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## The Schmittian Messiah in Agamben's *The Time That Remains*

Brian Britt

For Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek the New Testament writings attributed to Paul have much to say on contemporary debates over politics and religious tradition.<sup>1</sup> Unlike other thinkers who have turned to Paul at moments of crisis and innovation, Badiou, Žižek, and Agamben neither write as theologians nor profess Christianity. In what some have called our postsecular present, religious tradition has become a serious category of analysis in circles of political and cultural theory for the first time. Taking the measure of this new intellectual trend calls for careful readings of books on the subject, among the most interesting of which is Agamben's *The Time That Remains*, a series of seminar lectures (given in Paris, Verona, and Berkeley during 1998–99) that explores the influence of Paul's letters on messianic thought. Weaving in and out of the Greek text of Romans, other New Testament texts, and numerous works of modern political and cultural theory, Agamben argues that Paul's letters represent the "fundamental messianic text for the Western tradition" (*T*, p. 1).

Agamben, Žižek, and Badiou approach Paul as cultural and political theorists concerned to define his potential for contemporary thought. For Agam-

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All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

1. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, Calif., 2005); hereafter abbreviated *T*. See also Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, Calif., 2003), and Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).

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ben, the tradition of Pauline messianism challenges reigning models of liberal democracy and secular power, and he specifically disputes Badiou's universalistic reading of Paul. While Agamben never adopts a Christian confessional stance, he rejects merely aesthetic and hypothetical versions of messianism, preferring instead Karl Barth's robust reading of Paul (see *T*, pp. 41–42). Given this advocacy for Christian tradition, especially Paul's letters, it is not clear how Agamben can avoid sectarianism (see *T*, pp. 51–53).<sup>2</sup> The same issue faces many so-called postsecular thinkers, from the radically orthodox John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas to nontheologians and atheists like Jacques Derrida, Talal Asad, Žižek, and Badiou. For Christian sectarianism is one thing by itself, but severed as it is in some current thinkers from ecclesiology, liturgy, community life, and even Christology, non-Christian sectarianism can be puzzling—a kind of sectarianism without a sect. For contemporary theorists, the challenge is how to engage religious traditions without endorsing traditionalism or what Ashis Nandy calls “critical traditionalism.”<sup>3</sup>

My primary concern is not Agamben's reading of Paul but his reading of Walter Benjamin as a Pauline thinker through the lens of Carl Schmitt's political theology. Agamben claims that Benjamin's writings on messianism can be shown, through a set of allusions and quotations, to depend directly on Paul's writings. More specifically, he believes he has discovered a “secret presence of the Pauline text” in Benjamin's last work, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (*T*, p. 140). I argue that Agamben misreads and misunderstands Benjamin's messianic thought, projecting a Schmittian model of religion onto Benjamin's conception of tradition. Agamben's specific misreading is the claim that Benjamin's “On the Concept of History” (also known as “Theses on the Philosophy of History” [1940]) is a Pauline messianic text, but it illustrates a broader tendency to inscribe a dualistic map of religion and secularity onto Benjamin's thought. While

2. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif., 1998).

3. See the discussion in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago, 2002), p. 39.

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this essay engages Agamben at the level of textual detail at which he likes to operate, its stakes are nevertheless high: Agamben's project, like that of Badiou, Žižek, and others, engages Christian texts and traditions to address an emerging consensus that secular liberal traditions, along with such trademark ideals of liberty, equality, toleration, and rights, stand in crisis. In response to this crisis, I believe we are witnessing a religious turn in cultural and critical theory in which Benjamin and Schmitt play leading parts.

Agamben is only one of several thinkers to bring Schmitt and Benjamin to bear on the contemporary religious turn, and his book follows a widespread tendency to emphasize the religious dimensions of politics (with Schmitt) while minimizing religious and biblical tradition (as in Benjamin).<sup>4</sup> An important feature of the literature on Benjamin and Schmitt is the complex question of their intellectual interconnections, which I address below. If Agamben's text is any indicator, the role of Benjamin and Schmitt in the current religious turn is more of a cautious nod toward religious tradition as a superstructure than a set of distinct discourses and practices. Though written as a commentary on the first verse of Paul's letter to the Romans intended to restore it to its original biblical and Jewish-Hellenistic context, *The Time That Remains* concentrates on analogies between Paul and contemporary political theory, as in this Schmittian version of the biblical notion of the remnant: "This remnant is the figure, or the substantiality assumed by a people in a decisive moment, and as such is the only real political subject" (*T*, p. 57).

Religious texts and traditions resist such categorical comparisons. As Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and others established in the twentieth century have, one must first ask what constitutes religious tradition in the first place. My critical reading of Agamben's *The Time That Remains* thus leads

4. See Lutz Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1999); Michael P. Steinberg, "Introduction: Benjamin and the Critique of Allegorical Reason," in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Steinberg (Ithaca, N.Y., 1996), pp. 1–23; Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York, 2001); Arnd Wedemeyer, "Herrschaftszeiten! Theopolitical Profanities in the Face of Secularization," *New German Critique* 35 (Fall 2008): 121–41; Anselm Haverkamp, "Richard II, Bracton, and the End of Political Theology," *Law and Literature* 16 (Fall 2004): 313–26; Alexander Filipovic et al., *Theologie in Politik und Gesellschaft* (Berlin, 2006); Sigrid Weigel, "Soverän, Märtyrer, und 'gerechte Kriege' jenseits des Jus Publikum Europaeum," in *Figuren des Europäischen* (Munich, 2006), pp. 101–28; Elke Dubbels, "Zur Logik der Figuren des Messianischen in Walter Benjamins 'Theologisch-politischem Fragment,'" in *Profanes Leben: Zur Dialektik der Säkularisierung bei Walter Benjamin*, ed. Daniel Weidner and Weigel (forthcoming); Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore, 2001); and Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" trans. Mary Quaintance, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London, 2002), pp. 230–98.

to a constructive reading of Benjamin's conception of biblical tradition, especially in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Where Agamben draws a straight line from Paul to Benjamin and other modern thinkers, biblical reception history can better be understood in terms of numerous, uneven, and interlocking lines of influence, within a biblical tradition described by Benjamin as a definite but indirect constellation of influences.

*The Time That Remains* reflects Agamben's recurring preoccupation with political and cultural philosophy, especially with the problem of understanding religious categories and traditions in light of crises and conflicts of legitimacy in modern liberal political thought. One category that comes in for harsh judgment is toleration. To Badiou's claim that Paul's universalism is an "indifference that tolerates differences," Agamben retorts that "for Paul, it is not a matter of 'tolerating' or getting past differences in order to pinpoint a sameness or a universal lurking beyond. The universal is not a transcendent principle through which differences may be perceived—such a perspective of transcendence is not available to Paul" (*T*, p. 52). Agamben's conflict with Badiou reveals Schmitt's importance for Agamben's project: Schmitt furnishes Agamben with the doctrines of law, decisionism, and sovereignty he needs to dispute Badiou's universalistic Paul (see *T*, pp. 36–39).<sup>5</sup> But although Schmitt considers politics to be the inheritor of religious traditions, he maintains a sharp conceptual distinction between the two, often reading religion narrowly as a kind of politics.<sup>6</sup> Hans Blumenberg, a critic of Schmitt's understanding of secularization, has argued that "for the political theorist Carl Schmitt secularization is a category of legitimation."<sup>7</sup>

As Agamben notes, Jacob Taubes had already compared Benjamin and Paul on the concept of the Messiah. Reading Benjamin's "Theological-Political Fragment" closely with Romans 8, Taubes concludes that Benjamin's idea of the Messiah is Pauline. But, in doing so, Taubes portrays Paul as "more Jewish than any Reform rabbi, or any Liberal rabbi, I ever heard in Germany, England, America, Switzerland, or anywhere."<sup>8</sup> For

5. See also Badiou, *Saint Paul*, pp. 75–85.

6. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, Mass., 1985) and *The Concept of the Political*, trans. Schwab (Chicago, 1996), pp. 22–27.

7. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt, 1988), p. 108. Blumenberg's conception of secularization, against that of Karl Löwith and Schmitt alike, is not that of "the conversion [*Umsetzung*] of authentic theological contents into their secular counterparts, but rather as the reshuffling or reoccupation [*Umbesetzung*] of answer positions that have become vacant but cannot be freed from their corresponding questions" (*ibid.*, p. 75).

8. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander, ed. Aleida Assmann et al. (Stanford, Calif., 2004), p. 11; hereafter abbreviated *PTP*.

Taubes, Benjamin also represents a refreshing alternative to modern liberal thinking on the Messiah: “No shmontses like ‘the messianic,’ ‘the political,’ no neutralization, but the Messiah. . . . Not that we are dealing here with the Christian Messiah, but it does say: the Messiah. No cloudy Enlightenment or Romantic neutralization” (*PTP*, p. 70).<sup>9</sup> Later, comparing Benjamin to Karl Barth, Taubes reflects on the idea of Messiah as purely divine prerogative: “the drawbridge comes from the other side. And whether you get fetched or not, as Kafka describes it, is not up to you. One can take the elevators up to the high-rises of spirituality—it won’t help. . . . To liberate yourself autonomously according to the German Idealist model—well, when you get to be my age and in my condition, you just have to wonder that anyone besides professors takes such a thing seriously” (*PTP*, p. 76). Taubes laces his discussion with the kind of humor that, by signaling modesty and lightness, has the paradoxical effect of making his argument compelling. From the standpoint of Taubes, Agamben’s claim to the originality of Paul’s messianic thought comes too late, since Jewish tradition has already been there, and too early, since Taubes is more clear than Agamben about the historical context of political ideas.

I leave it for others to judge whether Agamben takes the study of Paul very far beyond Taubes’s *The Political Theology of Paul*; a comparison of the two studies yields some striking parallels, many of which Agamben acknowledges: the technique of closely reading Paul’s opening salutation, criticism of Martin Buber, the observation that the word *pan* is a motif in the letter to the Romans (see *PTP*, pp. 14–15, 10, 26–28).<sup>10</sup> One contrast between Agamben and Taubes is that Taubes grounds all of his analysis in a tradition of interpretation and liturgy; historical details about the life of Jewish communities, along with specific accounts of liturgy and Talmud, run through his study. Agamben, on the contrary, offers little historical analysis or what biblical scholars call *Sitz im Leben*, a cultural context, for how his reflections relate to specific communities, societies, or traditions (outside the guild of theorists, of course). It may be sentimental detail, but Taubes also permits himself to comment on the personalities of those whose ideas he engages, including Adorno, Benjamin, and Schmitt. Doing so contextualizes Taubes’s argument in an intellectual tradition that restlessly engages in new readings and avoids categorical interpretive claims.

Agamben’s final chapter addresses the correspondences between Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and selected passages of

9. “Compared to this Bloch is just wishy-washy, and especially Adorno” (*PTP*, p. 74).

10. Agamben though fails to acknowledge the influence of thinkers like Ernst Bloch, Gershom Scholem, and Hans Jonas; however, he later notes Scholem’s Pauline reading of Benjamin’s cryptic text “Agesilaus Santander”; see *T*, pp. 140, 144.

Paul's letters. Here Agamben claims that Benjamin quotes Paul directly in ways that reveal a close correspondence between their respective ideas of messianism: "You can imagine that I was moved (to quite a degree) when discovering this hidden (although not so hidden) Pauline citation in the text within the *Theses*. To my knowledge, Taubes was the only scholar to note the possible influence of Paul on Benjamin, but his hypothesis referred to a text from the 1920s, the *Theological-Political Fragment*" (*T*, p. 140–41). Strangely though, only three pages later, Agamben claims that "Scholem himself knew of this closeness between Benjamin's thought and Paul's" (*T*, p. 144). Agamben adds that his discovery, unlike Taubes's, reveals a genuine citation. What makes these lapses troubling, I believe, is that Agamben, like many thinkers, cites Benjamin to provide intellectual legitimacy for his own project.

Agamben struggles to reconcile what he considers to be Benjamin's messianic thought with the secular and political realism he associates with Schmitt. In his survey of the debate between Benjamin and Schmitt, Agamben portrays the difference in stark terms of law and anomie: "While Schmitt attempts every time to reinscribe violence within a juridical context, Benjamin responds to this gesture by seeking every time to assure it—as pure violence—an existence outside of the law."<sup>11</sup> Agamben then reads an excerpt from Benjamin's correspondence with Scholem in Schmittian terms. Benjamin writes, "without the key that belongs to it, the Scripture is not Scripture, but life. Life as it is lived in the village at the foot of the hill on which the castle is built."<sup>12</sup> Agamben offers this Schmittian comment: "The Scripture (the Torah) without its key is the cipher of the law in the state of exception, which is in force but is not applied or is applied without being in force" (*SE*, p. 63). For Agamben, the survival and study of the defunct law poses a problem that Benjamin can only solve by means of messianic thought: "What becomes of the law after its messianic fulfillment? . . . The decisive point here is that the law—no longer practiced, but studied—is not justice, but only the gate that leads to it. . . . One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good" (*SE*, pp. 63–64).<sup>13</sup>

11. Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, 2005), p. 59; hereafter abbreviated *SE*.

12. Walter Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, 11 Aug. 1934, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, ed. Scholem and Theodor Adorno (Chicago, 1994), p. 453.

13. In fact, the letter from Benjamin to Scholem may, as I have suggested, allude to the close relationship in Judaism between text and life, as in the biblical text of Deuteronomy 32: 46–47, which identifies *torah* with life. Neither this biblical text nor the tradition surrounding it

The “one day” of Agamben’s paraphrase ascribes a concept of indefinite deferral to Benjamin’s messianism, one that has no immediate political significance (without the help of Schmitt). And while the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and the earlier “Theological-Political Fragment” make such a conclusion understandable (and widespread), Benjamin’s texts nevertheless bear out an abiding and serious engagement with political thought. The “Theological-Political Fragment” rules out any direct correspondence between historical reality and messianism, for example, but it insists on an indirect and paradoxical connection between the order of the profane and that of the messianic.<sup>14</sup> Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” likewise craft not so much a link between politics and religion as an urgent call to juxtapose the two discourses. Agamben’s Benjamin is thus profound but finally ineffective when it comes to political matters; his value lies, rather, in bridging Paul and Schmitt.

### Textual Analysis

What is Agamben’s evidence for Benjamin’s citation of Paul? He offers three main examples. The first is an apparent citation of Paul in the phrase “weak messianic power” (“schwache messianische Kraft”) in Benjamin’s second thesis and a passage of 2 Corinthians 12:9, “And he said to me, ‘Take satisfaction in my grace, for my power is strong in weakness’” (the 1912 edition of Luther’s translation reads: “denn meine Kraft is in den Schwachen mächtig”). Agamben admits that the term *messiah* is missing from the passage, but he buttresses his case by the next lines, in which Paul embraces his own weakness because it draws him to the power of Christ (“Kraft Christi”): “for if I am weak, so am I strong.” (2 Cor. 12:9–10). Adding to the impression that he has pulled an exegetical rabbit out of a hat, Agamben notes, “according to my knowledge, only one text explicitly theorizes on the weakness of messianic power” (*T*, pp. 139–40). Here Agamben overlooks a significant number of texts from the Hebrew Bible, many of which play a central role in the New Testament; the Servant songs of Second Isaiah (Isa. 42:1–4, 49:1–6, 50:4–9, 52:13–53:12) and many passages of Jeremiah come immediately to mind. I will return to Second Isaiah below. But Agamben goes beyond this thematic connection to claim that Benjamin directly cites Paul. His evidence here is that Benjamin’s manu-

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carries messianic meaning. See Brian Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* (New York, 1996). Regardless of whether this allusion underlies Benjamin’s text, there is no reason to assign it a messianic meaning.

