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Apocalypse “As If Not”: Jacob Taubes and History in the “State of Exception”

Abstract: This paper offers a systematic reconstruction of the late apocalyptic thought of the Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes, positioning it as a critical intervention in twentieth-century political theology and the philosophy of history. Against interpretations that reduce Taubes to a “Gnostic nihilist,” it argues his work elaborates a Pauline-inspired apocalypticism “from below” to destabilise the metaphysical foundations of historical reason and political order. The analysis is grounded in a crucial set of sources—lesser-known seminars, correspondence, and late essays—which are essential for understanding the definitive role of Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history in shaping Taubes’s strategic reading of Carl Schmitt. These fragmentary materials reveal how Taubes, in dialogue with the Schmittian concept of the “state of exception” (*Ausnahmezustand*) and Benjamin’s concept of “now-time” (*Jetztzeit*), developed his core idea of history as a “compressed” (*geballt*) field of messianic intensity. They further document his critical appropriation of Schmitt’s *katechon*, reading it not as a guarantor of order but as a sign of eschatological domestication. By prioritising these often-overlooked aspects, the paper demonstrates that Taubes’s apocalypticism, governed by the Pauline *hōs mē* (“as if not”), articulates a negative metaphysics of history. It identifies an unrepresentable force that emerges only in fractures within linear time, challenging the symbolic orders of modern historiography and sovereignty from a position of constitutive weakness.

“[T]he time is short. From now on [...] those who use the things of the world, *as if not* engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.” (1 Cor. 7:29-31, NIV Translation)

Introduction

Apocalypse can also be present in history. This resonated during the crises of the 20th century, when hope in historical progress was lost. How could progress culminate in the World Wars and the Shoah? In this climate, theology and philosophy turned toward resources capable of explaining the darker side of the world. Not surprisingly, apocalyptic and Gnostic themes emerged in postwar theology and political theory. Odo Marquard’s notion of “das gnostische Rezidiv als Gegenneuzeit” captured this shift. (Marquard, 1984) Modern thought, faced with its own failures, revived apocalyptic and Gnostic-dualistic patterns that promised salvation beyond the world as given. Among the most provocative thinkers was the Jewish philosopher, Jacob Taubes.

More than a political theorist, historian of religion, or radical reader of Paul, Taubes was a thinker of the crisis of history, who observed the “end of modernity” after the First World War. (Taubes, 1984, p. 10) After four decades of studies, Taubes reached a dangerous thesis in one of his final lectures: “Ich kann mir vorstellen als Apokalyptiker: soll sie zugrunde gehn. *I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is.*” (Taubes, 1993, p. 139) This formulation—read by Agata Bielik-Robson as marking “a thin line” between the transformation and the annihilation of the world—condenses the entire aporetic structure of Taubes’s late thought. As she notes, everything hinges on whether the accent falls on “the world [...] in its entirety,” signalling a wholesale apocalyptic negation, or on “as it is,” which opens the possibility of criticising and transforming the *world-as-it-is*. (Robson, 2022, pp. 47–58) It is precisely this ambivalence that has led recent interpreters to portray the later Taubes as collapsing into “Gnostic nihilism,” “Gnostic apophati-

cism,” or a radical anti-cosmic stance far removed from Hegel’s dialectical model of “delayed destruction.” (Styfals, Willem, 2019, pp. 1–17; 118–9; 263–265; Wolfson, 2022, pp. 193–196) Such readings, however, underestimate both the centrality of history and political theology to his late work and his increasing distance from the Gnostic mythos. (Muller, 2022, p. 503) Taubes’s late apocalypticism is better understood as a Pauline reconfiguration of temporality. Echoing the Pauline principle of living “as not” (*hos mē*), Taubes reconsiders the apocalyptic as a philosophy of history that seeks not to describe the terminus of history, but to destabilise the very foundations of historical reason and political order.

Following the publication of his doctoral dissertation, entitled *Abendländische Eschatologie*, in 1947, Taubes did not publish another book. Instead, his ideas were articulated only in fragments, such as in letters, lectures, marginalia and late essays. Consequently, his apocalyptic thought remains diffuse and frequently misunderstood. The attempt to establish a bottom-up concept of apocalypse, or what could be named “apocalypse from below,” as a constitutive element of the subject, history, and the political is evident in his engagement with Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin.

