...Spinoza’s “to rejoice in true

contemplation” opposite St. Paul’s words, “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” [For the] precondition of...Spinoza’s ‘true contemplation’ is the willingness of the man ‘who knows’ to renounce God’s ‘blessing’ [i.e. God’s sovereign, arbitrary control] by virtue of which the world and everything that is in the world were destined for man’s use.⁵⁴

Strictly speaking, Paul’s theology is not a necessary element in Shestov’s philosophical program. Undoubtedly, one reason he features so prominently is because Shestov, like Spinoza, recognizes the moral authority of Paul within the wider Christian society and his usefulness as a common frame of reference. From this point of view, the Russian philosopher’s apparent lack of compunction only supports those commentators who have questioned his Jewish authenticity.⁵⁵ And yet, Shestov’s interest in the tyrannical

⁵⁴ L. Shestov, *In Job’s Balances*, Forward 2.

⁵⁵ “While the heroes and stories of the bible captivated Shestov, it is clear that the actual religion left him less enthusiastic. He did not reflect on the laws and rituals of Judaism, the institution of the rabbinate and ignored the history of the Jewish people and the problems of ‘chosenness.’ In short, he accepted only those aspects consistent with his teaching: the miracles of the Bible and the individual images of stubborn allegiance to God... By accepting both Judaism and Christianity, he maintains allegiance to the religion of his birth, yet was simultaneously free to employ Christianity’s spiritual wealth.” Brian Horowitz, “The Tension of Athens and Jerusalem in the Philosophy of Lev Shestov” in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 43:1 (Spring 1999): 168-169. “He cared too much for inwardness, for inner experience as an access to salvation, to rest within what was orthodox in Judaism. At the same time he was too dismayed with the Logos of the Fourth Gospel, too smitten with love for the Old Testament God, with all his arbitrary caprice, to have other than short shrift for conventional or churchly Christianity. Yet Shestov was both a Jew and a Christian; and for him the fundamental antinomies were not between the Old and New Testament, or even between religion and atheism, but rather, as the titles of his last two books clearly state, between *Speculation and Revelation*, and *Athens and Jerusalem* (1938).” Sidney Monas, “Shestov, Lev” in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1972).

⁵¹ L. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, III:6.

⁵² “What good, then, is Plato’s *catharsis*, the Stoics’ struggle, the monks’ *exercitia spiritualia*, and the rigorous *itineraria* of the martyrs, ascetics and mystics? Will all these tremendous, superhuman and glorious works then have served for nothing? Is it possible to ‘defend,’ through rational arguments, the God of the Bible against these accusations that are so well founded on rational thought? Obviously not.” L. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, II.

⁵³ To subject revelation to the judgment of reason is folly or, as he put it, “even Moses himself could speak face to face with God only as long as he held to the heights of Sinai; as soon as he descended into the valley the truth that had been revealed to him was transformed into law.” L. Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, II:10.

rule of rationality down through the centuries did make the apostle important in one special sense. Since Paul (and readings of Paul by men such as Augustine and Luther) continued to shape western civilization, the correct reading of the epistles really mattered. If his theology had actually been more radical than was commonly understood, if he had not simply offered a critique of Judaism or of legalism but had in fact sought to bring the counter-cultural message of the ancient Hebrews to those living in his own day, just as Shestov himself was attempting to do in contemporary terms, then there would be profound, if not revolutionary, implications for society. After all, in contemporary terms, the message was that the very scaffold upon which western theology and philosophy had been hung was rotten to the core. Of course, it was precisely because Shestov interpreted Paul's abrogation of the Law as a critique of the high value placed on reason that his warning cry to European civilization was entirely the reverse of Spinoza's. The seventeenth-century philosopher had painted a political vision of a better society, a world where a rational apostle set the example and where one might collectively challenge the authority of those who would control by way of superstition. For Shestov, Paul is rather one of the enlightened few who grasps the absurdity of such a vision, and who gives the lie to the claim that there is a rational basis to faith. In terms of social activism, however, Shestov appears impotent beside Spinoza. He cannot use Paul to offer a constructive blueprint for action, other than to point the individual inwards on a quest to confront the mystery, unintelligibility, and seeming injustice of the divine will. In time, an even more systematic negative political theology would be offered, again justified by reference to Pauline thought.

Jacob Taubes

The Viennese-born Jewish philosopher of religion, Jacob Taubes (1923-1987), was professor of Judaism and Hermeneutics at the Free University of Berlin. While a trained-rabbi and a self-proclaimed 'arch-Jew',⁵⁶ he was also deeply interested in marginality and limits, and described himself as living an "uneasy Ahasueric lifestyle at the borderline between Jewish and Christian, at which things get so hot that one can only [get] burn[ed]."⁵⁷ His academic career was concerned with religio-philosophical issues such as the theological legitimization of political authority and modern conceptions of apocalyptic thought, both of which informed his treatment of the apostle Paul.⁵⁸ In Heidelberg in 1987, a few weeks before he died of cancer, he gave a series of lectures on Paul that he described as his spiritual testament.⁵⁹ The result was a carefully edited work of oral

⁵⁶ Letter from Jacob Taubes to Carl Schmitt (18 September 1979), reproduced in Appendix B of J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 110.