14. See Benjamin, “Theologisch-Politisches Fragment,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt, 1972–89), 2:203–4.



script emphasizes the word *schwache*. This “citation,” however, may just as well come from the text that Paul himself may be citing: Joel 4:10 (3:10 in English), which, if not explicitly messianic, is clearly apocalyptic: “Let the weak say, ‘I am strong!’” (“Der Schwache spreche: Ich bin stark!”).

The second citation Agamben ascribes to Benjamin, a “textual confirmation that permits our referring to an actual citation without citation marks,” is between the sentence in the fifth thesis, “The true image [*das wahre Bild*] of the past flees by” (*T*, p. 141) and two distant passages of Paul: Romans 5:14 (“he who is an image [*Bild*] of the one who was to come”) and 1 Corinthians 7:31, which speaks of the figure of the world passing away. The second passage lacks any verbal correspondence with Benjamin’s text; the terms *flees* (*huscht*) and *image* (*Bild*) are both missing. All that remains, then, is the common word *Bild*, which appears in Benjamin and the passage from Romans, along with references to time.

Agamben’s third case of citation involves two very different forms of a single German word, *zusammenfassen* (to sum up) (Benjamin’s eighteenth thesis and Ephesians 1:10) (see *T*, pp. 142–43).<sup>15</sup> There is nothing very exceptional about this verb, but Agamben’s comparison is fascinating; Benjamin’s messianic now-time (*Jetztzeit*), like Paul’s Christ, sums it all up. Even though he fails to show that the citation is genuine, Agamben has hit upon a rich insight about ideas of time in Paul and Benjamin, one that deserves a full development. Instead, Agamben concludes that “this should be enough to prove a textual correspondence,” without providing a sustained comparative discussion (*T*, p. 144).

There are two salient biblical motifs in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that Agamben overlooks. Neither of these strikes me as a direct citation, but I believe both testify to Benjamin’s interest in religious ideas and biblical tradition. The first is from Benjamin’s final sentence, on the “strait gate through which the Messiah may enter,” which alludes to the “strait gate” through which Jesus urges his disciples to enter the kingdom (Matt. 7:13, Luke 13:24). Here my point cuts two ways: on the one hand, I do not believe Benjamin was actually citing Luther’s Bible, but I do think Benjamin is making a loose biblical allusion of the sort that even nonreaders of the Bible would catch, just as many sayings and phrases in English ring familiar to those who don’t read the Bible, such as “forty days and forty nights” and “the wages of sin is death.” But Benjamin’s phrase, “kleine Pforte,”<sup>16</sup> differs from Luther’s “enge Pforte” (Matt. 7:13, Luke 13:

15. Incidentally, Agamben’s text misquotes Luther; it reads *verfasset* where it should be *gefasst*.

16. Benjamin, “Über den Begriff Geschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:704.

24).<sup>17</sup> If Benjamin was quoting Luther's Bible verbatim in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," why would he so carelessly substitute *kleine* for *enge*? It must also be noted that Benjamin's reference describes the traditional Jewish idea of the Messiah's return through the eastern gate in Jerusalem, though I have not found a text that describes this gate as a "kleine Pforte." With this case, as with those cited by Agamben, I believe we have a loose, associative allusion rather than a citation.

A second, more striking set of biblical allusions in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" involves the terms for redemption and redeemer: *Erlösung* and *Erlöser* in Luther's Bible. Unlike many of the terms on which Agamben hangs his analysis, this is an explicitly religious association. My focus would not strictly be Paul, however, but rather a whole range of biblical texts. Unlike the examples given by Agamben, this term appears frequently in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (six times, by my count, in a text of eleven pages in the German) and is semantically close to the idea of the messiah.

The biblical text that comes closest to making a motif or *Leitwort* of *Erlösung* and *Erlöser* is Isaiah (9, 11, and 40–55), a text that precedes and influences Paul with the idea of a weak Messiah. Hundreds of years before Paul was born, the idea of a weak messianic power was born in the vivid oracles of an Israelite prophet during the time of the Babylonian exile. Through a brilliant set of images and allusions to earlier biblical texts, Isaiah develops a bold theological vision of a descendent of David and the "suffering servant" who redeems (*erlöst*) Israel.<sup>18</sup> Like Isaiah, then, Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is preoccupied with the idea of redemption through an individual (though the "servant songs" in Second Isaiah may apply to a group of people). Though this textual and thematic correspondence is arguably stronger than the examples adduced by Agamben, this is no proof that Benjamin cited Isaiah verbatim in the "The-

17. Luther's passage in Matthew reads, "Gehet ein durch die enge Pforte. Denn die Pforte ist weit, und der Weg ist breit, der zur Verdammnis abführt; und ihrer sind viele, die darauf wandeln." *Pforte* appears in only two other texts in Luther's Bible (apart from Matthew and its counterpart in Luke): Genesis 28:17 and Ezekiel 26:2; the similar word *Tor* appears much more often. Incidentally, *Tor* also appears in Kafka's famous parable "Before the Law," a story in which, like the New Testament parable, the door is closed, not open.

18. See especially the "Suffering Servant Songs" of Isaiah 42:1–4, 43:14–28, 49:1–6, 50:4–9, 51:10–11, and 52:13–53:12. The term *Erlöser* appears frequently in Luther's translation of the text; see Isa. 41:14: "Dein Erlöser ist der heilige in Israel." Similar uses appear in Isaiah 44:24, 47:4, 48:17, 49:7, and 54:8. *Erlöser* appears in theses 6 and 11 of the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," as well as in the feminine form in thesis 12. The corresponding noun *Erlösung* appears in thesis 2 and, for example, Isaiah 45:17: "Israel aber wird erlöst durch den HERRN, durch eine ewige Erlösung, und wird nicht zu Schanden noch zu Spott immer und ewiglich." Finally, *Erlösten* appears in thesis 3 and in Isa. 51:10–11.

ses on the Philosophy of History.” In his haste to latch onto Paul as a proof-text for Benjamin, Agamben overlooks the deeply intertextual structure of the Bible. Paul, more than most biblical authors, constructs his discourse on a patchwork of biblical references.

In preparing this essay I conducted some semirandom searches through Luther’s Bible and Benjamin’s writings that turned up a pair of texts that share a significant number of terms and themes: Luke 13 and the two-page passage of “One-Way Street” (1926; published in 1928) titled “To the Public: Please Protect and Preserve These New Plantings.” Benjamin’s text presents the verb *redeem* in quotation marks: “Was wird ‘gelöst?’”<sup>19</sup> Benjamin continues with one of his most direct statements on sacred texts: “Commentary and translation stand in the same relation to the text as style and mimesis to nature. . . . On the tree of the sacred text both are only the eternally rustling leaves; on that of the profane, the seasonally falling fruits.”<sup>20</sup> One could, following Agamben, pursue this as a series of direct, verbatim citations. A comparison of Luke 13 and this passage can be summarized in a list that follows the order of Benjamin’s text:

1. Luke 13:16 and Benjamin: both use the term *gelöst*, and, by placing quotation marks around the term, Benjamin alerts us to his citation.
2. Luke 13:6–9 and Benjamin: both use the terms for plant, tree, and fruit in symbolic sayings.
3. Luke 13:19 and Benjamin: both combine bird and tree in symbolic sayings.