Apocalypse from Below

In his two key essays in the 1980s, “Leviathan als sterblicher Gott” and “Carl Schmitt – Ein Apokalyptiker der Gegenrevolution,” Taubes argues that modern political philosophy contains a repressed strand of apocalyptic theology—one that no longer anticipates the collapse of order but instead works to secure it. He reads Schmitt as a modern counterpart to Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, whose fear of the revolutionary and messianic energies of Marxism exposes a recurring pattern: “Großinquisitor gegen die Häretiker.” (Taubes, 2017a, p. 276) On this basis, Taubes calls Schmitt an anti-apocalypticist or an “apocalypticist of the counter-revolution.” Such apocalyptic anxiety suggests that secularisation alone cannot explain the structure of the political.

Adopting Pauline vocabulary, Schmitt recasts the sovereign as the *katechon* (der Aufhalter), the power that restrains the advent of the Antichrist and thus holds back the end of the world. Drawing on the long medieval tradition he catalogues, Schmitt finds the Christian empire a metaphysical dam against eschatological collapse. (Schmitt, 2012, p. 29) For Taubes, however, this very concept of the *katechon* reveals the theological core of modern politics: it shows how the Christian experience of *Endzeit* becomes domesticated and enlisted in the service of worldly powers. Thus, the *katechon* becomes, for him, not a guarantor of order but the decisive sign of how political theology transforms eschatological expectation into a program of historical management and delay. Schmitt and Taubes reach opposite conclusions from the Pauline experience of time:

Carl Schmitt denkt apokalyptisch, aber von oben her, von den Gewalten; ich denke von unten her. Uns beiden gemeinsam aber ist jene Erfahrung von Zeit und Geschichte als Frist, als Galgenfrist. Das ist ursprünglich auch eine christliche Erfahrung von Geschichte. (Taubes and Schmitt, 1987, p. 22)

Yet the ontological status of this “unten/below” remains open: is it the suppressed subject, the messianic force embedded in history, or the proletariat?

Taubes was among the first to shed light on the unlikely yet decisive constellation between Walter Benjamin, the Marxist-Jewish critic, and Carl Schmitt, the National Socialist theorist of sovereignty. In correspondence with Theodor Adorno, he viewed Benjamin entering the “dangerous territory” of fascist thought to appropriate its conceptual instruments. (Taubes, 1968) In a 1977 letter to Gershom Scholem, Taubes referred to Benjamin’s dialectical-theological motifs, which incorporated Christian apocalyptic elements and two concepts that are central to political theology: “Ausnahmestand” (the state of exception) and “Jetztzeit” (now-time). (Taubes, 2006, p. 117) He, therefore, turns these two concepts into the structuring axes of his own apocalyptic political theology.

I. Fall in the “State of Exception”

Carl Schmitt famously quoted Søren Kierkegaard with the words, “the exception explains the general and itself.” (Schmitt, 2009, p. 21) The exception is the decisive suspension of the universal order. For Schmitt, Kierkegaard’s insight becomes the blueprint for a political ontology in which legality depends on the capacity to interrupt it. Kierkegaard views the exception as the existential site where the individual confronts the limits of the ethical-universal. Schmitt’s concept of the sovereign becomes analogous to the Kierkegaardian individual who decides when the normal order no longer applies: “Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet.” (Schmitt, 2009, p. 13) Schmitt radicalises Kierkegaard’s insight by shifting the exception from the realm of individual religious existentialism to the domain of collective political life. Where Kierkegaard’s Abraham suspends ethics for the sake of the divine, Schmitt’s sovereign suspends law for the sake of the political community.

