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Modernity: The Jewish Perspective

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Abstract

This paper aims at delivering a definition of modernity as offered by modern Jewish theology: a theological capturing of the modern era as an epoch possessing its own unique and positive religious characteristics. This *positive* theological evaluation of modernity seems to derive uniquely from the Jewish perspective which sees in *modernitas* a hopeful repetition of the narrative of Exodus: the story of liberation and autonomous self-constitution of man *helped* by God who wished his subjects to stop being just subjects, but also wanted to offer them freedom. This emphatically affirmative definition of religious modernity has only one equivalent in Christian theology: the millenarist notion of a "new age" – *die Neuzeit*, or *modernitas* – as the third age of the spirit, which greatly influenced the most ambitious strain of modern philosophy: German Idealism and Hegel in particular. In referring to the writings of Jacob Taubes (most of all his *Occidental Eschatology*) I will attempt to show that the twentieth-century Jewish messianism tends to perceive modernity, also in its Christian version, as an epoch of the reawakening of the original spirit of the Hebrew revelation, conceived most of all as the emancipatory event of Exodus.

Keywords

Jacob Taubes, messianism, modernity, Jewish theology

Every individual must think of himself as if he personally came out of Egypt.

Talmud, Pesachim

The first [age] is in the servitude of slavery, the second in the servitude of sons, the third in freedom. The first in fear, the second in faith, the third in love. The first is the status of bondsmen, the second of freemen, the third of friends.

Ernst Benz, Ecclesia spiritualis. Kirchenidee und Geschichtstheologie der franziskanischen Reformation[1]

[1] Stuttgart 1934.

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Let me begin with a word of caution: my account of the Jewish view of modernity will be *very* selective. I will not present the whole spectrum of Jewish historical responses to the modern era and its challenges: the literature on the "Jew in modernity", depicting both the Jewish enthusiasm for emancipation and the Jewish fear of the risks of assimilation, is simply too big to be summarised in just one lecture. And it is, to be honest, not that interesting, for it deals with those enthusiasms and fears rather predictably. What is interesting is the definition of modernity offered by modern Jewish theology: a theological capturing of the modern era as an epoch that possesses its own unique religious characteristics, which, as far as I know, comes only from the Jewish (though not necessarily Judaic) angle. I don't mean here a *negative* theological description of modernity, which you can find everywhere in modern Christian theology, most of all Catholic theology, from Erich Vögelin's famous rejection of *modernitas* as the "age of Gnosis", i.e. the Gnostic, hubristic self-empowerment of man who challenged God in an attempt to be *sicut Dei*, through Romano Guardini's famous thesis on modernity as a "civilisation of death", up to the anti-modern philippics of Radical Orthodoxy, which join the Catholic critique of the modern era from the Anglican side. I mean a *positive* theological evaluation of modernity, which seems to derive uniquely from the Jewish perspective that sees in *modernitas* a hopeful repetition of the narrative of the Exodus, the story of the liberation and autonomous self-constitution of man *helped* by God, who wished his subjects to stop being just subjects, but also wanted to offer them freedom. As you shall see, this affirmative definition of religious modernity has only one equivalent in Christian theology, namely: the millenarist notion of a 'new age' – *die Neuzeit*, or *modernitas* – as the third age of the spirit, which greatly influenced the most ambitious strain of modern philosophy, that is, German Idealism and Hegel in particular.

When I say "positive" I mean mostly the contrast with the unequivocally anti-modern religious attitudes which tend to see in modernity nothing but "the night of the world" (*Nacht der Erde*: from Hölderlin, through Balthasar and Heidegger, up to Ratzinger), the demise of the metaphysical sense of the sacred and the head-long fall into one-dimensional secularization. In fact, the Jewish theological interpretation of the modern break in the history of mankind can also be very critical, yet it is almost always a case of what Walter Benjamin called *die rettende Kritik*, a saving critique. The saving critique is also what Michael Oakeshott used to refer to as a "loyal critique". Taking an internal standpoint, such a critique does not venture to destroy its object, but – to use a great expression of Theodor Adorno from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* – wants to defend it against itself. Modernity, the age of enlightenment, man's rational empowerment and emancipation, is thus to be defended against itself, against

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its inner dangers that threaten to overthrow the promise it gave at its onset. The theological definition of modernity, therefore, wholly depends on the right understanding of this precarious promise, which is always threatened to disappear in the course of modern history: the messianic promise of a universal liberation, that is, leaving all the Egypts of this world for good, with its hierarchies, glories of domination and self-renewing cycles of power.

Among German-Jewish twentieth-century apocalyptic thinkers – the generation that starts with Georg Lukàcs and Gustav Landauer, and continues with Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Jacob Taubes – the last and youngest in this visionary company, Taubes is also the fiercest campaigner for the Jewish messianic vocation.[2] For Taubes, who was himself trained as a rabbi, "Jewish religions" (as he calls them, deliberately in the plural) cannot simply be equated with Rabbinic Judaism, which constitutes their very late, selective, and crippled variant. Against Judaism he opposes his own favourite version of Hebraism, which sports more "elective affinities" with early Christianity than the Talmudic formation. The common denominator between Hebraism and early Christianity is *apocalyptic messianism,* the fluid amalgam of messianism, apocalypticism, and gnosticism that Taubes finds completely lacking in the conservative arrangements of the Rabbinic tradition.[3] We can thus call his

[2] Anson Rabinbach describes "the new Jewish sensibility" of the above thinkers as poised "between enlightenment and apocalypse". While rebelling against the assimilatory dissolution of Judaism in the universal "religion of morality for all humanity" (as in the case of Leo Baeck's *Essence of Judaism*), these younger thinkers move towards more pronounced forms of Jewish identity, most of all Jewish Messianism, which they strongly oppose to the rabbinic tradition. Among those new representatives of "Jewishness without Judaism," Rabinbach lists: "The Jewish Nietzscheans, most notably Kurt Hiller, Theodor Lessing, Salomo Friedländer, and Martin Buber; and the 'linguistic' mystics from Gustav Landauer and Benjamin to the Oskar Goldberg *Kreis* would certainly also have to be included. Or we can restructure the axis long other lines, for example, Benjamin and Bloch as 'theological messianists'; Landauer/Buber/Scholem as 'radical Zionist messianists', Rosenzweig and Lukàcs along a critical Hegelian axis; perhaps with Kafka, Brod and the Prague Bar Kochba circle as the antithesis of that constellation": Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism", in *New German Critique*, no 34 (Winter 1985), p. 84. Taubes' location on this map would be a middle-way between Bloch's theological messianism and Lukàcs' and Rosenzweig's tarrying with Hegel – in other words, between apocalypsis and historiosophy. On the Jewish "mystics of revolution" of the Weimar era see also an excellent study of Anna Wołkowicz, *Mystiker der Revolution. Der utopische Diskurs um die Jahrhundertwende*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego: Warszawa, 2007.

