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SCHOLEM'S MESSIANISM IN THE UTOPIANISM OF SCRIPTURE

Abstract: Spinoza in his Theologico-Political Treatise in an terse fragment posits that there is no difference either metaphysically nor ontologically between Scripture and Nature, they are in fact one, and a similar exercise of study through reason can hermeneutically reveal a system of truths about the world. Therefore, the world is a book, and the book is a world in itself. In the Jewish tradition contra to the Greek or other Abrahamic tradition of Philosophy, contradiction, hermeticism and aporia is prized as a gift of writing which the wisdom of the writing will be performed by the reader and their experience of the world will change as a result. Whereas the Greek tradition prizes the logical argumentation through conciseness against the bulwark of Sophism, these two traditions have rightly so, become intertwined, and a dialogue has opened up in the History of Philosophy in several thinkers of the broadly Western tradition. We can witness within Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida a consideration of the impossibility of realizing the universal, ideal and abstract, but yet attempting to realize these notions in the real, concrete and historical situations of various periods in history. Benjamin's messianism has become something of a fashion to write about, writers including Badiou, Agamben and J.-L. Nancy all consider his thought from the Paris Arcades which attempt to constellate a utopian future through a study of the concrete past through universal, abstract ideals of the commodity, into a utopian future as a result. Derrida's analysis of the "democracy to come" as a messianic future to hope for but never to realize binds the Talmud into his thought by understanding the unique, concrete historical situation and yet attempting to realize this abstract ideal of a democratization for all that is to come in time for philosophy, ethics, politics and the world.

Keywords: Benjamin, Derrida, Messianism, Time, Scripture, Democracy, World.

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МЕССИАНИЗМ ШОЛЕМА В УТОПИЗМЕ СВЯЩЕННОГО ПИСАНИЯ

Резюме: Спиноза в главе VII Богословско-Политического трактата утверждал, что между Писанием и Природой не существует различия ни в метафизическом, ни в онтологическом смысле: исследование Писания подобно

исследованию Природы, поэтому, исследуя мышление, можно герменевтически выявить систему истин, касающихся нашего мира. Следовательно, наш мир — это книга, а эта книга — мир сам по себе. В еврейской традиции, в противовес греческой или какой-либо иной авраамической философской традиции, противопоставление, герменевтика и апория расцениваются как некий дар писания, читатель же обретает мудрость, которая и изменяет его опыт в понимании мира. Тогда как в греческой традиции для логической аргументации характерна лаконичность в противовес твердыне софизма; эти две традиции вполне естественным образом переплелись, и в истории философии возник диалог между некоторыми мыслителями, опирающимися на западную традицию. Мы можем отметить у Вальтера Бенямина и у Жака Деррида соображение о невозможности осознания универсального, идеального и абстрактного, но можем попытаться осознать эти понятия в реальных, конкретных и исторических ситуациях в разные исторические периоды. Сейчас стало модным писать о мессианстве Бенямина, и многие писатели, включая А. Бадью, Дж. Агамбена и Ж.-Л. Нанси, считают его идею строительства утопического будущего с помощью изучения конкретного прошлого посредством универсальных, абстрактных идеалов, характерных для утопий, что в результате и приведет к утопическому будущему. Проведенный Деррида анализ «демократии будущего» как мессианского будущего, на которое мы надеемся, но которое никогда не настанет, увязывает Талмуд с его мировоззрением через осмысление уникальной, конкретной исторической ситуации, но также делается попытка осознать этот абстрактный идеал демократизации для всего, что со временем произойдет в философии, этике, политике и мире.

Ключевые слова: Бенямин, Деррида, мессианство, время, Священное Писание, мир.

What is metaphysics? A white mythology which assembles and re-flects Western culture: the whiteman takes his own mythology (that is, Indo-European mythology), his logos—that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason¹.