⁵⁷ Cited by Aleida Assmann in J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 143. Ahasuerus was one of the names given to the Wandering Jew of medieval legend, who mocked Christ on route to the crucifixion and, as a result, was condemned by God to exile until the Second Coming.

⁵⁸ Key influences on his thought were his teacher and German-Jewish historian of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), the German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and German Catholic political theorist Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). Taubes was dependent on Scholem for his understanding of Sabbatianism and kabbalah; he concurred with Benjamin's pessimistic view of time as moving towards a cataclysmic ending and the call to act ethically in whatever time remains; and he agreed with Schmitt that all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts, although he disagreed as to the precise nature and implications of this special relationship.

⁵⁹ "Taubes did not understand his works on Paul as an academic obligation or exercise. He regarded them as an account of what lay at the

testimony that was published as *The Political Theology of Paul* in 1993.⁶⁰

Whatever his own philosophical agenda, Taubes was explicit that he wanted to approach Paul from a Jewish perspective,⁶¹ and sees himself contributing to a liberal Jewish interpretative tradition.⁶² This tradition had taken a dim view of the Apostle to the Gentiles in the past, in sharp contrast to the generally positive appreciation of his master, Jesus. As Taubes puts it, a Jewish reclamation of Paul is “a borderline that’s hard to cross.”⁶³ He is generally suspicious

centre of what unsettled him intellectually.” Preface by Aleida Assmann in J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, xiii.

⁶⁰ The four lectures were held at the Protestant Institute for Interdisciplinary Research (FEST) in Heidelberg, 23-27 February, 1987 and originally published in German (based on the audio recordings of Aleida Assmann) as Jacob Taubes, *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1993). The English edition is Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, ed. Aleida and Jan Assmann, trans. Dana Hollander (California: Stanford University Press, 2004). Despite the editors’ best efforts, one commentator has observed of the book: “[T]he tone – by turns confiding, anecdotal, and trenchantly judgemental – and the form – digressions, understatement, circular thought, incomplete demonstrations – are both bewildering.” Alain Gignac, “Taubes, Badiou, Agamben: Reception of Non-Christian Philosophers Today,” *Society of Biblical Literature* 2002, section 2.1. The Afterword in the English edition by Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, Aleida and Jan Assman (115-142), which provides an overview and commentary on the text, has proven to be an indispensable guide for making sense of Taubes’ highly idiosyncratic lectures in the presentation offered here.

⁶¹ “In the course of this lecture I want to try to convey to you why Paul concerns me as a Jew...” J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 4.

⁶² Taubes is dismissive of Klausner and Schoeps, complimentary about Baeck and Flusser, and interested to engage with Buber and Freud. J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 5-11, 136-138.

⁶³ “Of course I’m not speaking *ex nihilo* here [in this lecture]. This means that I still owe you a scholarly answer to the question of what tradition of Jewish religious history I stand within. Now it happens that the Jewish study of Paul is in a very sad state. There is a literary corpus about Jesus, a nice guy, about the rabbi in Galilee, and about the Sermon on the

of the motives of those who had written before him, and is keen to distance himself from any interest in improving Jewish-Christian understanding.⁶⁴ What appeals to Taubes is the possibility of reclaiming certain patterns of thought for Judaism that had become associated with Christianity in general and Pauline theology in particular. But before exploring these matters, he wanted to properly categorize the apostle.⁶⁵ For Taubes, the matter is clear: Paul had been an authentic Jew. As he explains,

[The reason why] little Jacob Taubes comes along and enters into the business of gathering the heretic [Paul] back into the fold, [is] because I regard him – this is my own personal business – as more Jewish than any Reform rabbi or any Liberal rabbi, I ever heard in Germany, England, America, Switzerland or anywhere.⁶⁶

Taubes feels a strong sense of familiarity with Paul, ‘a diaspora Jew’ who reminds him of the cocky, aggressive

Mount; it’s all in the Talmud and so on...This apologetic literature proliferated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and there is a consensus in Liberal Judaism (not in Orthodox Judaism, which hasn’t moved an inch), that is, a sort of pride in this son of Israel. But when it comes to Paul, that’s a borderline that’s hard to cross.” J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 6.

⁶⁴ “[T]o the present day...nothing has changed, and all of this blahblah about Jewish-Christian understanding is not worth mentioning – the world is divided into Jews and Gentiles. That there are Christians is something that has not entered [the Jewish] consciousness, so to speak. Whoever tells you anything different is an interested party. That’s how it is.” J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 20.

⁶⁵ “Names are not sound and smoke, but word and fire, and it is to names that one must be true.” Cited by Aleida Assmann in J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 143.

⁶⁶ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 11.