[3] Even in "The Price of Messianism", one of his latest essays, Taubes still maintains that "Rabbinic Judaism consistently opposed messianic movements. During the sixteen hundred years of the hegemony of rabbinic Judaism we witness only the sporadic and always ephemeral emergence of Messiahs who leave no traces except in historiography", in Jacob Taubes, *From Cult to Culture. Fragments Towards a Critique of Historical Reason*,

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"return to the source itself" (*zurück zu der Quelle*) as a paradigmatic example of the twentieth-century Neo-Karaite rebellion against the dominance of traditionalist Judaism (of course Neo-Karaite only to an extent, for this return is at the same time very far from any literal fundamentalism).

This Neo-Karaite re-reading of the Hebrew Bible would make its goal, first of all, in the *de-hellenisation* of the ideatic content of the early Hebrew message, in retrieving its "distant call" in its possibly original form, free from any later idealist contamination. It is thus not at all an accident that all these Neo-Karaites – Bloch, Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Taubes – were philosophers, for it is precisely philosophy which they wished to remove from the word of revelation. To de-hellenise for them meant to de-philosophise and de-idealise at the same time. The Neo-Karaite project, therefore, was not at all "philological", for it more or less knew from the beginning what it wanted to achieve, namely: a fresh reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, which, unlike the whole idealistic philosophical tradition "from Ionia to Jena", will be materialist, messianic, historical, emancipatory, focused on the finite life, immanentist and this-worldly. And, last but not least, *pro-modern*.

The aporia of antinomianism

In *Occidental Eschatology*, Taubes' messianic emphasis causes him to choose modernity as the most vibrant period in the history of Jewish (or simply human) thought. Contrary to the widespread Rabbinic view, according to which the modern era marks a decline of the traditional Jewish way of life, Taubes believes that modernity offers a chance of reawakening and renewing the universal messianic ambitions of early Hebrew religion. *Occidental Eschatology*, his doctoral dissertation from 1947, is wholly devoted to the elucidation of this hypothesis. The first part of the book presents Taubes's messianic-Gnostic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, and the next four parts demonstrate how this ancient messianic ferment influenced first early Christianity, then the chiliastic movements at the end of the medieval period (Joachim da Fiore), and finally the development of modern historicism (from Hegel to Marx). It can thus be seen as a polemical alternative to Karl Löwith's famous thesis on secularization[4]. Unlike Löwith, who reproaches modernity for the loss of the sense of the

ed. by Aleida Assmann (Stanford University Press: Stanford 2009) p. 6 (later in the text as *CC*).

[4] Taubes knew and admired Löwith's *Von Hegel bis Nietzsche*, in which Löwith for the first time tested the hypothesis of the influence of Joachim da Fiore on Hegel, while Löwith in *Meaning and History* (Chicago, 1949) already mentions Taubes twice.

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spiritual (which, for him, finds the best expression in mysticism), Taubes praises modernity for recovering the true, i.e. non-mystical and messianic, *practical* aspect of the religious revelation. For early Taubes, modernity can be regarded as the most religious of all epochs, precisely in its consciously historiosophic emphasis on the messianic transformation of our earthly conditions, aiming at achieving a better, more meaningful, freer life here and now. In its attempt to achieve this goal, *modernitas* walks a thin line between messianism and nihilism, which, for Taubes, is not necessarily a bad thing.[5]

In Taubes' interpretation, the purest manifestation of Hebrew religion is *apocalyptic messianism*, or so it would seem at first sight. This term, apparently innocent in its modest descriptive ambition, contains a serious inner tension. Contrary to most commentators, who usually enumerate modern Jewish messianism and irrational apocalypticism in one breath, I would like to prove that the young Taubes in *Occidental Eschatology* stands out from the apocalyptic climate of the Weimar era, because he attempts, if only implicitly, to *force a gap between the messianic and the apocalyptic*. This gap is absolutely indispensable if we wish to give an eschatological meaning to modern secular history, or any history at all. Taubes never tires of arguing that Saint John's Apocalypse is but a Christian version of the original Jewish Apocalypse, yet there always remains an uneasy feeling that the mode of apocalyptic writing that so strongly influenced the Protestant theology of the Weimar era (Karl Barth especially), does not sit well with Jewish messianic aspirations. In what follows, therefore, I will try to maintain a critical distance from Taubes' self-professed apocalypticism, strongly convinced – after Jacques Derrida and Harold Bloom – that "the apocalyptic tone" with its raised pitch of an uncompromising *either/or*, is *not* the natural idiom of Jewish messianism.[6]

Already the very word "apocalypse" is strangely ambiguous. On the one hand, and this is the official meaning of this word in *Occidental Eschatology*:

[5] I emphasize the qualification "early Taubes", referring mostly to the period of *Occidental Eschatology*, for "later Taubes" is a more complex case; already in the 50s he became visibly less harsh on Rabbinic Judaism, while his messianic enthusiasm, which he initially shared with Ernst Bloch, began to wane, eventually to reach the point of an almost explicit refutation of Bloch's influence. For instance, in *The Political Theology of Paul*, the latest series of lectures from the 80s, Taubes would call Bloch dismissively "wishy-washy": Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. by Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) p. 74 (later in the text as *TP*).