What is more, Luke 13:24 is also the passage that mentions the narrow gate “enge Pforte” to which Benjamin may allude in the final sentence of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (“kleine Pforte”).

Coincidence? Probably, and so are Agamben’s “citations.” These associations can and do yield insights into the structure and content of Benjamin’s thought, especially the religious (biblical) dimension that most scholars have swept under the rug. In my reading of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” references to theology, “weak messianic power,” the recurring use of *Erlöser*, and the image of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* are not merely religious metaphors but part of Benjamin’s preoccupation with tradition and history, with the persistence and concealment of religion in modernity. As he struggled in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” to understand this dynamic, Benjamin reiterated themes dating from his earliest writings, such as “On Language as Such and the Language of Human-

19. Benjamin, “Einbahnstraße,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4:92.

20. Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1978), p. 68.

ity” (1916) and “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” (1918), in which he insisted that modern thinking acknowledge its religious inheritance. One of Benjamin’s notes to the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” for instance, suggests that philosophical critique and prophecy are both related to the idea of salvation.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, these observations reveal the extent to which exegetical methods of close reading bring patterns of language and thought to light. To Agamben’s credit, these methods of reading are central to *The Time That Remains*, but instead of observing the extent to which Paul’s thought and Luther’s translation may have left an imprint on many texts and thinkers, Agamben exaggerates the case of Benjamin and Paul.<sup>22</sup> Re-reading Paul at moments of historical and doctrinal innovation is a topos in biblical tradition; one can see it in Augustine’s *Confessions*, Luther’s “Tower Experience,” John Wesley’s “The Aldersgate Experience,” and Barth’s commentary on Romans. In one way or another, each of these revisions of Christian thought involves Luther’s text on Paul’s letter to the Romans.<sup>23</sup>

### With Schmitt or against Us

My point here is not simply to criticize Agamben’s readings; it is to say that problems of biblical transmission and tradition are more complex and interesting than Agamben suggests. In his essays on language and translation and the passage above from “One-Way Street,” this complexity is a direct concern of Benjamin’s and one that I have argued is crucial to his work.<sup>24</sup> If Benjamin’s contribution to this problem can be summed up, I would say it calls for attention to subtle, even hidden, forms of biblical tradition not so much in explicitly religious texts and institutions as in the cultural phenomena of music, art, politics, and urban landscapes.

Though *The Time That Remains* is really about Paul and Schmitt, Agamben uses Benjamin as a methodological link between Paul and Schmitt, even while Agamben reads Benjamin through Schmitt. In *Homo Sacer*, *State of Exception*, and *Means without End* references to Benjamin

21. “Sollten Kritik und Prophetie die Kategorien sein, die in der ‘Retttung’ der Vergangenheit zusammen treten?” (Benjamin, “Benjamin-Archiv, Ms. 485,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:1245).

22. Many years ago I bought Robert Boyle’s *James Joyce’s Pauline Vision: A Catholic Exposition* (Carbondale, Ill., 1978), which I thought might contain a hidden key to understanding Joyce’s texts, despite the profound differences between the two writers. It is this kind of naive enthusiasm for correspondences that I think we see in Agamben’s book.

23. See John Wesley, “The Aldersgate Experience,” *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York, 1964), p. 66. I thank Jerome Copulsky for this observation.

24. See Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible*.

abound, but the core argument of each book comes from Schmitt.<sup>25</sup> The most familiar Schmittian concept here is the idea (from *Political Theology*) that the sovereign is the one who decides the state of exception. As in many of his other books, this concept underlies Agamben's entire understanding of law. Its application in *The Time That Remains*, however, yields awkward results. After a three-page exposition of Schmitt's notion of sovereignty illustrated with the suspension of constitutional law by the Nazis, Agamben identifies the idea in Paul's "justice without law" and "law of faith" (Rom. 3:21, 27). The sort of law one finds in Paul, such as "you shall not lust" (Rom. 7:7), is no law at all, says Agamben, but rather a "trial in the Kafkaesque sense of the term, a perpetual self-accusation without a precept" (*T*, p. 108). As for the upholding of the covenant in messianic time (Rom. 13:8–9), Agamben notes that it represents "an *Aufhebung* of the state of exception, an absolutizing of *katargēsis* [suspension of the law]" (*T*, p. 108). Nevertheless, Agamben disputes Schmitt's reading of Paul as a supporter of Christian political law in 2 Thessalonians 2.<sup>26</sup>

Agamben's uses of the Bible and Benjamin and his heavy dependence on Schmitt conceal problematic understandings not only of sovereignty but also of secularism and secularization. By his facile analogies between ancient and modern thought, between Paul and Benjamin, Agamben leans hard on similarities without addressing differences, claiming, for instance, that Hegel's political theory is a "secularization of Christian theology" (*T*, p. 99). Agamben goes beyond endorsing Schmitt's idea that modern concepts of the state are "secularized theological concepts" to applying it to Paul himself. With the claim that Paul's theology "plays the constitution against positive law," Agamben elevates the theory of secularization to a transhistorical, transcultural concept. Like those history survey courses that perpetually announce the rise of the middle class, Agamben's theory of Paul and the messiah seems to regard secularization as a permanent condition of Western history.

25. In *The Time That Remains* there are fourteen index citations to Benjamin and only four to Schmitt. In Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif., 1999) there are sixteen references to Benjamin and three to Schmitt. In *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, 2000), references to Benjamin outnumber references to Schmitt ten to five. The most notable exception to this pattern is Agamben's study of Schmitt called *State of Exception*, where Schmitt is cited twenty-two times and Benjamin only eight.

26. The dominant Schmittian idea in *The Time That Remains*, from *Political Theology*, is that "the most meaningful concepts of the modern doctrine of the State are secularized theological concepts" (quoted in *T*, p. 118). In Agamben's reading of Paul, this becomes the striking claim that "in a certain sense, every theory of the State, including Hobbes's—which thinks of it as a power destined to block or delay catastrophe—can be taken as a secularization of the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2" (one that Agamben disputes) (*T*, p. 110).

Despite his fealty to Benjamin, Agamben seems intent on conscripting him into Schmittian as well as Pauline service. Agamben's concern to link Paul's messianism to modern thought requires a methodological bridge between the two, one that Agamben thinks Benjamin provides. By linking Benjamin to Paul, Agamben strengthens the link between Schmitt and Paul. Benjamin also provides a smoother transition from Paul to Marx and Hegel (see *T*, pp. 30–33, 90). Following Benjamin's claim that Marx secularized the idea of the messiah in the notion of the classless society, Agamben compares Paul's messianic "calling" (*klēsis*; 1 Cor. 7:20) to Marx's idea of class (see *T*, p. 30). Agamben makes this connection after establishing it first through Max Weber's reading of *klēsis* as *Stand*, the term Marx used to denote class. What Benjamin adds here is authorization to pursue a Schmittian line of thought, which Agamben follows by circling back to Taubes's "anarchic-nihilistic interpretation" of Paul's messianism, also indebted to Benjamin (*T*, p. 33). By appealing to Benjamin, Agamben links Hegel to Paul via Luther and, in the culmination of the essay, Schmitt to Paul (on the state of exception and law versus faith in connection to messianism) (see *T*, pp. 104–12, 118–37).