Jewish American college students he had seen in Israel.⁶⁷ The apostle's Jewishness means that Taubes believes he can understand the epistles better than non-Jews,⁶⁸ but Paul's was a special kind of Jewishness, and one with exciting potential for any philosopher interested in marginal identity. As Taubes sees it, Paul had lived and worked in a unique atmosphere, one in which the conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians was still raging and in which the political and economic relationships within the mixed congregations was very different from the situation pertaining after the destruction of the Temple, when he believes that the spirit of the Jewish-Christians had been broken. Thus Paul had inhabited a world where what was 'Jewish' and what was 'Christian' had not yet been decided.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ "I am inclined to assume that Paul was a diaspora Jew. Whether his family originated in Palestine, whether he belongs to the tribe of Benjamin – he says he belongs. If he comes from the Galilean tradition, then it makes a lot of sense to me that he also calls himself a 'zealot'. Someone with zeal for the law...If you go to Israel [today] and look...then you will notice that there is a whole zealot group of American college boys...who are cocky [*frech*], like any American, and, on top of that, aggressive when they want to accomplish something. Anyway, this type of zealot diaspora Jew who is to the core holier than thou, that is, who wants to outdo the normal level of piety, this is what we have before our eyes today, so to speak. You can just smell it...That's the type he was. A diaspora Jew, but nevertheless sent by the family to Jerusalem." J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 25-26.

⁶⁸ Taubes reports as evidence a conversation he once had with the Germanist and Greek scholar Emil Staiger: "You know, Taubes, yesterday I was reading the Letters of the Apostle Paul. To which, he added, with great bitterness: but that isn't Greek, it's Yiddish! Upon which I said: Yes, Professor, and that's why I understand it!" J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 3-4.

⁶⁹ "During the time of Paul...the political balances and the economic balances were different...[The Roman congregation] is a mixed congregation, and the conflicts within it are between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians...The whole question of commensality, of the common table, these are very concrete problems. Does one eat together? Does one sleep together? Is this a congregation or is this not a congregation?"

To accomplish his reclamation, Taubes needed to undermine the Christian image of Paul. Rather than emphasize the *conversion* of Paul (from Judaism to Christianity), whereby Paul's faith is understood in terms of freedom from the Law, he stresses the *calling* of Paul (in-line with other Jewish prophets). Starting with Rm 1:1, in which Paul introduces himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle," Taubes argues,

So what we have here is not a conversion but a calling. Whoever looks at what Galatians 1:15 says about what is commonly called the conversion, the Damascus [Road] experience, knows that what is being talked about here is not conversion but a calling, and that this is done in the language and the style of Jeremiah [1:5 'Before I created you in the womb, I selected you. Before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet concerning the nations.'].... And this is how Paul sees himself called to be an apostle – one has always to add this, otherwise one misses what is essential – from the Jews to the Gentiles.⁷⁰

So, while Paul was undoubtedly a Jew, he was a Jew with a very special mission. What precisely had this mission entailed? Taubes reads Rm 9-11 as Paul's declaration that,

That wasn't as simple as it seems now. After 70 it was all smooth sailing... With that [the destruction of the Temple, interpreted as divine punishment] the will of the Jewish Christian congregation is broken by both the Jews and the Gentile Christians. What is exciting about Paul is that we are just *before this turning point*, and the balances are totally different...[T]he word 'Christian' – this I ask you to get into your heads – doesn't yet exist for Paul. One mustn't be cleverer than the author and impute to him concepts that he doesn't have and doesn't want to have." J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 20-21.

⁷⁰ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 13-14.

like Moses, he was the founder of a new people and the representative of a new Law.⁷¹

For Paul, the task at hand is the *establishment and legitimation of a new people of God*. This doesn't seem very dramatic to you, after two thousand years of Christianity. But it is the most dramatic process imaginable in a Jewish soul.⁷²

The letter of Romans can only be understood, suggests Taubes, if it is read alongside Ex 32, for always in Paul's mind is the story of Moses. God's anger at the rejection of his messiah had mirrored God's anger at the rejection of the Law and the worship of the Golden Calf. Moses and Paul had both been with Israel at the awful moment when relations had hung in the balance; but while Moses had been able to change God's mind, to convince Him to adhere to the original covenant, and had rejected the idea of founding a new people,⁷³ Paul had become the anti-Moses who took responsibility for the new foundation or covenant of the people of God. "The crux of the thing," Taubes continues,

lies in the fact that Paul faced the same problem as Moses. The people has sinned. It has rejected the Messiah that has come to it. It is only from this, after all, that the calling of Paul results, as it says in Galatians... All of what I have said appears to me to be necessary in order to understand just what Paul means when he says

⁷¹ Taubes relates a story of how he was summoned to Plettenberg in the autumn of 1979 to talk with Carl Schmitt about Romans and generated his idea of Moses who, twice, "refused the idea that with him begins a new people and that the people of Israel should be eliminated – and of Paul who accepts the idea." According to the story, Schmitt had said, "Taubes, before you die, you must tell some people about this." J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 2-3.

⁷² J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 28.

⁷³ Taubes cites Ex 32-34 and Nm 14-15.

he wants to be accursed by Christ. These are not rhetorical flourishes, but rather the [expression of] devastation about the people of God no longer being the people of God.⁷⁴

In offering further support for the idea that Paul had sought to create a new people, Taubes directed his attention to the Pauline reduction of Jesus' dual commandment (which had already reduced the 613 commandments to two, love of God and love of neighbor) to the single commandment, love of neighbor.