The object and activity of metaphysics has abandoned, thrown into doubt, deconstructed and at times, supposedly destroyed, but what remains are fragments of its ruins upon which many Jewish thinkers have sought to build from the ship wreckage of modernity. Jewish thought within the context of world philosophy has flourished and been denigrated, and within recent years witnessed a revival under the banner of contemporary Continental Philosophy. This paper will draw upon the work of Walter Benjamin and his interlocutor Scholem in light of recent fanaticism about his thought concerning time and things to come in the work of Giorgio Agamben in order to examine the origins leading up to the messianism of Jewish modernity and perhaps reveal

¹ Derrida 1974: 5–74.

another path of thinking through modernity not within Jewish mysticism but its relation to Christian mysticism in the Medieval period. This paper shall be divided into two sections with an interpolating interlude on Saint Paul which will only provide a short note to navigating the messianism of Jewish thought and possible other forms of political theology which lay between messianism on one hand, and nihilism on the other. My thesis will be that whilst the re-discovery of Jewish thought concerning mysticism and messianism serves as a possibility and potentiality to rethink modernity it contorts itself into a form of redundant redemption which firstly deflates the profundity of Jewish political theology, but also in its origins in the Sabbatian Heresy, thus permits a differing kind of political theology which may serve as a new foundation for an ontology of modernity. I shall then suggest that a return to the work of Hans Blumenberg and his studies on Christian mystics of the Medieval period and their views of the world as God's will to manifest himself and the need for self-deification as a means of becoming God, thereby becoming closer to God is a different route for world philosophy in modernity. The structure of this essay will firstly outline the core proponents of Sabbatian theology which will shed new light on the Jewish thought of redemption in Benjamin and Scholem. The second section of this essay will take account of the contemporary usage of Jewish thinkers by continental philosophers and suggest a third interpretation pointing towards Christian mysticism as a means of negotiating the full propensity of Jewish thought in modernity. The third and final section of this essay will read the work of Hans Blumenberg and his analysis of Tertullian, Cusan and Nolan in his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1985).

The first section of this essay will analyse the origins of Jewish modernity through the newly published text *Sabbatian Heresy, Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the origins of Jewish Modernity* (2017) which will introduce the fundamental categories of Benjamin's and Scholem's understanding of a Jewish modernity. To begin, whereas Agamben, Badiou, and others interpret Saint Paul in various ways which attempt to portray a universalism, a messianism and nihilism in turn, it is here with which we would like to investigate Sabbatian theology and portray a differing path which puts itself between reductive messianism and deflationary universalism. Again, this paper does not serve itself as an in-depth investigation of these fields of thought in relation to Jewish thought in the context of world philosophy, but only a short note towards re-understanding the messianism of Scholem in its origins and proposing a difference to the orthodox understanding. To begin, the categorization of Jewish modernity by thinkers like Benjamin and Scholem find their roots in Sabbatian theology with such phrases as redemption and salvation. However, we should not understand these terms only in relation to historical events, but also as a form of radical politicality which not only disrupts normative political structures, but proposes a simultaneously spiritual and intellectual significance not merely relegated to the importance of the coming of new historical

events which echo, redeem and falsify past events. If political theology is just the remains of a denigrated religion in the form of politicized entities, then we should not deflate the religious connotations and their original significances in order to make sense fully of the politicized nature of their now, present irreligious forms.

Catastrophe, exile, and divine abandonment became the necessary conditions out of which the urgent promise of personal and collective redemption could be anticipated. And in these radical orientations, the reestablishment of connections with the divine required a breaking and reordering of normative structures. The spiritual and intellectual impact and legacy of Sabbatian thought courses between apocalyptic, messianic, and redemptive signification².