For Benjamin, however, the “state of exception” is the enduring and fundamental condition of the Baroque concept of history, as he describes in his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. He argues that the Baroque world, structured by catastrophe (*Verhängnis*) and sovereignty, perceives history not as progressive but as a fallen, natural landscape of perpetual ruin. The past is staged as a constellation of static, dramatic situations—cycles of disaster repeating themselves in a time conceived as “after the Fall,” where transcendence has receded. In this world, history pivots not around progress but around the sovereign, who is paradoxically both the master and the primary victim of this order. The sovereign, as “der erste Exponent der Geschichte” (the foremost exponent of history), holds historical events like a sceptre, yet is utterly trapped within the snare of a merciless fate (*Schicksal*). His power, which theoretically decides the exception, is constantly undermined by his own creaturely nature and the inescapable machinations of the courtly intrigue that surrounds him. Thus, the Baroque state of exception is a generalised atmosphere of disaster and theatrical power, where sovereignty is displayed precisely in its paralysis and where history manifests as a ruinous, repetitive spectacle. (Benjamin, 1991, pp. 246–251) Taubes adapts this Benjaminian vision of a fallen world—encompassing both the theological “Fall” and the secular “iron cage”—to articulate his own political-theological critique of modernity.

Taubes argues that the Pauline conception of the Fall possesses decisive epistemological weight. Through the constellation of the first and last Adam, Paul constitutes the very concept of history and provides the vocabulary that later makes the idea of progress possible. Creation and *Urgeschichte* before the Fall are disconnected from the modern concept of history, which begins only once the seven-day creation is complete. With the “eighth day,” the Fall and “transgression” (*Übertretung*) introduce temporality and transfer the burden of evil and history from mythical agents upon Adam. For Taubes, the Fall is not an objective event to be reconstructed but “eine Geschichte über Geschichte selbst”—an account of how historical reason falls through the apotheosis of history in German philosophy. (Taubes, 2007, pp. 62–63, 2017e, pp. 250–251)

Taubes proposes a genealogy of the “Copernican revolution” in historical reason: the departure from a sacred, Ptolemaic cosmos ordered toward a divine hierarchy. Once this cosmology collapses, the modern subject retreats into “inner life” and makes history the site in which meaning and truth must be realised. (Taubes, 2007, p. 88) Kant, Taubes observes, internalises time as the “inner meaning” of the subject. His question, “How is history possible a priori?” points to an “event in itself” (*Ereignis an sich*). The determination of the *Ich* as the basis of temporal consciousness enables *past* and *future* to enter the horizon of the present. This move paves the way for interpreting *Sein* through temporal structures and culminates in Heidegger’s concept of *Zeitlichkeit*. (Taubes, 2017b)

For Heidegger, temporality is the self-contained fundamental structure within which being becomes intelligible. Taubes interprets this as the logical outcome of the modern inward turn

from Copernicus to Kant. Yet he misses the ecstatic structure of Heideggerian time. Whereas Kant retains time as a form of “inner intuition,” the temporality of Heidegger is ecstatic.¹ By overlooking this distinction, Taubes understands Heideggerian temporality as a messianic-apocalyptic deficit rather than an ontological analysis. This is less a simple error than a re-theologization of Heidegger: Taubes recasts thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) as a variant of fallenness, thereby creating the conceptual space for his own messianic intervention. This interpretive shift leads the later Taubes away from a secular genealogy of modernity toward a theological reading of history.

The second hermeneutic key that Taubes uses for understanding the present and diagnosing modern rationalisation is Max Weber’s metaphor of the “stahlhartes Gehäuse.” In the apocalyptic imagination of Weber, modernity culminates in either prophetic renewal or mechanised petrification.² Taubes understands Weber’s spatial “iron cage” in the same way that he understands Benjamin’s temporal “Ausnahmestand:” a world whose order functions as a prison of meaning. He risks interpreting Weber’s sociological diagnosis as a “Gnostic hieroglyph”—captured in the formula of the creator’s cell³—in which the cosmos appears as an ontologically fallen order marked by evil. Humanity thus becomes a stranger in the world, and God the counter-worldly force capable of suspending its categorical structure. (Taubes, 1984)