No dual commandment but one commandment. I regard this as an absolutely revolutionary act...[Jesus' dual commandment] belongs to the primordial core of Jesus's Christian tradition. And that Paul couldn't have missed.⁷⁵

Why had Paul done this? It made good sense, Taubes suggests, if Paul had been concerned not with the individual so much as the new community he had founded and the need to integrate Jews and Gentiles within it. Nevertheless, Taubes is insistent that Paul's vision of a new people had not negated his sense of belonging to the old people and that it was this loyalty that accounted for his heartfelt pain and readiness to suffer for their sake as a scapegoat that might neutralize God's anger (just as Moses had done for Israel's salvation). For Taubes' Paul, the enmity of God for the Jews (for their rejection of the messiah) had been part of an ancient love story and certainly had not implied the rejection of the Jews for the sake of the Gentiles. The election of the Gentiles had been a chapter in this story, whereby God had attempted to draw back his people to him.

⁷⁴ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 37-38.

⁷⁵ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 53.

The whole business about going to the Gentiles turns out in this context to be a scene of jealousy in order to make the Jews, to whom this message is directed, jealous. I didn't invent that; it says so in the text. Because he doesn't want to cast away the people, but to make them jealous.⁷⁶

In any case, what most interested Taubes in Paul's opening up of the Covenant to the Gentiles was the authority he claimed for the consequent creation of a new community. In Paul's day, he observes, there had been only two models of human relations: the ethnic community, such as the people of Israel, and the Imperial Order of the Roman Empire. Paul is understood to have offered a third option, which he had defined against both. Thus the Epistle to the Romans relativizes Rome's world imperialism with the messiah's claim to world dominance, and at the same time challenges Israel's self-understanding by asserting the New Israel's independence of Law (*nomos*) and peoplehood (*ethnos*). As Taubes put it elsewhere,

I read the Epistle to the Romans as a legitimation and formation of a new social union-covenant, of the developing ecclesia against the Roman Empire, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of the ethnic unity of the Jewish people.⁷⁷

His image of Paul was of a revolutionary thinker who, having rejected all political and ethnic conceptions of identity, went on to disregard any authority that defined itself in these terms. And this is the context in which he offers another

⁷⁶ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 50.

⁷⁷ This is from a course description of a lecture course "On the Political Theology of Paul" (1986), cited in J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, Afterword by Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, Alieda and Jan Assman, 117.

corrective to Christian traditional interpretation, this time regarding the Law.

For Taubes, it is important to jettison the traditional dichotomy of Law and works-righteousness, and to acknowledge the error of regarding Pauline theology as, essentially, a critique of the Torah or Jewish religious law. Instead, he believes that the "nomos" or "law" that Paul had condemned should actually be understood as referring to the "Hellenistic theology of the sovereign." In stark contrast with other interpretations of what Paul had meant by the Law,⁷⁸ Taubes maintains that Paul's critique of the Law represents a negation of the use of law *per se* – whether imperial or theocratic⁷⁹ – as a force of political order: for the apostle, legitimacy is denied to *all* sovereigns of the world. As Taubes puts it, "It isn't *nomos* but rather the one nailed to the cross by *nomos* who is the emperor!"⁸⁰ Taubes' Paul offers, then, a "negative political theology" in that he offers no *political* alternative in his program to undermine the law as a power to dominate; and this, says Taubes, has important implications for those interested in using Paul for their political theologies, for while many oppressed groups might identify with his revolutionary objectives, they could not claim the authority of Paul for the new political orders for which they called.

⁷⁸ Taubes takes exception to Bultmann's assertion that Paul shares in the same kind of universality found elsewhere in the Jewish-Hellenistic world, so that his concept of the law incorporates the Torah, the law of the universe, and natural law. J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 24.

⁷⁹ Paul goes beyond the Zealots who only deny the legitimacy of Roman Imperial law, and who hope for a new national form of rule, a theocratic law. In this context, Taubes praises Bruno Bauer who was the first to recognize in *Christ and the Caesars* (1877) that "Christian literature is a literature of protest against the flourishing cult of the emperor." J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 16.

⁸⁰ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 24.

In offering this unusual interpretation of Paul's view of the Law, Taubes not only tried to develop a political-theological critique of the foundations of legal authority, but also to build a case for the categorization of anti-nomism as a legitimately *Jewish* enterprise. Judaism and Christianity have traditionally been stereotyped as two different approaches to religion: one is said to exemplify "reconciliation by ritualization" or ritualistic religiosity, whereby obedience to the law is prized above all else; the other exemplifies "redemption by liberation" or spiritual religiosity, whereby freedom from the law is regarded as the key. And yet, historically, both approaches have each had proponents within the two religious systems. Taubes' original contribution was to focus on "redemption by liberation" in the *Jewish* context, for which he held up Paul as his Jewish champion. (Traditionally, of course, Paul had been regarded as the *Christian* exemplar of "liberation" from the Law). For Taubes, Paul's critique of the law had *not* been a Christian polemic against Judaism or Jewish Law or Torah, but rather one of a series of Jewish attempts to find freedom from the law itself.⁸¹ Another controversial example he gives is the seventeenth-century self-proclaimed messiah Sabbatai Zvi.

The story of Sabbatai Zvi (1626-1676?) and his apostle Nathan of Gaza (1643-1680) provided Taubes with the evidence he needed to justify his categorization of Paul's anti-nomian theology as authentically Jewish. After all, both Nathan and Paul had been concerned to answer a profoundly Jewish question, namely, how does one rationalize the apparent failure of the messiah?⁸² In

⁸¹ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, afterward by Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, Alieda and Jan Assman, 116-117.