[6] Jacques Derrida, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy," in *Raising the Tone in Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant*, Peter Fenves (ed), trans. By John P. Leavey Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) as well as Harold Bloom, *Omens of Millennium. The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).

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> . . . apocalypse means, in the literal and figurative sense, revelation. All apocalypse tells of the triumph of eternity . . . . The triumph of eternity is *played out* on the stage of history.[7]

On the other hand – and this is the meaning half-hidden in the dark shadow of revelation:

> . . . apocalypticism negates this world in its fullness. It brackets the entire world negatively . . . . The 'nonexistent' God is an annihilating God who crushes the world . . . . God will annihilate the world and then appear in his might (*OE*, 9–10).

"Apocalypse", therefore, means both revelation and annihilation. And while it is possible to have an apocalyptic historiosophy in the first sense, it is impossible in the latter. We can imagine that the revealed "glimpse" may be "played out on the stage of history", that "history is the plane on which God and the world intersect; history is the path of God and He shows Himself at work in it" (*OE*, 15). But what "entanglement," "intersection," "transfer," or divine "work" are possible if God is there only to "crush the world"?

One cannot be simultaneously an apocalypticist, simply wishing that the edifice of being will go down, and a historicist, investing, if not in the world as it is, then at least in the world as it could be. So goes the famous line from *The Political Theology of Paul*, which contains in a nutshell all the possible dangers of Taubes' troubled position: "I can imagine as an apocalyptic: let it go down. I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is" (*TP*, 103). Now, everything depends on how we understand the last phrase, either with the emphasis on "the world", "in its fullness" or "in its entirety", or with the emphasis on "as it is", suggesting a less wholesale distaste for historical reality. If we follow the first apocalyptic possibility, history will only emerge as a passive waiting for an event which will finally lead us out of the world into the original divine Nothingness. But if we follow the latter, history will have a chance to emerge as a *process* that can finally lead us from the world-as-it-is, that is: naturalised, hierarchised, spatialised, and ideologically stabilised in the cyclical succession of powers. Taubes' aporetic rhetoric toys incessantly with both possibilities, which are present simultaneously and equally strongly in the opening pages of *Occidental Eschatology*. In the space of few sentences he can say that "the beyond is beyond the world in its entirety" (*OE*, 27) and that "the world is the power system which loses its exclusiveness when viewed from the beyond" (*OE*, 28). While the first formulation implies that there is no mediation between "this" and "that" world, the second positions the "beyond"

[7] Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. By David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2009) p. 4; my emphasis. Later in the text as *OE*.

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as a critical vantage point from which the world-as-it-is, gripped in the "power system", can be transformed into something else.

Taubes' case, therefore, is interesting precisely as a *case study* of a typically modern Jewish messianist who wants to have both, walking a thin line between the messianic hope in the radical transformation of the world and the apocalyptic expectation of the ultimate annihilation of the world, which is yet another version of walking the thin line between religion and nihilism. Taubes' life-long uneasy affair with both apocalyptic *and* historiosophy can be summed up as a sometimes less and sometimes more successful attempt to square the circle of the most fundamental aporia of all "hot" messianic movements, which we may also call *the aporia of antinomianism*. If God is alien to the world and so hostile to the created realm, how can his message be active and operative in being itself? How can this divine antithesis *work* in the sphere of creaturely reality?[8]

This question was not originally Taubes'; here, he merely follows Hegel, the first modern historiosoph, who posed it explicitly and, because he could not find a satisfactory answer, he rejected the overtly antinomian scheme altogether. In his *Early Theological Writings*, Hegel depicts the Jewish Revelation as the moment of an absolute antithesis which, precisely because of its absoluteness, must for ever remain static. When the two realms of transcendence and immanence clash and contradict one another, the negativity of the former cannot find its way into the latter and stays inactive, the best example of which, for Hegel, is the Jewish Law, conceived by him as a mechanical negation of life. It is, therefore, only in the moment of Christian incarnation that the antinomian impulse falls on earth and becomes operative in being, pressing towards the spiritual transformation of reality.[9] And though Taubes tries to dismiss Hegel as an "immanent pantheist" (OE, 6) already at the beginning of his

[8] Taubes is obviously not alone in the historiosophical ambition to square the circle of antinomianism, which he shared with Bloch and Benjamin. The latter, as early as 1914, writes about the antinomian traces constituting 'real' history: "The elements of the end condition are not present as formless tendencies of progress, but instead are embedded in every present as *endangered, condemned, and ridiculed* creations and ideas. The historical task is to give absolute form in a genuine way to the immanent condition of fulfilment, to make it visible and predominant in the present" (from Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin. An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994) p. 49; my emphasis). Moreover, as Anson Rabinbach convincingly shows, Benjamin would associate this "historical task" of enhancing and elucidating the "ridiculed" antinomian traces with the role of the modern Jewish intellectual. Bloch in "Symbol: The Jews" (a prophetic fragment included only in the first 1918 edition of *The Spirit of Utopia*) defines this particularly Jewish sensibility as "a latent gnosticism" issuing in the powerful opposition of "the good and the illuminated against everything petty, unjust and hard": Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse", p. 101.

[9] See especially "Christianity and Its Fate" in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *On Christianity: Early Theological Writings by Friedrich Hegel*, trans. by T.M. Knox with an

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dissertation, this manoeuvre appears as a mere evasion of the most powerful precursor, for it will be always Hegel with whom Taubes will have to wrestle, struggling to mark the Hegelian system with his own antinomian *clinamen*. Thus, when we read that "history is the project of the spirit" (*OE*, 12) and "dialectic is the signpost on the pathway of history, from creation to redemption" (*OE*, 15), we are firmly fixed in the Hegelian universe which Taubes will only strive to revise in a more dramatic, Jewish-Gnostic manner:

> The world was created for the express purpose of revealing freedom. God's totality [das All Gottes] should become world, so that in freedom God may be all in all. Mankind is to entrust the world to God, who abolishes all worldly dominion, authority, and power . . . . The thesis is the totality [das All], when God and the world are not yet differentiated. The antithesis is the separation of God and the world: synthesis is the union of God and the world through mankind, so that in freedom God may be all in all (*OE*, 15).