In his early works, Taubes presents Gnosticism as the constructive principle of the subject. The Gnostic *Ich* perceives itself as trapped within the structure of error that permeates the world. For the Gnostic, the only authentic existence is the spirit (*pneuma*), which has fallen into the prison of the flesh and nature within this world. The young Taubes traces the formation of the idea of the *person* back to the crisis of collective order in Greek society. The spirit (*pneuma*) was alienated not only from the *polis* and the cosmos but also from its own psyche, finding itself belonging to another world: “the emergence of man’s self as a general human experience [is] the axis of our history.” Therefore, Taubes places the apocalypse of the Greek polis at the kernel of history, which functions as the experience of the man in the world, “as in the exile.” Only this *estrangement* could open the path to the “self.” The essential condition of this process was the dissolution and *Entheilung* of the cosmos. (Taubes, 2017c, pp. 113, 118)

Taubes distinguishes two modalities of alienation: *Fremdheit*, a primordial estrangement that grounds apocalyptic consciousness, and *Selbstentfremdung*, a moralised alienation produced by forgetting this origin. In both cases, alienation involves forgetting the way of the other-worldly home: “Zur Fremdheit als Leiden kommt die Entfremdung als Schuld, beides als Einheit beschlossen im doppelten Sinn von: sich verirren.” Yet, *Fremdheit* preserves an “unforgettable” core that remains active precisely through its forgottenness. (Taubes, 2007, pp. 26–27) Taubes argues that the strict historical distinction between two modes of relating to reality—ancient “memory of origin” (*Erinnerung an die Herkunft*) and modern “assurance of expectation”—

¹ In §72 of *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger argues that *Dasein* can understand itself and the world only because it always experiences itself within the horizon of a temporal openness, an openness that shapes human life as a living flow of possibilities, dependencies, and situations. This temporality is constituted in three “ecstasies” of time (*Ekstasen der Zeit*)—future (*Zukunft*), past/been-ness (*Gewesenheit*), and present/presence (*Gegenwart*). In this fundamental understanding, the future is the dimension in which *Dasein* experiences the “projection” (*Entwurf*) of its possibilities; the been-ness (*Gewesenheit*) is the mode from which *Dasein* always comes and accepts its “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*); and the present is the field of the coming together of the two in the act of Being. (Heidegger, 1967, pp. 372–403)

² “Niemand weiß noch, wer künftig in jenem Gehäuse wohnen wird und ob am Ende dieser ungeheuren Entwicklung ganz neue Propheten oder eine mächtige Wiedergeburt alter Gedanken und Ideale stehen werden, oder aber - wenn keins von beiden - mechanisierte Versteinerung, mit einer Art von krampfhaftem Sich - wichtig - nehmen verbrämt. Dann allerdings könnte für die ‘letzten Menschen’ dieser Kulturentwicklung das Wort zur Wahrheit werden: ‘Fachmenschen ohne Geist, Genußmenschen ohne Herz: dies Nichts bildet sich ein, eine nie vorher erreichte Stufe des Menschentums erstiegen zu haben.’” (Weber, 1988, p. 203)

³ *haec cellula creatoris*

cannot be maintained when we examine phenomena such as Surrealism or late antique Gnosis.⁴ In these movements, remembrance and expectation collapse into one another: Redemption requires *Wiedererinnerung*: a recollection that recovers the “original homeland.” To remember the origin is already to anticipate its return. This fusion produces a structure in which *Erinnerung* does not function as a backwards-looking recollection but as a mode of anticipating a transformative future. In Surrealism and in Gnostic thought alike, memory becomes the site through which utopia appears not as a wholly new construction but as the re-emergence—or *Wiederkunft*—of a lost paradisaic state. Hence, the idea of a realised utopia as a return to paradise persists as a theological and political topos all the way into the “modern theological Marxism” of Benjamin and Bloch. (Taubes, 1996, pp. 154–156) In this sense, *Erinnerung* acquires an apocalyptic character: becoming the medium through which the end of the present order and the irruption of redeemed time are imagined.

Taubes finds the historical index of the Gnostic forgetting and remembering in his later reflections on Benjamin’s philosophy of history. In his 1984 lectures on Benjamin, Taubes transforms forgetting into a temporal setting. By treating the Past (*Vergangene*) as merely what has passed (*vergangen*), historical reason naturalises the tripartite division of past–present–future, thereby failing the Past, *Gewesene*, and *Vergessene*. The mystical, suppressed, and “unforgettable” remainder of history persists, according to Taubes, despite the refusal to remember in the constitution of modernity. (Taubes, 2006, p. 75) It undermines the authority of linear temporality and exposes history as a contingent construction. In its place, he would reactivate the idea of *Urgeschichte* and imagine a new temporality in which origin and end, remembrance and expectation, collapse into one another.