⁸² "If there is something like a catalogue of Jewish virtues, and there is such a thing, then the word *emunah* [faith] plays a very subordinate role. That is, if you read the moral literature of the Talmud or of thirteenth-century Spain or of the fifteenth-century... if you read this moral literature, then [it's true that] you will also find, among the wide variety of virtues they

comparing what he called the 'messianic logic' of the two theologians, Taubes hoped to demolish the common view of Paul's conception of faith and his attitude towards the Torah as evidence of his non-Jewish or Christian character. Basing himself heavily on his friend Gershom Scholem's work, Taubes explains that Lurianic *kabbalah* teaches that every Jew partakes of the restoration (*tikkun*) of creation by means of the "progressive separation of good from evil" accomplished through "performance of the commandments of the Torah."⁸³ Nathan of Gaza had replaced the redeeming function of the "works of the Law" (which had been assumed by Luria) with legitimation by means of "pure faith" in the messiah. Just as Paul had written "The righteous shall live by his faith."⁸⁴ so Nathan had exclaimed "He whose soul is justified by faith shall live."⁸⁵ Just as Paul had offered a theological rationale of the crucifixion (that is, the pure messiah must, paradoxically, become impure so as to sanctify those who are impure),⁸⁶ so too had Nathan for Sabbatai Zvi's conversion to Islam. In Nathan's case, the idea appears to have been that evil is so thoroughly woven into the cosmos that its division from good is impossible; the good must fully identify with evil, transcending the Torah which distinguishes between good and evil, in order to

have there, the word *emunah*. [But in contrast] In the Sabbatian literature the coverage is very dense. This is in the first place a statistical finding: Suddenly the word *emunah* appears six, seven times on each folio page. This statistical finding is incredibly instructive. The Sabbatian drama is a caricature of the Christian drama. By caricature I don't mean that it is imitated [but that both histories are those of the apparent failure of a Jewish messiah for which an explanation must be found]." J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 8.

⁸³ Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676*, trans. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 42.

⁸⁴ Rm 1:17, referring to Hb 2:4.

⁸⁵ G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi* (1973), 282, 284.

⁸⁶ Taubes cites 2 Cor 5:21.

transcend it. Thus faith for Paul and Nathan is not a matter of belief in God. What both are calling for was, in fact, the impossible – to believe, despite the evidence to the contrary, that Jesus or Sabbatai Zvi was the messiah – and they were prepared to recognize this feat as the greatest spiritual accomplishment of all. It was clear that, to achieve this, the believer needed to discard previous assumptions along with any and all authorities upon whom they had previously depended.

[T]he principle is clear: the inner experience of redemption is going to be *reinterpreted* in light of an external catastrophe and a slap in the face...[T]he internal logic of events demanded a faith that is paradoxical, that is contradicted by the evidence. Paul comes and says: Here is the Messiah. People must know that he died on the cross. After all, word has gotten around...Here is the son of David hanging on the cross!... Now try to think from the centre in a Jewish way: expelled from the community he hangs there, accursed, and has to be taken down in the evening lest the ground become impure. This is a total and monstrous inversion of the values of Roman and Jewish thought...⁸⁷

The faith in this defamed son of David becomes an equivalent for all – now we're speaking in Pauline terms – works. This faith is more important than any works... Here something is demanded at such a high price to the human soul that all works are nothing by comparison – to consider it for a moment from the perspective of religious psychology instead of theology...Faith according to Paul must be understood in the emphatic sense as faith in the Messiah, who by an earthly measure cannot be the Messiah who hangs condemned on the cross...This

⁸⁷ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 9-10.

paradoxical faith...[this] messianic logic in the history of Jewish mysticism, is a logic that is repeated in history.⁸⁸

Once again, then, Taubes was offering a corrective to the Christian tradition. Paul's faith had had little to do with an individual's ahistorical spiritual experience of salvation as understood in terms of a new relation with God. Nor could it be used to justify any claim to power. Rather, it had been founded on the historical experience of a catastrophe and the paradoxical realization that salvation was to be achieved by the overturning of the previous rational universe, the abandonment of the Law and works, and the transfer of allegiance to a higher authority than that of *any* earthy rulers. Pre-empting any queries as to how this anti-authoritarian reading of the apostle could be reconciled with his apparently quietistic passages which called for the *status quo* and obedience to existing worldly powers,⁸⁹ Taubes reasons,

under this time pressure, if tomorrow the whole palaver, the entire swindle were going to be over – in that case there's no point in any revolution! That's absolutely right, I would give the same advice. Demonstrate obedience to state authority, pay taxes, don't do anything bad don't get involved in conflicts, because otherwise it'll get confused with some revolutionary movement, which, of course, is how it happened. Because, after all, these people have no legitimation, as, for instance, the Jews do, as a *religio licita* [legal religion]...⁹⁰

Thus Paul's apparent quietism actually reflected his radical apocalypticism: if you expect the imminent end of the world

⁸⁸ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 49-50.

⁸⁹ For example, Rom 13:11ff and 2 Cor 7:29ff.