In Taubes' unstable apocalyptic narrative two worlds clash all the time: the Kierkegaardian-Barthian universe, in which the antithesis is so strong that it can only be called a *diathesis*, a static alternative of either/or between the worldly and the divine, and the Hegelian universe of dialectics that turns the antithetical separation of revelation and reality into a stage of the holy-historical process, ultimately "aiming at union with God" (*OE*, 15). This tension complicates the understanding of the messianic vector, which, as Gershom Scholem observed, almost always combines elements of retrogressive and progressive utopias, the best illustration of which is the Lurianic concept of the *tikkun*: yes, the return to God, *but* in a different form of unity.[10] The uncertainty as to what truly moves human history – is this a regressive ideal of restoring the divine origin in perfect Nothingness, or a progressive ideal of creating a new condition of existence called freedom? – hovers constantly over Taubes' musings. Sometimes Taubes leans to the Barthian side, where history consists only in hastening to the end in, so to say, speeding the reel of being, which, taken out of the static configuration of nature, merely quickens its inherent transience and proceeds towards self-expiration.[11]

introduction, and fragments translated by Richard Kroner (Gloucester, Mass., Peter Smith, 1970).

[10] See Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism. And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (Schocken Books: New York, 1995).

[11] Compare Barth himself: "The most radical ending of history, the negation under which all flesh stands, the absolute judgment, which is the meaning of God for the world of men and time and things, is also the crimson thread which runs through the whole course of the world in its inevitability." And further: "No road to the eternal meaning of the created world has ever existed, save the road of negation. This is the lesson of history": Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. By Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford University

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And sometimes he leans on the Hegelian side, where history truly creates a *novum* in the narrative of being, the freedom of all its individual elements, so the ultimate "union with God" can essentially vary from the initial undifferentiated identity of God and world. In the first case, history is but a process of being's self-annulment, the hastened passing away of the passing away, reverting the scandal of creation to the original pleroma. In the second, history is a dialectical progress which transforms being on the metaphysical plane, introducing into it a new category of freedom.

Temperamentally more inclined towards the former, the Kierkegaardian-Barthian diathesis, Taubes nonetheless resumes Hegel's challenge and, grappling with his dialectic, attempts to leave the timeless "realm of paradox" and enter the dynamic sphere of an *antinomian historiosophy*. Read in this way, early Taubes will differ from other "hot" Jewish messianists, for he would not believe, in Anson Rabinbach's words, that "the chasm that separates the historical quotidian from redemption is too wide to be bridged by determined action or profane events".[12] The whole stake of his early work is precisely the attempt to offer a connection, though not necessarily in the form of a steady "bridge". The "transfer" between the revealed messianic message and the temporal dimension of history is a matter of a complex sacred dialectics, but it is nonetheless possible. The difference between the "other-worldly" and "this-worldly" may indeed be extreme, but it does not mean that it must remain inoperative in the profane realm. The whole gist of "holy history" is to make this difference manifest and active, though always only on the antinomian principle, precisely as the traumatic negation of the profane. This traumatic or traumatizing negation, however, cannot be equated with an apocalyptic annihilation that simply destroys the offensive world. History is an *operative antinomianism* – or it does not exist at all.

This notion of history and modern historicism offers a highly original *tertium* between the apocalypticism that passively awaits the

Press: Oxford 1968) pp. 77, 87. Taubes, of course, is very much aware of the changes that occurred in the passage from the first to the second edition of the *Römerbrief*, already at the stage of writing *Abendländische Eschatologie*. Later he summarized them as follows: "The antithesis in the ternary dialectic that served in the first edition as a transitional element is emphasized in the second edition to such a degree that dialectical theology becomes a 'theology of crisis.' *The spirit of critique is radicalized to a spirit of crisis. The antithesis takes on the aspect of a perennial contradiction*. The negative characteristics are exegetically unfolded in all lengths and at all depths. The smell of death reaches to the highest and most sublime realms of human activity . . . If the dialectic of the first edition of the *Römerbrief* can be interpreted in the light of a religious Hegelianism, the second edition reveals the influence of Kierkegaard's negative dialectic on every page.": Taubes, "Theodicy and Theology: A Philosophical Analysis of Karl Barth's Dialectical Theology," *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 34, nr 4/1954, pp. 236–7; my emphasis.

[12] Rabinbach, p. 87.

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demise of the scandal of profane existence, and the evolutionary historiosophy that believes in a steady and normative progress of occidental institutions. What creates history in Taubes' account is neither an annihilating shock awaited by the apocalypticists, nor the inherent norm inscribed into some impersonal "laws of history", but the antinomian tension, which always presses against the grain, against "nature", against any progressive normativity. History, therefore, is never a progress, it is rather a disruptive staccato of breaks, awakenings and traumas that never simply evaporate without trace but always leave a disquieting mark that, despite all the "natural" obstacles, initiates messianic transformation of the world.

Poised somewhat awkwardly between apocalypsis and historiosophy, Taubes will always insist on the dialectical interplay of the antinomian messianic impulse and its historical manifestations, always necessarily distorted, but nonetheless operative. Reluctant to accept any form of an anti-historical purism, he emphasizes in a Hegelian way a *hic Rhodus, hic salta* principle of every serious messianic involvement, as, for instance, in this critique of Buber, coming from a characteristically titled essay "Martin Buber and the Philosophy of History":

> Buber, the historian, cannot deny that in spite of all corruption and degeneration a *continuous transfer of the paradigm of an eschatological community into various historical configurations* occurred throughout Western history of the last millennium. Every new significant version of messianic hope, every new pursuit of the millennium has forged new forms of fellowship between men giving endurance and cohesion to the fabric of social institution (*CC*, p. 27; my emphasis).