II. *Jetztzeit* and Messianic History

Taubes emerged in 20th-century theological and philosophical debates on the meaning of history and eschatology: Is *eschaton* the “end of time,” or is it the “time of the end”? Following Walter Benjamin, Taubes was one of the few Jewish apocalyptic thinkers who chose the latter. His philosophy of history—often described as a messianic or *Heilsgeschichte* reading of history—emerges from his engagement with a tension he detects in Benjamin’s encounter with the early works of Martin Heidegger. In a 1973 lecture, he argues that both thinkers employ qualitative concepts of time in contrast to the homogeneous, quantitative time of the natural sciences. (Taubes, 1973)

Benjamin’s earliest confrontation with Heidegger’s historical ontology is evident in his 1915 lectures “Der Zeitbegriff in der Geschichtswissenschaft,” which already anticipates elements of *Sein und Zeit*. For Heidegger, “historicity” (*Geschichtlichkeit*) is grounded in temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*): Historical events are unique, unrepeatable, and embedded in qualitatively distinct epochs. Each epoch possesses its own structure and significance, irreducible to chronological measurement. Even calendars, he notes, mark meaningful events and thus establish a qualitative relation between present and past. On this basis, Heidegger preserves the distinction between past and present. (Heidegger, 1978) Taubes identifies this as the point at which Benjamin’s more radical logic of interruption begins to diverge.

In “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (1940), Benjamin mounts a critique of linear and progressive historiography. History becomes accessible only in ruptures, “sudden flashes” (*Aufblitzen*), and where images of the past flash up in the “moment of danger” (*Augenblick einer Gefahr*). These flashes demand that the historical subject *redeem* latent possibilities buried in the past. (Benjamin, 1991, p. 695, VI) Benjamin had long resisted Heidegger’s approach to history.

⁴ Taubes argues that the Gnosis of Late Antiquity and surrealism are “comparable.” The prefix *sur-* signifies a transcendence of the world, for the “world” results from natural science’s interpretation of *Wirklichkeit*. (Taubes, 1996, p. 188)

In a 1916 letter to Gershom Scholem, he dismissed Heidegger's concept of time as a model of how not to think about history, in terms of both mechanical and historical time. (Benjamin, Scholem and Adorno, 2012, p. 82) Taubes, aware of this critique, draws a sharp distinction between two types of qualitative time: Heidegger's "descriptive" temporality and Benjamin's "fragmentation of the historical continuum." An introduction of "a new calendar [...] in connection to revolution," Taubes argues, does not "fill homogeneous and empty time." They break it open. Heidegger's "examples," by contrast, remain a harmless "abundance of facts," according to Taubes. (Taubes, 1973)

Both Benjamin and Heidegger treat the "now" (Jetzt) as a moment of openness to past and future in an ecstatic temporality. Yet, for Heidegger, the past is not a reservoir of redemption but the condition of thrownness (Geworfenheit), the inherited structure that delimits understanding. The future—as *Being-towards-death* (Sein zum Tode)—holds ontological priority over the past.⁵ Benjamin reverses the polarity: the original temporal category is *what has been* (das Gewesene in thesis IV), a past that presses claims of redemption upon the present. The openness of the now is, therefore, for Benjamin a political and ethical demand, which frames the subject's relationship to the past as a duty of rescue. (Taubes, 2006, p. 79) This contrast between Heidegger's existential temporality and Benjamin's critical Jetztzeit underlies Taubes' account of the entanglement of history and messianism.