⁹⁰ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 54.

and believe that God has called you to found a new social order, then there is no time to waste revolting against meaningless worldly authority.⁹¹

With this highly original interpretation of the apostle's theology, Taubes believed that he had returned Paul the heretic to the Jewish fold (because a messianic logic is a Jewish logic) and, in so doing, had also developed a more sophisticated understanding of Judaism itself – one which saw Judaism as a phenomenon that has historically, from time to time, demonstrated a tendency to seek liberation from the Law. This is, of course, a highly problematic argument. It is by no means self-evident that messianism is an exclusively Jewish phenomenon, for Christianity arguably shares this trait. It is also somewhat naïve for Taubes to think that his assertion that Paul and Nathan both understood the Law in terms of religio-political authority would be accepted without further debate. And the same is true for their “messianic logic,” whose anti-nomism would – by definition – disqualify its Jewish categorization as far as many in the Jewish community are concerned. Nevertheless, as we shall see, this allegedly Jewish messianic understanding of faith, as espoused by Paul, represented a powerful means by which Taubes could critique certain ideas within modern political theology.

⁹¹ For an excellent overview of Taube's key philosophical interests, including his apocalypticism and political-theological legitimization of authority, see Joshua Robert Gold, “Jacob Taubes: Apocalypse from Below” in *Telos* 134 (March 2006): 140-156. See also the comparative study of Taubes' political theology in Marin Terpstra and Theo de Wit, “No Spiritual Investment in the World as it is: Jacob Taubes's Negative Political Theology” in Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens Ten Kate, eds, *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 320-353.

In *Occidental Eschatology* (1947),⁹² Taubes had argued that if one accepted the idea that time would one day come to an end, as he himself did, then there were profound implications for political thought. While in ‘nature’ time was experienced as an eternal cycle of events, ‘history’ was defined as the realm of time in which men's actions altered the progression of events. A man's decision, then, really mattered. Such a philosophy demanded that individuals take responsibility for their own actions and shake off all authorities that claimed to act on their behalf.⁹³ This theory, which he called Apocalyptic, was deeply unnerving to many observers and went a long way towards earning him his reputation as a non-conformist, maverick thinker. It certainly colored his debate with Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), the German political theorist. In this intellectual engagement, two theoretical possibilities for relating divine and secular power had been discussed in the light of Paul's theology. In 1922, Schmitt had famously written in *Political Theology* that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,”⁹⁴ thereby stressing the structural similarities between the function of political theory in legitimating State power and the function of theology for justifying God's power. The idea that God intervenes miraculously as part of his providential role for the world correlated to the ruler's acting above the law in the interest

⁹² Jacob Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie* (Bern: A. Francke, 1947).

⁹³ As he put it elsewhere, “This has consequences for the economy, actually for all life. There is no eternal return, time does not enable nonchalance; rather it is distress.” Interview with Jacob Taubes (1987), cited in Joshua Robert Gold, “Jacob Taubes: Apocalypse from Below” in *Telos* 134 (March 2006), 145.

⁹⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 36. The translation is of the 1934 second edition; the first edition was published as Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (München: Duncker & Humblot, 1922).

of state order; to 'decide on the exception' was therefore the justifiable action of a sovereign.⁹⁵ Ominously, Schmitt argued elsewhere that membership of the State was defined against a common enemy who was "existentially something different and alien."⁹⁶ The appeal of such ideas to the Nazi regime are obvious and explain in part Schmitt's prestige and influence as a jurist during its early years. A lifetime later, in September 1979, Schmitt invited him to his home in Plettenberg.⁹⁷ Taubes' own account makes it clear that the category of enemy was discussed in the context of Paul's attitude to the Jews as portrayed in Rm 11:28, "Enemies [of God] for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their forefathers." While Schmitt focused on the earlier part of the sentence, believing that Paul's new community had been defined against and in opposition to the Jewish people who had become the enemies of God himself, Taubes emphasized the latter part of the sentence, stressing the ongoing covenant with Israel.

And this is the point I challenged Schmitt on, that he doesn't see this dialectic that moves Paul, and that the

⁹⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (1985), 5.

⁹⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 27. Originally published as Carl Schmitt, "Der Begriff des Politischen" in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, 58 (1927).

⁹⁷ In 1952, Schmitt had been forwarded a copy of a letter in which Taubes had described him as "the intellectual capacity that stands above all the intellectual scribbling" (see Appendix B in J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 107) and began sending him copies of his books; he circulated the letter, commenting, "Letter from a Jewish intellectual who understands me better than any of my followers." Taubes had ignored the ex-Nazi jurist, until in 1979 he wrote asking to see him. For an overview of the Schmitts-Taubes relationship, see Marin Terpstra and Theo de Wit, "No Spiritual Investment in the World as it is: Jacob Taubes's Negative Political Theology" in Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens Ten Kate, eds, *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 327-336.