It is, however, essential to understand the nature of this "continuous transfer". While Carl Schmitt and Karl Löwith (though on opposite poles of evaluation) believe that the political theology of modernity serves as a hidden legitimization of earthly powers, Taubes claims the possibility of other theopolitics in which the divine distant call brings the revolutionary egalitarian message of freedom.[13] On the other hand, Taubes also recognizes the necessity of the interiorization of the messianic impulse, which protects its ideatic content against a simple dissolution in the historical element. In his polemic against Scholem's "messianic idea in Judaism", in a late essay called "The Price of Messianism", Taubes vehemently protests against direct "transfers" of the messianic idea onto the "landscape of history" and opts for the

[13] In the later idiom of *The Political Theology of Paul* this opposition would indicate a contrast between the "messianic" and the "katechonic" use of revelation. On this difference see also David Ratmoko's comments in his preface to *Occidental Eschatology*.

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maintenance of the gap separating the antinomian revelation from its immediate translation into the course of time:

> If the messianic idea in Judaism is not interiorized, it can turn the 'landscape of redemption' into a blazing apocalypse. If one is to enter irrevocably into history, it is imperative to beware of the illusion that redemption (even the beginning of redemption, *athalta di geula*) happens on the stage of history. *For every attempt to bring about redemption on the level of history without a transfiguration of the messianic idea leads straight into the abyss* (*CC*, 9; my emphasis).

The modern God of the Exodus

History is the divine revolution that has been transferred-transfigured into the dimension of time. The moment of revelation, itself not yet belonging to history, initiates history as the revolutionary, antinomian touch of something radically other, which cannot be reconciled with the "natural" course of events. Unlike the spontaneous cults of nature and its immanent deities, messianic belief can be impressed upon human beings only through a violent event called revelation. History is thus paradoxical from the very start, fuelled by the extra-historical, strictly transcendent factor, it continues only as the very opposite of a smooth *continuum*. Far from being a direct realization of the messianic idea, it continues only as a series of anamnetic breaks and disturbances, as a permanent revolution that constantly reminds one of "the other" revealed dimension. Yet, this antinomian ordeal is not for nothing, not just for its own sake. Revelation is revolution pure and simple because it marks a radical turn (*Wende*) in the story (not yet history) of mankind, and this revolutionary revelation sets off an understanding of time in terms of History (as "Holy History", *die Heilsgeschichte*) the aim of which is the development of human freedom. God, therefore, is most of all the proto-Gnostic God of the Exodus, i.e. a counter-principle to the natural world (*Gegenprinzip*) which helps mankind to escape the bondage of nature (and everything "natural"). He is the God of liberation, whose proper element is history, the time of initiation and new beginnings, which breaks with the pagan glorification of natural life and its timeless origin:

> The all-embracing power of origin is nature, because it keeps (*bannt*) all events within a cycle in which everything flourishes and fades. The gods of nature are the Baals, and the most holy of the gods of Baal is Dionysus .... The bounds can be narrower or wider, but the cycle remains. So, in the mythical world, time is under the dominance of space .... The eternal return of the same is dominated by eros, which draws together what is above and what is below, and completes nature's cycle. By contrast, in the realm of time moving irreversibly in

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> one direction, it is the *spirit* that rules, as it presses forward. Therefore, the spirit is strictly bound with time (*OE*, 11–12).[14]

God, as the counter-principle of the natural world, is the revolutionary fire itself that cannot be grasped in our worldly terms. Antinomian, Gnostic metaphysics is thus also necessarily tinged with negative theology, with this difference however, that this version of *apophasis* is not contemplative, but active. God, as the alien counter-principle to our natural way of life, constitutes a traumatizing power. Yet, this trauma is a necessary and positive condition of mankind's *yetziat mitzraiim*, the Exodus from the Natural House of Bondage, which paves the way to the idea of a New Life, i.e. life liberated from the constraints of the natural cycle where everything flourishes and fades, or comes to existence only to perish.

Taubes never stops emphasizing that early Hebraism is the religion of Life; JHWH is not only a "living God" (*Elohim hayim*) but also a "God who wills life" (*rosech ba-hayim*). God chooses Israel to implant in His people the idea of a "new life", which is both vitalist and anti-naturalist. He wants to *take life out of nature* in order to expand its vital possibilities. In this messianic-eschatological vision life is singular and historical. It is not a general essence of Life, contemplated in the sanctity of its mysterious cycle, but always a particular – mine, yours – life whose practice consists in evolving towards the *eschaton*, led by the promise of a final triumph of life over its main adversary, death, and *all that death represents*, most of all, a resigned adaptation to the limits of natural order. This latter correction, which gives up on the literal understanding of life triumphing over death in the expectation of individual immortality of the soul (characteristic more of Christianity than early Jewish religion) is absolutely crucial here. What truly counts is not so much an agon with death as such, as with *death's symbolic potential*, not so much a protest against the fact of dying, as a refusal to accept the whole machine of sublimation which predestines Death, the Absolute Master, to the role of the natural *sacrum*. Hence the Exodus from Egypt, the central motif of the Hebrew Bible, must be understood as an effort to exit the realm of death's dominion, the "narrow place" of pagan magic, myth, and the sacralised powers of nature.

[14] The Exodus from nature into history, from eros into spirit, is thus also an exit from the plastic world of myth into the desert of human self-constitution: "Mythic consciousness does not recognize borders between divine, worldly, and human realms. In mythic narrative, the transition between gods, things, and humans remain fluid.... Then, the dreamlike stage of this mythic unity of gods, things, and humans is exploded by the experience of transcendence proper to monotheistic religions of revelation.... The de-godding (*Entgötterung*) of the world is thus not only the work of Greek philosophy, but primarily the work of monotheistic revelation" ("The Dogmatic Myth of Gnosticism," *CC*, p. 66).

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The early Hebrew emphasis on the notion of a New Life is characteristic of the whole genre of *proto-Gnostic* beliefs which, according to Taubes, come to the fore particularly strongly in the thought of the Mandeans:

> The general introduction to almost all Mandean writings begins: in the name of that great, first, alien Life from the exalted worlds of light, that stands above all works... Life, which appears in its pristine state as the great, first Life in the worlds of light, is thrown into exile in the world, where it is estranged from itself. The dramatic homecoming that follows, as ordained by the motif of salvation, is the metaphysical history of the light deprived of light, of life in the world deprived of life, of the estranged life in the estrangement of here and now (OE, 26–7).