Benjamin situates historical experience within the tension between the messianic and the profane orders. Building on this, Taubes distinguishes the "perspective" of historicism from messianic history. Historicism is the idea of seeing every era as unique, with its own distinct character that historians should describe as it "really" was. While historicism adopts what Taubes describes as a calm, contemplative stance, and Heidegger anchors historiography in an existential openness to "authentic possibilities" (eigentliche Möglichkeiten), messianic history originates from a state of danger—from the awareness of a "permanent state of exception." (Benjamin, 1991, p. 697 thesis VIII; Taubes, 2006, pp. 88–92) It is only from this vantage point that the Real image (wahre Bild) of history becomes visible. (Benjamin, 1991, p. 695 thesis V) For Benjamin's chronicler, the past encompasses all temporal strata—past, present and future—and in this true image, the forgotten ruins of history re-emerge as claims on the present.

The *Real image* of the Past emerges in fragments as a *resurrected* present. Taubes invokes the eschatological notion of *Auferstehung* and highlights the image of *Totenbeschwörung* (the conjuration of the dead)—a concept that, unlike Marx, Benjamin employs in the sense of redemption. Benjamin writes, "Freilich fällt erst der erlösten Menschheit ihre Vergangenheit voll auf zu." (Benjamin, 1991, p. 696, thesis III; Taubes, 2006, p. 79) Resurrection is an image of the end that arises in relation to the Past in every complete remembrance. This is the Day of Judgement, when the Past is fully remembered.

Messianic temporality, therefore, transforms time from a sequence of epochs into a revolutionary contraction. Forgetting is the force of time and profane order. It does not let the Past function as stable inheritance. The Past appears only in fragile, discontinuous configurations with the present and vanishes as soon as it flashes forth. Giorgio Agamben captures this structure of ephemerality in his reading of Paul's notion of condensed time (1 Cor. 7:29) as "the time it takes for time to end, or, more precisely, the time we take to bring to an end, to achieve our representation of time." (Agamben, 2005, p. 67) In his 1984/85 lectures on Benjamin, Taubes thus situates him apart from broader Jewish and Marxist apocalyptic traditions:

⁵ "Das eigentliche Sein zum Tode, das heißt die Endlichkeit der Zeitlichkeit, ist der verborgene Grund der Geschichtlichkeit des Daseins. Das Dasein wird nicht erst geschichtlich in der Wiederholung, sondern weil es als zeitliches geschichtlich ist, kann es sich wiederholend in seiner Geschichte übernehmen." (Heidegger, 1967, p. 386)

Benjamin gehört zu denen, die das Apokalyptische auf ein schockierendes Ende von allem geschichtlichen Dasein festlegen, das ein Neues walten läßt, das von keiner Vorstellung von Welt eingeholt werden kann, deshalb [...] ist Benjamin interessiert (daran), den Begriff von Fortschritt als bürgerlichen zu begreifen, der nichts zu tun hat mit dem a) religiösen, theologischen, messianischen, apokalyptischen und b) mit dem historischen Materialismus. (Taubes, 2006, p. 89)

Taubes was intensely influenced by Herbert Marcuse’s radical rejection of the idea of the future. Following his death, Taubes juxtaposed his late works against Weber’s “iron cage,” which provides the basis for radical negation. Marcuse himself concedes at the close of his *Der eindimensionale Mensch* the element of lack in the critical theory: “keine Begriffe, die die Kluft zwischen dem Gegenwärtigen und seiner Zukunft überbrücken könnten.” (Marcuse, 1998, p. 268)

In his later writings, Taubes reorients his philosophy of history by treating the Past as the site of a Gnostic “original homeland.” The Past becomes alive—*geschieht*—only through narration (Erzählung), which renders it, in Benjamin’s sense, quotable (zitierbar). On this reading, history is not the reconstruction of “what actually happened” but a narrative encounter in which present and past enter into shifting constellations. (Taubes, 2006, p. 73) Narration transforms the closed historical claim of *once upon a time* into the open *once*. What counts as truth is not a stable representation (Abbild) but a mode of recognition (Erkennbarkeit) that emerges in the now-time of interpretation. (Taubes, 2006, p. 84) From here, Taubes finds a metaphysical condition of Benjamin’s idea of recognitional history: “Das Gewesene [...] möchte selbst an die Oberfläche gelangen.” (Taubes, 2006, p. 78) This apocalyptic strain of the time towards the now-time makes being a form of *been-ness* (*Gewesenheit*). Neither the future nor the time-sequence is addressed by Taubes. The present, under such conditions, acquires an apocalyptic contour, which tends to see Being in a concentrated configuration of historical meaning.