Thus, the anticipated redemption can be seen as not only a radical re-conception of Jewish modernity, but that there is an inherent politicization behind questioning the normative structures of institutional theology which did not pose a redemptive future but a stagnant present. These two elements are very significant in light of Benjamin and Scholem whose thought alongside other forms of political theology has captivated contemporary world philosophy particularly in Western philosophy. More specifically, Gershom Scholem posits a further distinction within redemption in Sabbatian theology, such that there is an “inner and [...] out reality of redemption”³ in which its contradiction needed to be resolved. Such that, the redemption itself being an “unmediated reality” or overwhelming experience as a certain, pre-ordained entity must be reconciled “with the empirical reality of historical events”⁴. This assertion constructs the foundations for the modern Jewish interpretation of modernity in Benjamin and Scholem, such that although empirical reality might not correspond to scripture or the theory of what it supposed to happen, it will in time and we should bear witness and act towards the empirical reality of the world in an immediate, immanent anticipatory politics of the day of redemption which seems ethereal and dream-like but may and will actualize at any given moment. Additionally, given the radicality of this redemptive Sabbatian theology to destabilize normative structures, such that these structures were no longer secured as earthly permanences, but mere symptoms of a correctable empirical reality when the messiah comes and redemption is made possible and actualized, Sabbatai’s apostasy was also another radical political theological move. In essence, Sabbatai’s radical reconception of the redemptive moment of the coming of the messiah as opposed to Saint Paul’s assertion of the event of the messiah and what happens after coupled with his plasticity in converting to Islam served as a bolstering move in Jewish thought leading to modernity. Pawel Maciejko

² Maciejko 2017: 9.

³ Maciejko 2017: XVII.

⁴ Maciejko 2017: XVII.

surmises the latter apotasy through circumstance of death by Sabbatai as a form of radical secularized modernity in that it had ideological content of true Jewish faith and that later converts following Sabbatai claimed that his example proved the messianic moment entirely.

First, the conversion was interpreted as a descent of the powers of righteousness embodied in the messiah into the world of evil and impurity (*kelippot*, husks, in the terminology of Kabbalah). The purpose of this descent was further expounded as an endeavor to bring about the total destruction of the *kelippot* or, conversely, as an attempt to save the sparks of holiness trapped among them⁵.

The conversion of Sabbatai was conceived as apostasy however it possessed ideological implications in that in a way, it cleansed the faith and saved the holy parts through the act of the messiah. The commandment prohibiting apostasy was in a sense, overturned and made from its negativity into a positivity, such that “true faith cannot be a faith which men publicly profess”⁶ some radical, Polish Sabbatians claimed according to Scholem. However, this in fact leads to another problematic issue within Jewish thought of the period, of “the impossibility of reconciling one’s true religious identity with one’s social role”⁷. This key issue when examining Benjamin and Scholem and the characteristics of Jewish modernity in fact reveal this symptom of the Sabbatian heresy, such that for Scholem it in fact permits a certain kind of religious nihilism, not purely secularized but merely waiting for the messiah free of any sociality and orthodox practices. The Sabbatianism describes in this way was a means of understanding the “dialectic of Jewish history” by Scholem, in that it was an “antithesis” to “annihilate the petrified forms of religion, while at the same time sowing seeds for future developments”⁸. Within this characterization of the Sabbatian heresy which would later taint Jewish modernity Scholem claims it was “distinctly Jewish in character” in that it assaulted normative religious authorities and shook the very definition of Judaism at its heart of its apostasy, a sort of pure faith through inner revolution and redemption as a result. Scholem continues in arguing that Sabbatianism was a form of “grandiose though abortive attempt to revolutionize Judaism from within”⁹. In this form of analysis, Sabbatai can be read as a Jewish version of Saint Paul and what contemporary Continental philosophy has interpreted Paul’s apparent universalism and nihilism of Christianity in declaring the equality of Christianity in that there are no Jews nor Greeks but only Christians, albeit a more radical form and potential for negotiating the problems of modernity.

⁵ Maciejko 2017: XVII.

⁶ Maciejko 2017: XVII.

⁷ Maciejko 2017: XVII.

⁸ Maciejko 2017: XVIII.