The New Life is strictly opposed to the Fallen Life spent within the bondage of natural cycles. All Jewish messianic movements, which initiate Jewish modernity, rely on this opposition as its guiding principle, the source of which is obviously the line from Deuteronomy 30.19: *I have set before you life and death: choose life*. It is understood within the Jewish messianic tradition that the life we must choose is not the life that is bound with death, but the life that transcends the alternation of life and death and only thus becomes free from the deathly thrall. Thus, while nature is governed by the succession of life-and-death, and natural life can never separate itself from its end, the messianic ideal of a New Life breaks this seemingly necessary connection and aims at the absolute *denaturalisation* of life. If history, therefore, indicates a passage from the natural cage of necessity into the new Kingdom of Freedom, it is only possible due to the essential transformation of a singular life, moving away from the "natural" dominion of death.[15]

In praise of modernity

If there is a thinker who truly deserves to be called a "modern Judeo-Christian" (no matter if this be a blessing or a curse) it is certainly the young Jacob Taubes, and before him, his direct precursor, Ernst Bloch. Both are obsessed with the "apocalyptic thorn" they find in Jewish messianism and its immediate offshoot, messianic Christianity, and then again in *modernitas* as an epoch which allowed the sharp energetic edge of revelation to come fully to the fore. Both believe that Christianity, especially in its early pneumatic version, is closer to

[15] On this idea in more detail see my "Taking Life Out of Nature: Jewish Messianic Vitalism and the Issue of Denaturalization" in *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, Vol. 1, Numbers 1 & 2 (August 2012), pp. 167–87.

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the living Jewish "spirit of utopia" than to Rabbinic Judaism, which threw out the messianic child together with the Christian bathwater.

It is worth juxtaposing their position with that of Gershom Scholem who also thought that modernity is the most interesting period, religiously speaking, vividly negotiating between fervent piety and a sense of abandonment by the "absent God", but, unlike Bloch and Taubes, he remained firmly within the house of Judaism and openly criticised them for their irresponsible blending of Jewish and Christian revelation. "Pious atheism" – Scholem's paradoxical formula which was devised originally to describe the religious mood of Franz Kafka – fits perfectly well his own understanding of modern religiosity as historical, immanentist, yet still orienting itself towards an elusive transcendence, the famous *Nichts der Offenbarung*, no longer fully meaningful, yet still somehow valid.[16]

For Scholem, however, this is mostly a Jewish affair. The true passage to modernity occurs in the esoteric milieu of kabbalistic speculation. The difference between pre-modern Judaism and modern Judaism corresponds to the difference between early and late Kabbalah. While *Zohar* (The Book of Splendor) is still strongly a-historical (the world of creation and its history must be completely destroyed for a "new creation" to come), the sixteenth-century Kabbalah of Isaac Luria and his pupil Hayim Vital shows a distinct attempt to messianise the immanentist historical perspective, where history can be also conceived as a divine scenario that begins with creation, is given its right direction with revelation, and ends with redemption. It is the latter, Lurianic, view which creates truly modern Jewish religious sensibility, which, as Hans Jonas, strongly influenced by Scholem and his praise of Luria, would claim later, "insists on the immanentist temper".[17] No longer chained to the absent and unattainable transcendence, it overcomes all mystical ambition, and turns this positively "frustrated mysticism" into an active, practical messianism, realizing itself in the horizontal dimension of the world here and now.[18] Modernity, therefore, marks an epochal change in the *messianic strategy*: instead of a messianic passivism, i.e. "waiting for the Messiah", characteristic of the earlier forms of Judaism, there emerges a messianic activism, forcing the Messiah to come, or even

[16] Scholem says: "The emptying of the world to a meaningless void not illuminated by any ray of meaning or direction is the experience of him whom I would call *the pious atheist*. The void is the abyss, the chasm or the crack which opens up in all that exists. This is the experience of modern man, surpassingly well depicted in all its desolation by Kafka, for whom nothing has remained of God but the void, in Kafka's sense, to be sure, the void of God": Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis, Selected Essays*, Werner Dannhauser (ed), (Schocken Books, New York 1976) p. 283.

[17] Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality. A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, trans. by Lawrence Vogel, Chicago, Evanston (Northwestern University Press 1996) p. 134.

[18] The phrase *verhinderter Mystizismus* is also Scholem's.

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giving up on the personification called "the Messiah" and opting for – in Levinas' words – a mundane "messianism of the human". Thus, "the life in deferment" (Scholem's *Leben im Aufschub*) in which the Messiah is awaited passively, becomes replaced by an active pressing for an end, in which the figure of the Messiah is summoned and anticipated in a palpable, experiential, and fully immanent reality.

Bloch and Taubes can be seen both as Scholem's allies and revisionary polemicists. They certainly ally with Scholem's praise of modernity, which he articulates in the distinctly Gnostic terms of the Lurianic Kabbalah. The catastrophic vision of creation (*shevirat hakelim*); the theological materialism of the immanent sphere, voided of God and seen as the true arena of antinomian redemptive practice (*tikkun*); and the validation of history, seen no longer as a passive waiting and the time of delay (*Aufschub*), but the kairotic time of messianic action – all these motifs chime very nicely with Bloch's and Taubes' modern materialist eschatology. Taubes especially is deeply indebted to Scholem's negative theology, centred around the motif of the enigmatic "nothingness of revelation", which, in *Occidental Eschatology*, turns into an actively nihilising counter-principle to the world, not just a "nothing of meaning", as in Scholem's vision of *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*, but a "nothing of anti-being", so to say, constantly hovering over creation as its apocalyptic-annihilating judgment.[19]