Taubes refers to this configuration as “geballte Geschichte” (compressed history), which he considers to be the experiential kernel of eschatological time. (Taubes, 2006, p. 87) For him, this compression is not a matter of progress or archetype, but rather a contraction of time experienced in expectation of the imminent arrival of the Messiah. Taubes locates this notion of time in the apocalyptic experiences: “Das sind Erfahrungen, die Paulus durchschütteln und die Benjamin nach 1918, nach dem Krieg, durchschütteln [...] das sind Fragen der Optik.” (Taubes, 1993, p. 103) He shifts the focus of history from detached construction to moments of suffering and messianic interventions that reveal the Real image of history.

The advent of the Messiah is prophesied by biblical apocalypses in tandem with catastrophic destruction — war, famine, and cosmic dissolution. For Taubes, the structural juxtaposition of destruction (*Untergang*) and redemption (*Erlösung*) constitutes the dialectical core of Pauline messianism, which Benjamin describes as “messianic intensity.” (Taubes, 1993, p. 100) Taubes opposes messianic history to the history of leisure and culture. Leisure presents a homogeneous concept of time because it is incapable of grasping the Real image. It is afflicted by “sloth of the heart” (*Trägheit des Herzens*), which is the polar opposite of the immediate messianic intensity of the heart formulated by Benjamin in his “Theologisch-politisches Fragment.” (Benjamin, 1921; Taubes, 2006, p. 87) This consciousness, born from a state of exception and danger, apprehends the past not as a stable inheritance but as a constellation of fragmentary, “compressed” images whose latent claims demand redemption in the present. The *short time* of the apocalypse transforms history from a narrative of progress into a site of messianic intensity.

III. Apocalypse and the Political

In his reading of Hobbes and Schmitt, Taubes turns to the two apocalyptic beasts of the Hebrew Bible: Leviathan and Behemoth. Hobbes famously names Leviathan the “mortal god,” the great

artificial person who suppresses natural chaos by concentrating power.⁶ Taubes was, however, surely aware of the deeper, mystical genealogy of Leviathan through the works of his early mentor Gershom Scholem.⁷ In Scripture (Job 41; Psalm 74) and later in Kabbalistic and Sabbatean traditions, Leviathan appears as a primordial monster associated with the destructive, profane domain of power. At the centre of Hobbes' theo-logics, Taubes draws attention to his references to the mythical elements "aus dem Abgrund" in the Book of Job that appear in the answer of God to Job. For him, Hobbes's mortal god is the secularised residue of the absolute divine will (*potentia absoluta*) transferred from medieval theology into modern political form. (Taubes, 2017d, p. 265) In his preface to the volume *Der Fürst dieser Welt*, Taubes imagines this mystical element in the "dragon" or apocalyptic beast of the Book of Revelation, whose authority will ultimately be undone by the Messiah, crawling "aus diesen Abgründen" in the form of the sovereign. (Taubes, 1983, p. 5) Sovereign is the opposite and corrective of the other animal of the abyss, Behemoth, which remains below. Taubes describes Leviathan and Behemoth as the two foci of Hobbes's ellipse that together shape apocalyptic thought.

Taubes is supposed to be understood as the so-called "left-wing" reception of Carl Schmitt. Yet he articulates a more mystical-political conception of the left. In a 1977 letter to Michael Wyschogrod, he argues that the "vocabulary of revolt" cannot be understood in purely secular terms. "'Left'," he writes, "is not a symbol only post-French Revolution[...] I cannot imagine that without (continuously) being challenged by Thora, by every Jewish face that reveals yir'at shamayim,⁸ I would be able to even think such heretical thoughts." (Taubes, 1977b) For Taubes, concepts such as theocracy or revolution therefore carry primarily religious, not political, significance. By reversing Schmitt's authoritarian theology, he elaborates a counter-theological, mystical-political apocalypticism. This is a revolutionary theology that refuses the task of founding a political order.