Christian church after 70 has forgotten, *that he adopted not a text but a tradition, that is, the folk traditions of church antisemitism, onto which he, in 1933-36, in his uninhibited fashion, went on to graft the racist theo zoology.* That is something that he, the most important state law theorist, did indeed receive as a lesson. 'That I did not know!' It is possible to read texts without noticing what their core point is.⁹⁸ [Italics added]

In general terms, Taubes agreed that political theory and theology were intimately related. But the implications, as he saw them, were very different from those suggested by Schmitt, whose theoretical conception of "enemy" showed him to be a victim of the seductive power of the traditional, but mistaken, Christian interpretation of Pauline thought. For Taubes, the structure of theology – that is, the logic of messianic and Apocalyptic thought – did not somehow legitimate the political power, but rather pointed to the usurpation of all authority and the de-legitimization of State sovereignty. And this view, which made pointless any accommodation to the prevailing political establishment, was a good thing. As Taubes tries to explain in his Heidelberg lectures, Schmitt had been interested in only one thing, namely,

that the chaos not rise to the top, that the state remain. No matter what the price...! [Taubes] have no spiritual investment in this world as it is. But I understand that someone else [e.g. Schmitt] is invested in this world and sees in the apocalypse, whatever its form, the adversary, and does everything to keep it subjugated and suppressed, because from there forces can be unleashed that we are in no position to control. You see now what I want from Schmitt – I want to show him that the separation of powers between worldly and spiritual is

⁹⁸ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 51.

absolutely necessary. This boundary, if it is not drawn, we will lose our Occidental breath. This is what I wanted to impress upon him against his totalitarian concept.⁹⁹

It would be surprising if, in making this argument to Schmitt himself in 1979, Taubes had not drawn heavily upon Paul's Jewish messianism, which he believed offered the antidote to the poisonous assumptions underlying Schmitt's political theology.¹⁰⁰

As a post-holocaust Jew, Taubes had been understandably concerned to question the foundations of political authority, and especially its theology legitimation. Partly because influential Western political theoreticians such as Schmitt appeared to have been influenced by Pauline theology, in one way or another, it seemed imperative to Taubes to offer a critique of Paul. In his reclamation of the "Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles," Taubes suggested that the study of Paul's milieu offered an insight into a time when borders between Jewish and Christian thought had not been finalized; there was, in his view, a tantalizing possibility to reach back and reclaim certain traditionally Christian ideas as Jewish. One such idea was the tendency to look for liberation from the law – in the sense of freedom from political authority. In other words, his focus on Paul's creation of a new people, "a subterranean society, a little bit Jewish, a little bit Gentile,"¹⁰¹ and the justification the apostle offered for doing so, allowed

⁹⁹ J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 103.

¹⁰⁰ Gold has demonstrated that from early on in his career, Taubes had read Paul's theology along apocalyptic lines; thus the Pauline community had been constituted of those who "have freed themselves from all natural, organic attachments – from nature, art, cult and state – and for whom emptiness and alienation from the world...accordingly reached a high state." J. Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie* (1947), cited in Joshua Robert Gold, "Jacob Taubes: Apocalypse from Below" in *Telos* 134 (March 2006), 153.

¹⁰¹ Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 54.

him to criticize both Christian and Jewish culture more generally. The Christian community had missed the political import of Paul's language of "faith" and "law," while the Jewish community had been wrong to regard anti-nomism as entirely alien to Judaism and Jewish thought.

Conclusion

The philosophical treatments of Spinoza, Shestov and Taubes, despite their differences, nevertheless share certain aims in common. All three orientated their work around a revolutionary vision of society, and all three regarded Paul as an influential voice in western civilization whose support was essential for persuading their mainly non-Jewish readerships of the failings of (Christian) authority. All three were also interested in relating Paul to rational discourse, although in different ways. Spinoza's inclination was to use the apostle in the construction of a pro-rationalist, anti-superstitious platform from which to undermine the Church's interference in secular power. Shestov also challenged the established orders but, in his case, Paul helped destabilize what was regarded as the overly rationalist assumptions of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Taubes, like Spinoza, was particularly interested in Paul's universalism, although he was less concerned about questions regarding the universality of reason and more interested in the apostle's creation of a universal society that implied the subjection of *all* rational forms of political authority. Here, Taubes' messianic, apocalyptic logic shared a good deal in common with Shestov: both men were theoretically anti-nomian, although only Taubes tried to show that this was an authentically Jewish stance. It is also worth noting that, however much each drew upon Paul in their work, the apostle can in no wise be regarded as having shaped their ideas or their sense of identity; quite the reverse, it should be clear that it is their pre-existing ideological programs which

dictated their understanding and use of him. Of course, in making such observations about the incorporation of the Apostle to the Gentiles in the writings of Spinoza, Shestov and Taubes, and in identifying their primary aims as politico-philosophical critiques of Christian society and of the rational foundations of western civilization in general, a certain question naturally arises: To what extent should such interpretations of Paul actually be regarded as *Jewish* interpretations?