But there are also significant differences. While Scholem's modernity is strictly Lurianic, and it is via this late-kabbalistic variant of Jewish modernity that the Christian world learns the lesson of immanentist messianism (in Scholem's account, Luria's historical scheme lurks behind Hegel, while the Sabbatians and the Frankists, the dispersed children of the Jewish "false Messiahs", form the eighteenth-century revolutionary avant-garde of radical enlightenment). Taubes, on the other hand, builds a strong analogy with similar messianic tendencies which also press towards modernity on the Christian side, most of all Joachim da Fiore and the millenarist (or chiliast) movement, rejected by the Church as heretical and subsequently destroyed. Yet, despite that rejection, the chiliast movement exerted an enormous influence on the so called Brotherhoods of Free Spirit, which in their turn fuelled the rebellious theology of Thomas Münzer, the ideologue of the German peasant wars, and eventually led to the outbreak of the Reformation.[20]

[19] Gershom Scholem to Walter Benjamin, Letter 66, 20 September 1934 in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem. 1932–1940*, trans. By Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre (New York: Schocken Books 1989) p. 142.

[20] In the "Price of Messianism", Taubes attacks Scholem for emphasizing too strongly the influence of Luria on German Idealism and the influence of the Sabbatian movement on the French Enlightenment: "Scholem has advanced a rather strange thesis, striking but

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According to Taubes' eschatology, an increasing *sense of historicity* emerges among the Christians from the twelfth-century onwards. The millenarists wanted to break with the medieval cosmos of a-historical harmony and recover the messianic promise in strictly historical and a-cosmic terms. Their *millennium* (also called The Third Kingdom) is envisaged as the messianic era of the Holy Spirit, where every individual will enjoy perfect freedom and all earthly hierarchies will fall down. It is to come after two previous eras: the Era of the Father (Old Testament) and the Era of the Son (New Testament), and this is why it is also called the era of the "new gospel". This succession follows straight from the scheme of the Trinity but given here for the first time a temporal and dialectical spin, which will find its fully explicit formulation in the Hegelian triad, combining Trinitarian logic with the historicist Lurianic perspective of the "death of God": God the Father dies, so Jesus Christ may come and then die too, finally giving way to the immanentist works of the Holy Spirit. This is precisely what we call *die Neuzeit*, or *modernitas*, now however defined in strictly theological terms:

> The tiresome dispute over the beginning of the modern age pales into insignificance alongside Joachim's achievement. In fact, the model of antiquity – Middle Ages – modern age is nothing but a secular extension of Joachim's prophecy of the three ages of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Every revolutionary eschatology since Joachim has suggested that with it, beyond the prehistory represented by antiquity and the Middle Ages, something definitive is beginning, something which brings fulfilment: the third empire, the age of the Holy Spirit (*OE*, 82).

Taubes attributes this awakening of the messianic-historical spirit on the Christian side to the *re-hebraisation* and, accordingly, *de-hellenisation* of the Gospel, which reclaims the messianic elements of the Jewish revelation, operative in the Gospels themselves but subsequently repressed by the Catholic Church with its falsely purified

without any historical foundation, concerning the "dialectical" nexus between Sabbatian messianism and the rise of the *Aufklärung* in Jewish history. The death of a Frankist adventurer at the guillotine of the French Revolution does not secure a link between Sabbatian messianism and the *Aufklärung*. The link is too weak to sustain a dialectical turn from one to the other" (*CC*, 7). For Taubes, the development of the Radical Enlightenment is directly indebted to the millenarist notion of the Spirit whose origin is unequivocally Christian. Yet, in the longer run back, Taubes will also claim that this origin is, in fact, Jewish-messianic, so the debate between Taubes and Scholem is not so much the issue of influence as such, as rather the issue of how far historically should the influence be placed. In *Occidental Eschatology*, written before his conflict with Scholem (which might have clouded the objectivity of his judgment), he still claims that "the steady rhythm of eschatology was not a singular development exclusive to Christian Europe . . . . The eschatology of the Zohar, like that of the Spanish Kabbalah, runs along lines which are closely akin [isotop] to those of Joachim and the Spirituals" (*OE*, 87).

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pneumatic-spiritual orientation (as Taubes asserts, at least since the time of Origen). The most salient feature of this awakening is the *dialectical sublation of the difference between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the secular*, which completely transfigures the traditional discourse of the religious. Combining Taubes with Scholem, who sees this transfiguring sublation in millenarianism and Lurianic Kabbalah respectively, it is easy to see how both these early-modern formations influence the development of modern philosophy, strongly marked by *historiosophical* interest, most of all in Lessing and Hegel. Thus, while Hegel's division of History into three epochs: the epoch of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, follows the teachings of the Joachimites, the very identity of the Hegelian Spirit, *der Geist*, strongly resembles the antinomian divine presence in the world (*Shekhinah*), which, through the agencies of subjective and objective Spirit, i.e. human minds and institutions, presses towards the realization of the promise contained in revelation. And last but not least, the Hegelian cunning of reason, *List der Vernunft*, can also be seen as the antinomian agency of the messianic impulse, which strives to achieve its goal despite all the obstacles and appearances to the contrary.[21]

In the end, therefore, Taubes' manoeuvre seems even bolder than Scholem's, who only pointed to some trends within the Judaic tradition, producing strange and rather erratic effects on Western modernity (the secularisation of the *tikkun* in Hegel and the antinomian moment of the Radical Enlightenment). In Taubes' experimental account, *modernity as such is Jewish* – while all modern thinkers, with Hegel as their paradigmatic centre, remain modern only insofar as they can be reclaimed by Jewish messianism. This strategy may not seem so obvious *prima facie*, especially when we consider Taubes' polemic with Scholem, where he explicitly states that the roots of the modern Spirit are Christian. Yet in fact, when he emphasizes, *pace* Scholem, the *non-Judaic* character of modernity, he only

[21] We could also go on in listing the borrowings from Luria in Hegel: the divine *tsimtsum* as the first alienation of Spirit who thus creates the world; the world's fallen status as totally alienated from God (*Anderssein des Gottes*); Shekhinah (the holy presence in the fallen world) as the secret identity of the Spirit, operative within created reality; and the *tikkun* envisaged as the ultimate de-alienation of the world in the act of Absolute Knowledge and the return of reality to God. On the affinity between Hegel's notion of the Spirit and the Judaic doctrine of *Shekhinah*, the divine presence, see Taubes's article on the eighteenth-century Jewish Hegelian, Nachman Krochmal, "Nachman Krochmal and Modern Historicism". Yet even here, Taubes "stresses the Christian origins of the concept of spirit" (*CC*, 31), thus fully agreeing with Löwith's genealogy of *der Geist* (*CC*, ibid, p. 29). But, as I claim in this essay, this does not hinder Taubes in his strategy of re-hebraisation of modernity, for Christianity, especially the messianic-pneumatic-spiritual Christianity, is not seen by him as an alternative to Jewishness, but as a more consequential fulfilment of Jewishness than Judaism itself.