In fact, Benjamin's claim that Marx secularized messianic time with the concept of the classless society leads to a discussion of the complex interactions of religion and politics. "The problem [*Unheil*]," writes Benjamin, "is the fact that social democracy elevated this idea to an 'ideal.' The ideal would then be defined in neo-Kantian doctrine as an 'endless task.'" Thus elevated to an ideal, Marx's idea (*Vorstellung*, an invented notion) leads to negative political consequences. Such a perspective keeps "empty and homogeneous time" perpetually waiting in the "so-called antechamber" of a "revolutionary situation." The exaggeration of Marx's simple idea thus leads to the eternal deferral of political change, one that can only be interrupted by political action. Benjamin concludes this short text with a paradoxical and parenthetical challenge to the messianic ideal of classless society: "The classless society is not the final goal of progress in history but rather that so often failed, endlessly contrived discontinuity."<sup>27</sup> On another manuscript page, Benjamin compares the development of messianic power ("messianische Kraft") in history to the spectroscopic analysis of ultraviolet waves from sunlight; neither obvious nor illusory, messianic power can only be recognized by means of special powers of observation.<sup>28</sup>

27. Benjamin, "Benjamin-Archiv, Ms. 1103," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:1231.

28. In yet another manuscript page, Benjamin punctuates his insistence on the convergence of messianic and political conceptions: "A genuinely messianic face must be returned to the concept of the classless society, and that is in the interest of the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself/themselves" (*ibid.*).

The fact that Benjamin corresponded with and cited Schmitt has led some to overstate their common ground. One example is Derrida, who condemns Benjamin for his alleged affinity with Schmitt.<sup>29</sup> My concern is not to distance Benjamin from Schmitt's politics (though the custom of depicting Benjamin as politically effete, which runs from Hannah Arendt to Agamben, could be brought as testimony in this regard) but only to consider how Benjamin's use of Schmitt relates to the question of messianism. First, there is no doubt that Schmitt's idea of sovereignty influenced Benjamin's 1924–25 study of baroque tragic drama. There, in a brief discussion of seventeenth-century politics, Benjamin cites Schmitt's conception of the sovereign in the same terms he would use in the eighth thesis of "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

Whereas the modern concept of sovereignty amounts to a supreme executive power on the part of the prince, the baroque concept emerges from a discussion of the state of emergency, and makes it the most important function of the prince to avert this. The ruler is designated from the outset as the holder of dictatorial power if war, revolt, or other catastrophes should lead to a state of emergency. This is typical of the Counter-Reformation.

Relating baroque politics to the literary form of the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin cites the understanding of seventeenth-century sovereignty from Schmitt's *Political Theology*. For Benjamin, though, baroque politics expresses an "overstrained transcendental impulse" characteristic of the period: "For as an antithesis to the historical ideal of restoration it is haunted by the idea of catastrophe."<sup>30</sup> Benjamin's description of baroque politics stresses the religious and political crisis of the period. The maximal claim of the sovereign to power, which would prove to have affinities with fascism, reflects a political crisis that for Benjamin is also metaphysical and literary. The Schmittian state of emergency in whose name the sovereign claims unprecedented power results from the religious crises set in motion by the Reformation. These crises, in turn, produce a literary crisis of sorts, most obviously manifested in the breakdown of allegorical meaning in the *Trauerspiel*: "Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else."<sup>31</sup>

Benjamin acknowledged his debt in a letter to Schmitt: "You will very quickly notice how much this book is indebted to you for its understand-

29. See Derrida, "Force of Law," pp. 287–93.

30. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London, 1977), pp. 65, 66.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 175.



ing of sovereignty in the seventeenth century.”<sup>32</sup> But influence is not agreement. In a careful study of the problem, Lutz Koepnick argues that Benjamin’s analysis of baroque drama subtly undermines Schmitt’s political theory: “Benjamin uncovers the inner contradictions of ethico-political authority when he portrays the seventeenth-century invention of secularized politics as a misdirected entrance into the modern age.”<sup>33</sup> On Koepnick’s reading, the aesthetic and political crises of the seventeenth century allude to Weimar Germany, and the crises and shortcomings of the earlier period indict Schmitt’s decisionistic and aestheticized politics in the later.<sup>34</sup> Samuel Weber similarly observes, “the theater of the German baroque diverges both from the classical tragedy and from the Schmittian theory of sovereignty in that it leaves no place for anything resembling a *definitive decision*.” In the *Trauerspiel* as Benjamin reads it, “determination is revealed to be the errant stage of an inauthentic and unlocalizable place” while “for Schmitt decision can be situated in terms of an unequivocal *point*.”<sup>35</sup>

The Benjamin text most often associated with Schmitt is “Critique of Violence” (1921); thinkers as different as Derrida and Jürgen Habermas agree that “Critique of Violence” is indebted to Schmitt. For Derrida, the essay’s interest in violence not only echoes Schmitt but also brings Benjamin into the intellectual company of the Nazi perpetrators of genocide.<sup>36</sup> Habermas, along with Derrida, links the Schmittian themes of the text to its religious categories.<sup>37</sup> Beatrice Hanssen denies the claim that Benjamin’s essay echoes Schmitt, but she agrees with Derrida and Habermas that the religious categories of the essay are problematic: “Didn’t the essay rather reintroduce a theological foundationalism, that is, a decisive, authoritative ground, which was to sustain secular forms of violence?”<sup>38</sup>

32. “Sie werden sehr schnell bemerken, wieviel das Buch in seiner Darstellung der Lehre von der Souveränität im 17. Jahrhundert Ihnen verdankt” (Benjamin, letter to Carl Schmitt, 9 Dec. 1930, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:887).

33. Koepnick, “The Spectacle, the *Trauerspiel*, and the Politics of Resolution: Benjamin Reading the Baroque Reading Weimar,” *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996): 291.

34. See *ibid.*, p. 282.

35. Samuel Weber, “Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt,” *Diacritics* 22 (Autumn–Winter 1992): 18.

36. See Derrida, “Force of Law,” pp. 281–83, 298.

37. See Jürgen Habermas, “The Horrors of Autonomy: Carl Schmitt in English,” *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate*, trans. and ed. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 137.

38. Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (London, 2000), p. 23.



What is interesting about these three accounts of Benjamin's essay is their common dismissal of and failure to engage religious categories.<sup>39</sup>

Even allowing for the possible influence of Schmitt on Benjamin during the 1920s, by the time he wrote the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," after Schmitt had joined forces with the Nazis, Benjamin went out of his way to cite and renounce Schmitt's decisionistic politics by playing on the Schmittian terms of state of emergency and exception:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.<sup>40</sup>

Here Benjamin turns Schmitt's notion of sovereignty on its head. In contrast to the presumed state of emergency claimed by the sovereign, Benjamin appeals to a "real state of emergency" directed precisely against the Schmittian politics of fascism. Though it is politically unequivocal and bold in its rejection of fascism and Schmittian theory, Benjamin's rejection nevertheless engages Schmitt's thinking through the kind of implicit inversion Koepnick sees in the *Trauerspiel* study.

### Messianic Tradition

Given the tendency among several thinkers to identify Schmittian themes in Benjamin's thought, it is no surprise that Agamben applies this analogy to the category of messianism. Agamben's claim that Paul's messianism engendered that of Benjamin and others really turns out to mean that two of Schmitt's ideas—the sovereign as the one who decides on the exception and politics as secularized theology—have perennial validity from Paul to Benjamin. Agamben first traces Paul's paradox that the Messiah makes the law inactive (*katargese*) but also serves as its telos (1 Cor. 15:24 and Rom. 10:4) through Chrysostom, Luther, Hegel, Lévi-Strauss, and Derrida (see *T*, pp. 98–104). He then argues that Paul's messianic

39. In an essay on Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," Judith Butler challenges Derrida's reading of the essay as having affinities with Schmitt and fascism: "Derrida also worries that Benjamin wrote to Carl Schmitt in the same year that he published 'Critique of Violence,' but we don't learn what, if anything, in that letter gives cause for concern" (Judith Butler, "Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,'" in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan [New York, 2006], p. 207).

40. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), p. 257; hereafter abbreviated "TPH."

paradox of the law is perfectly parallel and consistent with Schmitt's political paradox of the law as state of exception under the sovereign (see *T*, pp. 104–6). In addition, he argues that Paul's opposition between *pistis* (faith) and *nomos* (law, but also Torah) confirms Schmitt's claim that modern political concepts are "secularized theological concepts" (*T*, p. 118). Agamben's messianic genealogy from Paul to Schmitt and Benjamin really amounts to the imposition of Schmitt on Paul and Benjamin. For Paul, the consequence is a conflation of the messiah and sovereign that reinscribes old dichotomies of particular and universal, law and faith, old and new, that no longer withstand the scrutiny of biblical scholarship (see *T*, pp. 104–7, 120).<sup>41</sup> The Schmittian reading of Benjamin—my main concern here—distorts and inverts a body of work that challenges the distinction between sacred and profane and resists messianic fulfillment. For it was precisely against the tidy opposition of tradition and modernity, sacred and secular, that Benjamin labored. The messianic idea in Benjamin actually serves to resist Schmittian decisionism as well as fascism. As Irving Wohlfarth puts it, citing Benjamin, "it is not as if, with the advent of the messianic age, mankind will enter into a fat 'inheritance,' a parousia of absolute knowledge, a historicist eternity in which truth will be finally incapable of running off."<sup>42</sup> Far from the intentionally ambiguous messiah of Benjamin, Agamben's messiah, in Paul and in Benjamin, is a Schmittian construct.

Of course, messianism did not begin with Paul. It emerged rather from a large number of biblical and postbiblical texts and became part of the culturally pervasive biblical tradition theorized by Benjamin. To illustrate how messianic thought can only be understood as part of a highly intertextual, complex tradition, rather than as a single line of influence from Paul to the present, I digress briefly on the history of biblical messianism. Although it can be argued that "messianic" texts in Isaiah 9, 11, or 53 do not reflect a coherent or full-fledged doctrine of the Messiah, Michael Fishbane shows how early rabbinic understandings of the Messiah have strong biblical roots, as in the citation of Genesis 49:10–11, Psalm 72:8, and other texts of Genesis in the later prophetic book of Zechariah: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zech. 9:9; the allusions to Genesis and Psalm 72 extend through verse 11).<sup>43</sup>

In *The Messiah before Jesus*, Israel Knohl argues that messianic texts

41. See John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford, 2000).

42. Irving Wohlfarth, "On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections," *Glyph*, no. 3 (1978): 187. For the Benjamin, see "Benjamin-Archiv, Ms. 1103," 1:1242.

43. See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1985), p. 502.

among the Dead Sea Scrolls (and other ancient texts like the Oracle of Hystaspes and writings of Philo and Josephus) reveal a Jewish messiah figure, killed in 4 BCE.<sup>44</sup> Like Jesus, this messianic figure was identified with the “servant” of Isaiah 53. The significance of Knohl’s suggestion is its challenge to the predominant scholarly view that the idea of a redemptive messiah closely matched to the “suffering servant” of Isaiah 53 originates with Jesus and his followers. Whether one agrees entirely with Knohl or not, his reading of messianic texts from Qumran, together with the messianic contents of biblical texts and their early reception, suffices to show that the messianic traditions mentioned by Benjamin and so carefully studied by Scholem were already highly developed and heterogeneous by the time of early Christianity.<sup>45</sup> Not all messianic roads lead to and from Paul, even in the first century CE. Knohl’s discovery was not available to Benjamin, but the model of biblical tradition as culturally diffuse and pervasive, along with the category of messiah from such contemporaries as Ernst Bloch, Erich Gutkind, and Scholem, make Agamben’s case for a primarily Pauline influence even more dubious.

### “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: Text and Tradition

What divides Benjamin’s work from Agamben’s is, in a word, tradition. To what extent is our writing conditioned by the weight of tradition? While Agamben addresses the question directly, by his claim that Paul’s letter is the fundamental text of messianic tradition, he resorts to a narrow and linear understanding of tradition. According to Talal Asad, Schmitt’s account of tradition, by linking past religious categories to contemporary secular ones, lacks complexity: “It is not enough to point to the structural analogies between premodern theological concepts and those deployed in secular constitutional discourse, as Schmitt does, because the practices these concepts facilitate and organize differ according to the historical formations in which they occur.”<sup>46</sup> Benjamin confronts the problems of religious tradition and secularism in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and his unfinished *The Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*) by trying to bring together the Nietzschean insight about the eternal recurrence of tradition with the compelling novelty of modern cultural forms.

44. See Israel Knohl, *The Messiah before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, trans. David Maisel (Berkeley, 2000).

45. See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York, 1971), and Fishbane, “Midrashic Theologies of Messianic Suffering,” *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), pp. 73–85.

46. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif., 2003), p. 191.

If Agamben's reading of the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" sees Pauline citation and Pauline messianism where there is none, what then is Benjamin's messianic meaning? In the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" there *are* explicit quotations and citations to nonreligious texts; precision is not beyond Benjamin or alien to this text. Yet the allusive nature of the text's religious language makes its meaning, sources, and references ambiguous, but not incidental; the six instances of *Erlösung* or *Erlöser*, the angel, and the six uses of the term *messiah* (once each in theses 2, 6, 17, 18, A, and B) in a text about the category of history in dialectical materialism cannot be dismissed as mere convention or style.

In thesis 6, Benjamin interrupts a discussion of historical materialism and tradition with the following statement: "The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer [*Erlöser*], he comes as the subduer [*Überwinder*] of Antichrist." The three sentences preceding this statement reflect on tradition ("Tradition" and "Überlieferung" respectively) as follows: "The danger affects both the content of the tradition [*Tradition*] and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition [*Überlieferung*] away from a conformism that is about to overpower it [*überwältigen*]" ("TPH," p. 255). Tradition faces the danger that ruling classes and conformism will overpower it. The challenge faced by the kind of historiography imagined by Benjamin is to "wrest" tradition away from this conformism. How? The answer is not immediately given, but the text of the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" makes plain that the version of historical materialism Benjamin describes must take theology and the category of the messianic seriously. Like many of his early writings on religion and culture, the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" indicates the necessity of overcoming the divide between politics and religion, the domains of public secularism and private religiosity.

In thesis 18, a passage in which Agamben sees the hidden hand of Paul, we do not have the Messiah but the Messianic modeled by the concept of the now-time (*Jetztzeit*): "The present [*Jetztzeit*], which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises [*zusammenfaßt*] the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgment [*ungeheuren Abbréviation*], coincides exactly with the stature that the history of mankind has in the universe" ("TPH," p. 263). As I mentioned above, Agamben regards this as one of the passages that cites Paul directly (Eph. 1:10). While I believe the claim to citation is mistaken, the broader link between Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* and religious ideas of sacred time (similar though distinct from New Testament *kairos* in Romans 5:6 and 9:9, for example) is worth considering. Benjamin's idea of a *Jetztzeit* that models messianic time by summing up all human history is

one of the most suggestive statements of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Benjamin develops this line of thinking in the final section of the text when he contrasts “homogeneous” and “empty” time to the future time of the Messiah for Jewish tradition (“TPH,” p. 264). This orientation to a future messianic time is not, Benjamin insists, the same as soothsayers’ magic. While he does not call it tradition here, Benjamin singles out Torah and prayer as traditional practices that distinguish Judaism from magic and soothsaying. Benjamin’s final messianic observation, as Taubes notes, speaks of a Jewish Messiah and a category of the messianic distinct from magic and necessary to a fully developed understanding of historical materialism.