Modern Jewish identity is a complex matter. After the Enlightenment and the attendant phenomena of the dissolution of the ghetto and the widespread establishment of legal emancipation, there was no longer one norm of Jewish existence (if there ever had been). Spinoza was amongst the first wave of Jews to find themselves living outside the Jewish community despite the fact that they had not abandoned Judaism for another faith. In earlier times, the existence of a Jew who was at odds with his community, who held ideas that were deemed by the religious authorities as heretical, and who was attracted to non-Jewish ways of thinking, was untenable. And yet, over time, as a result of a tremendous variety of pressures and influences that accompanied modernity, the 'secular Jew'¹⁰² emerged to become a permanent feature of the Jewish landscape. The reason why such individuals should continue to regard themselves, or be regarded as others, as in some sense Jewish, is a matter of on-going debate. One seminal contribution was a collection of essays entitled, *The Non-Jewish Jew* (1968), in which the Polish-Jewish journalist Isaac Deutscher made an impassioned defense of this new

¹⁰² Yerushalmi has described Spinoza as "the first great culture-hero of modern secular Jews." Yosef Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Indeterminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 10.

species of Jew.¹⁰³ Insistent that "the Jewish heretic who transcends Jewry" was part of a Jewish tradition whose revered membership had begun with Spinoza, he went on to describe some of their characteristics. The non-Jewish Jews, he says, who went beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community and who looked for ideals and fulfillment elsewhere, nevertheless

had in themselves something of the quintessence of Jewish life and of the Jewish intellect...[T]hey dwelt on the borderlines of various epochs. Their minds matured where the most diverse cultural influences crossed and fertilized each other...Each of them was in society and yet not in it, of it and yet not of it. It was this that enabled them to rise in thought above their societies, above their nations, above their times and generations, and to strike out mentally into new horizons and far into the future...All of them had this in common, that the very conditions in which they lived and worked did not allow them to reconcile themselves to ideas which were nationally or religiously limited and induced them to strive for a universal *Weltanschauung* [worldview]...Their manner of thinking is dialectical, because, living on borderlines of nations and religions, they see society in a state of flux. They conceive reality as being dynamic, not static... [They] comprehend more clearly the great movement and the great contradictoriness of nature and society...[and] agree on the relativity of moral standards. None of them

¹⁰³ Isaac Deutscher, "The non-Jewish Jew" in *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 25-41. Later, Deutscher observed, "The definition of a Jew is so elusive precisely because the Diaspora exposed the Jews to such a tremendous variety of pressures and influences, and also to such a diversity of means with which they had to defend themselves from hostility and persecution...To speak of the 'Jewish community' as if it were an all-embracing entity, then, is meaningless." I. Deutscher, "Who is a Jew?" in *The Non-Jewish Jew*, 51-52.

believe in absolute good or absolute evil. They all observed communities adhering to different moral standards and different ethical values...[T]he genius of the Jews who have gone beyond Jewry has left us the message of universal human emancipation.¹⁰⁴

Here, Deutscher reminds us of three important aspects of modern Jewish identity. Firstly, that Jewish self-consciousness, however difficult to describe or account for, is no less real for having abandoned the two ideological pillars of religion and nationalism. Secondly, that those Jews who no longer feel at home within the Jewish community continue to feel a sense of alienation from the wider society. Yet this experience of living in an ideological and cultural crossroads had the benefit of bestowing upon them a more flexible view regarding prevailing assumptions, even ethical assumptions, and of encouraging them to strike out intellectually in contrary directions. Thirdly, having escaped from one intellectual ghetto, such Jews are determined not to be imprisoned in another, and are drawn as moths to the flame to grander, more universalistic visions of human endeavor.

Having completed a brief survey of three philosophers who have drawn upon the apostle Paul in their work, it is worth noting that, whilst Jewish-born, all inhabited the no-man's land of Jewish marginality. Two did not adhere to religious practices whatsoever and, arguably, all three attempted to transcend their Jewishness through the more universal worldviews of philosophy. In this regard, several of Deutscher's observations appear to apply. All three sought to challenge, even to subvert, a culture which was regarded as dangerously dominated by Christian norms of thought. Each one found a perspective that offered an alternative,

historically unconventional view, whether it was rationalism (Spinoza), anti-rationalism (Shestov), or messianic apocalypticism (Taubes). All aimed to strike at the heart of the sources of power within society, be it the fearful sway of superstition (Spinoza), dogma and idealism (Shestov), or legal authority (Taubes). In so doing, they can be regarded as having joined the ranks of religious Jews in the modern period who have offered a critique of Christian thought by means of engaging with the apostle, with the key difference that here their focus was not upon theology per se but upon the legacy of Paul for understanding the place of religion in society. What is rather remarkable is that, in each case, it was asserted that Paul supported their perspective and stood with them in making their social critique. The question is why the Apostle to the Gentiles assumed such a positive role in the imaginations of these philosophers. It has already been suggested that, as a figure of great authority within Christianity and Christian culture, who had influenced generations of theologians and leaders and had profoundly shaped the course of western civilization, it made sense for Jewish writers to engage with and claim the support of the apostle, who was, himself, regarded as Jewish. But it is also possible to see in their attraction to the complex figure of Paul a reflection of their own complex issues of identity. After all, Paul's life had been one lived in the borderland between the Jewish and the Gentile communities, distanced from the Jewish people, even as he remained connected to it. And he, too, had been profoundly affected by his engagement with the wider world, having broken through the boundaries of Jewish religion and nationalism. There was surely a degree of identification with the apostle amongst these thinkers, and, perhaps, some cold comfort in finding in this misunderstood Jew an ideological ally.

¹⁰⁴ I. Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew*, 26-27, 30, 35, 36, 41.