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aims at an idea of Jewishness freed from the crippling formations of Judaism. Praising the Christian liberation of the Spirit, which paved the way for the modern sense of history, Taubes does not betray Jewishness for the sake of its long-standing adversary. On the contrary, in the typically Karaite way, he defends it against the betrayal he senses in the Rabbinic tradition. Thus, precisely because modernity is *not* influenced by any movement that sprang from the "house of Judaism" (be it Maimonides, Lurianic Kabbalah, or even Sabbatai), it can still be influenced by the most precious Jewish element that never found its proper place within the Rabbinic edifice: the pure, untamed, antinomian spark of Jewish messianism.

Thus, although the original Hebrew revelation contains all we need to know about the proper beginning of History, the true sense of messianic historicism becomes possible only with modernity, or the so called Copernican Turn, which repeats but also strengthens the exodic direction of the first original *Wende*. The term "Copernican Turn" derives obviously from Immanuel Kant, but is used by Taubes to serve a different purpose. It is not to signify the change in our cognitive attitude towards reality (as in Kant), but a spiritual reorientation: *the passage from Eros to Spirit*. While Eros is a pagan principle of the world conceived as a self-enclosed, self-sufficient and harmonious totality, Spirit is a religious principle of the creaturely world, first shaken and traumatised in its false self-enclosure, and then set on a dynamic route towards redemption. Philosophically speaking, this passage indicates the change from the pre-modern static Neo-Platonism to modern dynamic Historicism:

> The medieval Church is characterized by the Ptolemaic worldview. The world, as it is, is an image of its archetype, and by elevating its proper nature to a higher plane, the imperfect image of this world approximates its archetype .... In the Copernican view of the world there is an earth but no heaven. The earth mirrors no heaven, and the reality of the world is gained by *Copernican* man, not by having the world emulate a superior archetype, but by revolutionizing the world in terms of an ideal that lies in the future. The Ptolemaic world is ruled by the Platonic concept of *eros*, which attracts the lower sphere to the upper sphere. The Copernican world is ruled by the *spirit*, which invariably presses ahead. The ethics of the Copernican man is an ethics of the future .... The Platonic relationship of image and archetype, which Origen and Augustine set up between earthly history and heavenly guidance, is transformed for Joachim [da Fiore] into a powerful chain of events within history: the Kingdom of Heaven becomes the final realm of the spirit (*OE*, 88–9).[22]

[22] This also means a one-way, irreversible passage from the pre-modern method of analogy to the modern method of dialectic. The following sentence from Taubes' essay "Dialectic and Analogy" could thus be read as an interesting memento for John Milbank: "A

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The Copernican Turn, therefore, inaugurates modernity but only as an epoch of awakened Jewish messianism. The "new" of *die Neuzeit* is also the "oldest", the renewed revelation of the *ruah* hovering restlessly over the waters (it is not at all an accident that Luther's word s*chweben* would become the favourite term in the vocabulary of German Idealists). The modern demise of metaphysics ("earth without heaven") or, more subtly, modern *temporalisation of metaphysics* (where secular history becomes inscribed into *Heilsgeschichte* with the holy beginning and eschatological end); the modern appreciation of a dynamic change that transforms being without looking up to eternal archetypes; and finally, modern rupturous "all that is solid, melts into air" – all these moments point to a revolutionary break with the Greco-Christian cosmos of the neo-platonic harmony, ruled by the sublimated principle of Eros. Now Eros is gone for ever. Enter *Spiritus*: this is how modernity truly begins, once again reinvigorating the sacred beginning.

At the same time, however, while investing in modern history, Taubes maintains a hard-core belief in revelation coming "from the other side". It does not make Taubes anti-modern, to the contrary. He firmly believes in the modern "transfigurations of the messianic" (*TP*, 55), which allow the antinomian impulse to come through despite all the obstacles. Thus, even if Taubes' evolution can be described as a long journey from "Gnostic" Bloch to "pistic" Barth[23] – or, from the messianic revolutionary Gnosis of *Occidental Eschatology* to the deeply disillusioned *Political Theology of Paul*, that is, in yet other words, from the dialectical belief in the inner transformation of being to the diathetical expectation of the annihilation of being, what is truly interesting about him stays somewhere in the middle. It is the strange *tertium*, which makes him differ both from Bloch's cheerful autonomy of the human spirit and Barth's sombre heteronomy of the "paradox of faith"; some vague, never fully articulated, idea of a *subtle heteronomy* where revelation, never watered-down but always a hard-core antinomian force, does not diminish but enables its human recipient. For Taubes – and I believe him to be a crucial representative of modern Jewish messianism – the modern self-assertion and empowerment of the human constitutes the most essential message of the Hebrew religion of the Exodus: the "alien message", which, precisely because of this alienness, still remains very much

theology that has lost the cosmological basis for the principle of analogy but nevertheless continues with the method of analogy becomes purely metaphorical. In a Copernican universe a theology that takes its symbols and presuppositions seriously can only proceed by the method of dialectic" (*CC*, 171–2).

[23] On this difference see Jacob Taubes, "The Realm of Paradox", *Review of Metaphysics*, no 7 (1953/1954), p. 482.

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dependent on its revealed beginning, for ever anchored in the antinomian opening of radical otherness.

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