⁹ Maciejko 2017: XVIII.

The notion of religious nihilism did not imply simply a rejection of values or mores associated with normative religion. Rather, as Scholem put it: “By this concept I do not mean nihilism with regard to religion but rather a nihilism that appears in the name of religious assertions and follows from religious tenets. It adopts religious discourse but it completely denies the authority, which this discourse claims to possess. It does not attempt to replace the old structures with new ones, but tries only to destroy them”¹⁰.

In this way the messianism of both Benjamin and Scholem represented a form of redemptive hope for the future only in and through a permanence of religious nihilism. They both recognised the significance of the religious structures and sought to dismantle them not in order to replace them with secularized institutions of modernity but to be left with a hopeful, albeit restless future of nihilistic possibilities and potentialities. This radical act of political destruction and religious apostasy is most poignantly surmised by one of Scholem’s most famous statements. It is “*Mitsvah ha-Ba’ah be-Avera* (literally: a commandment that is fulfilled by the breaking of another commandment). The phrase, especially after its mistranslation into English as Redemption through Sin, came to be regarded as the catchword of Sabbatianism”¹¹. Now that we have surmised the key aspects of Sabbatianism and its roots in the thought of Scholem and his friend Benjamin, it becomes clear that a differing view of messianism comes about, and as a result of the recent interest in Saint Paul and Jewish thought concerning modernity, that this form of messianism changes its meaning and takes on a different form. In the next part of this essay, in order to further explicate the differing form of messianism that Jewish thought from Sabbatai onwards possesses, we shall examine the other form of messianism of Saint Paul to compare with the Jewish form as a form of interlude. Then after this section examining the misinterpretation of Saint Paul, we shall then conclude on Hans Blumenberg on his work concerning Cusan and Nolan in re-conceiving a new possibility of political theology for modernity. L. L. Wellborn in his *Paul’s Summons to Messianic Life* (2015) summarizes the misinterpretation and sudden, misguided appraisal of Paul.

The philosophers who, in a moment of danger, seek to link their present to the apostle’s past have glimpsed in Paul’s messianic faith a spark of hope. For anyone familiar with this literature and its antecedents, it will already be clear that the hermeneutic which governs the new philosophical readings of Paul is that which Walter Benjamin gave to historical materialists in “On the Concept of History” and in some notes in his unfinished Arcades Project. In contrast to the method of historicism, which seeks, by forgetting the subsequent course of history, to lay hold of the eternal meaning of a work, and in contrast to the popular, liberal assumption that a work is susceptible

¹⁰ Maciejko 2017: XVIII.

¹¹ Maciejko 2017: XVIII.

of a variety of legitimate interpretations, depending upon the interpreter's perspective, Benjamin proposed that a work — a text such as Romans — contains a temporal index that connects it to a specific epoch, and that it comes forth to full legibility only for a person who is singled out by history at a moment of danger, a perilous moment like the one in which the work was composed¹².

Therefore, just as Sabbatai and Scholem's interpretation of his heresy and apostasy are hermeneutically linked, the recent discovery of Paul by Continental Philosophy is similarly structured. However should we adhere to Benjamin's claim that texts such as Romans have an "immediate messianic intensity of the heart?" Wellborn evidently disagrees and decides to place "greater emphasis" on "Paul's own *kairos*"¹³. Wellborn summarizes his counter-argument as follows:

I shall argue below that the defect in current philosophical interpretations of Paul is a consequence, in large measure, of the philosopher's commitment to the project of knowledge, a commitment that Paul did not share, and that, in fact, he vigorously opposed (1 Cor. 1:18–25). In particular, Paul did not believe that the *kairos* depended upon the self-presence of consciousness. Nor the center of our concern¹⁴.