Given Benjamin’s ability to be precise when he wanted to, the ambiguity of the religious language in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” must be part of the text’s design. What explains this ambiguity? Benjamin’s implicit and explicit claims for tradition in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” reflect a rhetorical strategy that appears, in several forms, in many of his essays: a confrontation between the secular discourse of dialectical materialism and religious tradition. There are at least three possible ways of understanding this confrontation, which I summarize as follows: (1) religion is the underlying source and master discourse of secular discourse, which must be rendered in religious terms in order to be understood; (2) religious tradition forms a necessary part of our critical vocabulary and understanding and thus serves as a useful model for understanding nonreligious phenomena; and (3) religious tradition cannot be separated or made distinct from political and historical thinking; therefore the distinction between categories of the religious and the nonreligious must be dismantled. One of the means to that dismantling is the rhetorical confrontation between religious and secular discourse in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”

Despite the view that the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” represents a novel turn in Benjamin’s work, and that his later work departs in general from his earlier work, there are striking continuities between the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and even some of Benjamin’s earliest writings. “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” (1918), which relates Kant to modern thought, appeals emphatically for a serious engagement between philosophy and religion that understands religion to be a “concrete totality of experience” rather than simply a set of teachings.<sup>47</sup>

47. Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” trans. Mark Ritter, *Selected Writings*, trans. Jephcott et al., ed. Marcus Bullock et al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1996–2003), 1:109. Other early texts with strong echoes in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” include a fragment called “The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe” (1921), which speaks of the

The need to recognize a more robust understanding of religion follows, for Benjamin, from Kant's more fundamental failure to see the "linguistic nature of knowledge."<sup>48</sup>

While it is accurate to assign this essay to Benjamin's so-called neo-Kantian period, it is nevertheless striking how closely it anticipates the agenda of the "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Though concerned mostly with Marxist and historicist ideas of history, the central role of religious categories and experiences here is just as provocative as it is in "On the Program for the Coming Philosophy." Like Marxism and historicism, Kantianism is emphatically secularist, so by insisting that religious categories belong in this discussion is as surprising in the 1918 essay as it is in the 1940 manuscript.

If Paul's letter by itself is not the prime source of messianic thought in Western tradition, then what accounts for messianic thought? The question underlines the contrast between Agamben and Benjamin on biblical tradition. While Agamben relies on a single figure and genius (Paul) to account for messianic tradition, Benjamin, through a deliberate avoidance of specific religious citations, indicates that biblical tradition pervades language and thought, even in modernity: "The Bible, in regarding itself as a revelation, must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts."<sup>49</sup> Agamben's claim to discovering a one-to-one correspondence between Paul's text and Benjamin's oversimplifies the broad, complex strands of biblical tradition. A better way of understanding biblical reception and biblical tradition, one that is reflected in Benjamin's deliberately ambiguous religious references, might be to describe them as a constellation of allusions.

Benjamin's engagement with the category of messiah was abiding and serious, as was his choice not to specify its meaning or sources with precision. Benjamin's messianism was mediated through his engagement with the works of Erich Gutkind, Bloch, Buber, and Scholem and was therefore a distinctly modern category. It evokes an age of closure or fulfillment tied intimately to history, fragmentation, and disaster. As Wohlfarth notes, "inasmuch as experience ideally culminates in its own redemption, the

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"Last Judgment" as "that constantly postponed day which flees so determinedly into the future after the commission of every misdeed" (Benjamin, "The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe," trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, 1:286). For evidence of messianic thinking during the same period, see the fragment called "The Currently Effective Messianic Elements" (1919), trans. Livingstone, *Selected Writings*, 1:213 and, of course, "Theological-Political Fragment" (1920–21 or 1937–38), trans. Jephcott, *Selected Writings*, 3:305–6.

48. Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," 1:108.

49. Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *Reflections*, p. 322.

messianic and the profane are not merely inextricable but practically indistinguishable.”<sup>50</sup> Benjamin’s messiah is no less political than Agamben’s, but it is more sensitive to the depth and pervasiveness of biblical tradition. How does Benjamin’s category of messiah operate in political terms? As John McCole shows, the category appears early in Benjamin’s work as a strategic means to criticize the German idealist tradition; neither precise nor rooted in a specific Jewish text, Benjamin’s messiah paradoxically represents radical discontinuity with continuity in what McCole calls the antinomy of tradition.<sup>51</sup>

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin articulates a vision of historiography directly opposed to the ideology of progress. The novelty of modernity, he argues, belongs unwittingly to tradition. Yet Benjamin rejects simplistic accounts of continuity and narratives of decline: “Overcoming the concept of ‘progress’ and overcoming the concept of ‘period of decline’ are two sides of one and the same thing.”<sup>52</sup> In another section of the manuscript, Benjamin relates Nietzsche’s idea of eternal return (*Wiederkehr*) to the category of progress:

The belief in progress—in an infinite perfectibility understood as an infinite ethical task—and the representation of eternal return are complementary. They are the indissoluble antinomies in the face of which the dialectical conception of historical time must be developed. In this conception, the idea of eternal return appears precisely as that “shallow rationalism” which the belief in progress is accused of being, while faith in progress seems no less to belong to the mythic mode of thought than does the idea of eternal return. [AP, p. 119]

The search for historiographic alternatives to the models of progress and eternal return also informs Benjamin’s aesthetics. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and his essay on photography, Benjamin demonstrates that new art forms not only observe the conventions of older ones but can also perform similar functions. While critics commonly observe Benjamin’s claim that technically reproducible artworks lack the aura of premodern originals, they often miss the fact that Benjamin warns against the return of this lost or repressed aura in politically motivated films: “The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an

50. Wohlfarth, “Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” pp. 184–85.

51. See John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), pp. 66–67, 294.

52. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 460; hereafter abbreviated AP.



apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values.”<sup>53</sup> Tradition haunts the newest of forms, sometimes in dangerous ways. For Benjamin, then, modernity is fundamentally ironic; the very ideologies of progress that drive modernity—including fascism and historical materialism—are displaced forms of religious theology, just as the hidden dwarf named Theology drives the puppet of historical materialism. The myth of secularization embraced by historical materialism and other modern ideologies drives religion into hiding, but it also increases its power.

Neither the narrative of progress or of eternal recurrence can capture the complexity of modernity and tradition. McCole shows “how aware Benjamin had become of the inextricable entwinement of elements of continuity and discontinuity in his conceptions of tradition and history.”<sup>54</sup> McCole cites a manuscript note to Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: “The idea of discontinuity is the foundation of genuine tradition. The connection between the feeling of beginning anew and tradition must be pointed out.”<sup>55</sup> Challenging widespread interpretations of Benjamin as a modernist or a messianic theologian, McCole claims that this tension between continuity and discontinuity in tradition unites all of Benjamin’s work.

The analysis of modernity that Benjamin recommends is one that acknowledges the power of tradition. At the same time, the continuity of tradition remains elusive: “It may be that the continuity of tradition is mere semblance. But then precisely the persistence of this semblance of persistence provides it with continuity” (*AP*, p. 486). In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin suggests the possibility that a “weak messianic power” follows from bringing these patterns to light. But there is very little in Benjamin’s work to show what kind of power that might be, apart from a critical awareness of the tragic circumstances of modernity. In “Capitalism as Religion,” for example, Benjamin observes that “capitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West . . . until it reached the point where Christianity’s history is essentially that of its parasite—that is to say, of capitalism.”<sup>56</sup>

Asad’s approach is to add the notion of practice to Alasdair MacIntyre’s idea of tradition as “embodied debate,” noting that tradition is also “about learning the point of a practice and performing it properly and making it a

53. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, p. 241.

54. McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 295.

55. Benjamin, “Benjamin-Archiv, Ms. 449,” *Gesammelte Schriften* 1:1242; quoted in McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 296.

56. Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” *Selected Writings*, 1:289.



part of oneself.”<sup>57</sup> Richard Bernstein makes a similar point about tradition in the conclusion to his book on Freud: “Freud’s most distinctive (and controversial) contribution to understanding a religious tradition is to make us sensitive to the unconscious dimensions of this transmission.”<sup>58</sup> Bernstein borrows here from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical understanding of what Jan Assmann calls the “linguistic embeddedness of human existence.” The problem of the transmission of hidden memories, which Freud had sought to address on biological, Lamarckian grounds, can be addressed in cultural, hermeneutical terms, according to Bernstein. Like Bernstein’s idea of tradition, Assmann’s notion of cultural memory “encompasses the age-old, out-of-the-way, and discarded; and in contrast to collective, bonding memory, it includes the noninstrumentalizable, heretical, subversive, and disowned.”<sup>59</sup>

### Conclusion

Taubes illustrated the significance of the Bible for Benjamin as follows: “I think it is a disaster that my students grow up in sheer ignorance of the Bible. I received a dissertation about Benjamin in which twenty percent of the associations were mistaken, for the reason that they were biblical associations. So the student comes to me with the finished product, I read some of it and I say: Listen, you need to go to Sunday school and read the Bible! And with the delicacy of the Benjaminites he says to me: In what translation? I say: For you, any one will do” (*PTP*, p. 4). Taubes does not present Benjamin in a one-to-one relationship with Paul or other parts of the Bible. Associating Benjamin with ideas of nature and nihilism in Paul, Taubes adds: “Benjamin differs from Paul, however, in the thought of the autonomy of that which he calls here the profane,” adding later that the parallel is not meant in a “strictly exegetical sense” (*PTP*, p. 74).<sup>60</sup> While he regards Benjamin as a truly messianic thinker, Taubes groups Schmitt with Barth under a chapter heading called “The Zealots of the Absolute and of Decision” (*PTP*, p. 62).<sup>61</sup> Following Taubes, we could characterize Ben-

57. Talal Asad, “Responses,” in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford, Calif., 2006), p. 234.

58. Richard J. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), p. 89.

59. Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, trans. Livingstone (Stanford, Calif., 2006), pp. 26, 27.

60. The link, for Taubes, is the experience of disaster: “I want to say: This is said out of the same experience, and there are hints in the text that confirm this. There are experiences that shake Paul through and through and that shake Benjamin through and through after 1918, after the war” (*PTP*, p. 74).

61. Taubes notes, by the way, that Schmitt’s notion of sovereignty is indebted to Kierkegaard; see *PTP*, p. 65.

jamin's orientation as exegetical and Schmitt's (like Barth, following Kierkegaard) as polemical. Both Benjamin and Schmitt can claim an inheritance from Paul, who combines these tendencies, and one could speculate further that the convergence of Benjamin and Schmitt during the Weimar period has a Pauline dimension. But it would be mistaken to draw either of these characterizations to an extreme.

In most of *The Time That Remains*, Benjamin appears—as he does so often—as an oracular authority to be cited incidentally but not analyzed in depth. Benjamin's works deserve more contextualized reading. It has never been established whether and to what extent Benjamin's unpublished writings, especially the *The Arcades Project* and “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” should be regarded as finished works. Widespread critical appraisals of Benjamin's work as original and brilliant are well deserved, but the fact is that this reputation leads to more citations than sustained readings. It is to Agamben's credit that he attempts such a reading in his appendix, but the argument of his book, leaning as it does on Schmitt's notion of secularized theological concepts, misses the complexity of Benjamin's concept of and engagement with biblical tradition.<sup>62</sup>

Along with the unconvincing convergence of Paul and Benjamin, which produces either an improbably Pauline Benjamin or Benjaminian Paul, a deeper equivocation of Benjamin and Schmitt animates *The Time That Remains*. In the case of Paul, Benjamin would seem to represent Agamben's desire to avoid sectarianism, and, in the case of Schmitt, Benjamin appears as a kind of fig leaf on a simplistic understanding of secularism and secularization. One casualty of these inversions is the failure to historicize, a tendency to affirm an unrigorous comparativism and to accept secularization as an uncomplicated state of affairs. The impulse to compare and conclude, to find citation when there is only allusion or even just influence, undercuts Agamben's skill in exploring the terrain of religious tradition in contemporary thought. Agamben is right to wish for more nuance than he sees in Pauline and Schmittian thinking, and his lectures indicate the need for a deeper exploration of Benjamin's thinking on the place of religious tradition and texts in modernity, one that acknowledges the risks of the grand narrative of eternal recurrence and the inscrutable promise of messianism.

62. Schmitt's text reads: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology” (Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 36).

At his best, Agamben recognizes the aporetic nature of messianic thought in Paul and Benjamin, along with the troubling and redemptive political reverberations of messianism. But if Agamben's book represents part of a religious turn in contemporary theory, then its inclination toward biblical text and tradition indicates some of the promises and pitfalls of mixing cultural theory with textual commentary. Contemporary thinkers too often understand tradition simply as doctrine, which may explain why Paul's heavily doctrinal texts hold such appeal for Agamben (as well as Žižek and Badiou).

This neo-Pauline enthusiasm thus risks becoming a kind of sectarianism without a sect. Of course, the study of how later writers read Paul is a legitimate scholarly topic, namely, reception history. But reception history is descriptive; it does not require or justify the affirmation of Pauline thought one finds in Badiou, Žižek, and Agamben.<sup>63</sup> The recent critical theory about Paul's writings not only removes Paul from his historical and cultural context, reinforcing simplistic impressions of Paul as a harsh critic of Judaism who "converted" to Christianity; it also removes him from his theological context.<sup>64</sup> Endorsing Paul's purported views on history, justice, or identity in this way claims the force of tradition without accepting its burden or acknowledging its complexity. In theological terms, this is like selectively endorsing dogmatics while ignoring ecclesiology.

These nontheological readings ironically resemble theology by reading the Bible as eternally present and valid; they constitute, to paraphrase Hans Vaihinger's famous title, a theology of the as if. But Paul is not just for theologians and philosophers. His writings, first addressed to particular religious communities on particular occasions, belong to centuries of liturgy, sermonizing, paraphrase, and literary transformation embodied and tempered by historical and cultural realities. Without first embedding Paul in the context of tradition, the study of Paul's influence cannot perform the work that Agamben and others want it to perform, whether that means offering a foundation for universalism, messianism, or a dialectic of love and law. If, however, Paul's influence is conceived as part of an elusive tradition that challenges the binary distinction between secularism and theology, then this contextualized Paul can be theoretically fruitful and genuinely Benjaminian.

63. Badiou's defense of Paul as an "*antiphilosophical theoretician of universality*" involves the transposition of Pauline writing into abstract theorems (Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 108; see also pp. 81–97). Žižek's approval of Paul includes analogies to Lenin, Che Guevara (as Christ), Hegel, and Lacan; see Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, pp. 9, 30, 88, 115. Agamben's adoption of Paul takes place in such moves as the following: "These questions [about Messiah and messianic time], meaning Paul's questions, must also be ours" (*T*, p. 18).

64. See Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, pp. 21–36.