In essence, what this means for the contemporary fascination with messianism, Benjamin, Scholem and Saint Paul is that in fact, "the political ethics" which Paul demands is totally other than the orthodox interpretation of messianism. Wellborn points out the difference in Paul's messianic-like "awakening": "Paul was waiting for the so-called Second Coming of Jesus. As we shall see, Paul nowhere mentions the *parousia* in Romans (or in any of his later epistles). Instead, Paul summons believers to an "awakening" by grasping the full implications of a messianic event that had already occurred"¹⁵. In this way, the messianism that contemporary Continental philosophers have attempted to portray on behalf of Paul have been misguided hermeneutically and temporally. Thus, the messianic event is not awaiting an event that has not happened, the event has already happened and he is awaiting the Second Coming of Jesus as a form of awakening, the resurrection and *parousia*, for those who "joined his messianic assemblies the vanguard of the sons and daughters of God, who would awaken and take responsibility for the redemption of the world (Rom. 8:19)"¹⁶. Having now performed an interlude demonstrating the misinterpretation of the messianism in both the Jewish thought of Sabbatai and Scholem, and the misinterpretation of Saint Paul, we can now conclude on Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1985) in order to demonstrate a new

¹² Wellborn 2015: XIII–XIV.

¹³ Wellborn 2015: XIV.

¹⁴ Wellborn 2015: XIV.

¹⁵ Wellborn 2015: XIV.

¹⁶ Wellborn 2015: XIV.

path for political theology to theorize a difference to messianism and a new way of understanding the problem of modernity.

Tertullian holds the heretics responsible for the reception of ancient philosophy within Christianity; the pluralism that they produced forced people to make use of the preexisting means of intellectual argument. A homogeneous religion would not have needed to interest itself in philosophy. Tertullian sees the difference between Gnosticism and his faith as reduced to differing interpretations of the biblical command “Seek and ye shall find” Gnosticism perennializes this relation of conditioning. To the restlessness of seeking it holds open one chance of finding after another, whereas Tertullian localizes the end of seeking and the totality of having found in the single act of accepting faith. “In a single and definitive system of doctrine, there cannot be an endless search. One must seek. until one finds, and believe when one has found, and then there is nothing more to be done but to hold fast to what one has grasped in faith, since after all one also believes that one should not believe, and consequently should not seek., anything else, since one has found and faithfully accepted what was taught by him who commands us to seek nothing but what he teaches”¹⁷.

One element of our investigation is how theological figures within Jewish thought through acts of apostasy have demarcated the boundaries of their own religion and the outside which helps support their dogma externally. The problem of apostasy and gnosticism within Christianity in Tertullian’s time was seen with far more harsh consequence, however in the doctrine of seeking and finding the truth of the doctrine itself, there presents a differing form of messianism that can challenge Saint Paul. Additionally, Nolan discusses the moment of the Incarnation of the son of God as a means of self-deification to provide the messianic moment for its believers, in which the world is seen as “God’s self-exhaustion” in that he created the world to merely demonstrate his beauty to us. And in this sense, we should not perhaps side with messianism of a form of nihilism as a means by which to orient ourselves towards modernity, but to recognise the universe and the world as the corpse of God, and ourselves as parts of his body.

For the Cusan, the moment of the Incarnation of the son of God, which he believed to be accomplished in historical individuality, was at the same time the culminating point of metaphysical speculation, with its all-dominating effort to “overtake” the transcendence of the Divinity by means of the communicating transcendence of man and to draw the universe, in its representation by man, by an individual man, into the reflection process of the Divinity. Precisely this basic figure of the Christian self-conception God’s entry into the singularity of man in the universe-becomes the fundamental scandal, the offense that could not be suppressed by any threat, to which Giordano Bruno of Nola testified on February 17, 1600 at the stake in the Roman Cam-

¹⁷ Blumenberg 1985: 300.

po di Fiore by averting his face from the crucifix that was held before him, a kind of testimony that had been regarded, in the early part of the epoch that now and not let with this event came to an end, as the highest martyrdom for the truth¹⁸.

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¹⁸ Blumenberg 1985.