The entanglement of the apocalyptic and the political in Taubes no longer mirrors the dichotomy of Matthew 6:33 (first material needs, or first the Kingdom of God). The tension is dissolved because he locates the material and the spiritual intertwined in the concept of history. Reading Benjamin, he identifies the deficit of historical materialism in its neglect of a spiritual dimension that acts "underground" in correspondence with class struggle. This element is not a bourgeois residue nor a projection of a future "Kingdom of God." It is a theological-messianic force latent within history itself. (Taubes, 2006, p. 69)

Taubes interprets Benjamin's philosophy of history as grounded in a mystical theory of correspondence (*Entsprechung*). The invisible element of the "unscheinbarste" in Benjamin's "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" (thesis IV) is, for him, a theological "secret" (*Geheim*) that silently orients historical change and class conflict. He finds the most radical expression of this two-dimensional structure in Benjamin's concept "mystische Geschichtsauffassung" in his early "Theologisch-politisches Fragment," where historical discontinuity emerges from the interweaving of two continuous yet opposed currents: the visible, secular course of events and the subterranean counter-current of sacred history (*Heilsgeschichte*), which refers ceaselessly to the Messiah and only intermittently breaks into appearance. This substratum is, however, not abstract. It is the Real image of the past—what becomes Universal when revealed in messianic or apocalyptic experience. (Taubes, 2006, p. 81)

From this, Taubes derives a universalism grounded in apocalyptic-messianic experience. In his lectures on Paul, he links the concepts of *pan* ("the All") and *pas Israel* ("all Israel") to an

⁶ "This is the generation of that great Leviathan, or rather, to speak more reverently, of that mortal god to which we owe, under the immortal God, our peace and defence." (Hobbes, 2009, p. 106)

⁷ See Scholem's studies on Nathan's Treatise on the Dragons (*Drush ha-Tanninim*) in: (Scholem, 2014; Babylon and Scholem, 2020)

⁸ "Fear of heaven," "awe of heaven," or "reverence of heaven." (sefaria.org)

apocalyptic conception of time. The Universal and the Messianic, for Taubes, cannot be reduced either to inward spirituality or to a public-political program. In Paul’s letters, especially 1 Corinthians 1–14, *pan* is not an empirical totality or a liberal universalist horizon. It marks a compressed present in which *love* becomes the unifying force. This force suspends the prevailing structures of *nomos* and *fatum*, which Taubes—drawing on *Dialektik der Aufklärung*—understands as reconstituted within the Enlightenment’s symbolic order of domination. (Taubes, 1993, pp. 38–40)

This closed rational–scientific cosmos re-mythologises history by placing the subject inside a deterministic order. Taubes’s apocalyptic political, therefore, engages the political only indirectly. It cannot be dissolved into the *nihilism* of world politics. Like Paul and Benjamin, he insists that messianism must remain in permanent tension with the profane order. On this basis, he critiques Zionist attempts to enact redemption on the stage of history. (Taubes, 1977a, pp. 10–12) To “realise redemption on the stage of history without transfiguration of the Messianic idea,” Taubes argues, “leads into the abyss.” (Taubes, 2006, p. 104) The Messianic, therefore, can appear only as distributed (*verteilt*), never as a sovereign event. (Taubes, 2006, p. 72)

Benjamin’s idea of a “schwache messianische Kraft,” which assigns each present moment responsibility for unfulfilled past hopes, supplies the key matrix for Taubes’s interpretation. Taubes traces this “weakness” to Paul’s paradox of the “weakness of Christ” (*astheneia tou Christou*): not impotence but the subversion of worldly power by a mode of redemption operating beneath historical sovereignty. The Messiah does not perfect the world or address a stable subject. Taubes finds a thread between Benjamin’s concept of world politics as nihilism and Paul’s “as not” (*hōs mē*) in Corinthians and Romans. Through Paul’s “as not” (*hōs mē*), fixed identities lose their solidity, and speech gives way to the “inexpressible groanings” of the Spirit (Romans 8:26). In the apocalyptic experience of time, “what is not” (*ta mē onta*) proves stronger than what is. The apocalypticism of Taubes is, therefore, not that of world-destruction, but understanding the world as-if-not: “[d]ie Welt vergeht, die Morphe dieser Welt ist vorbei.” (Taubes, 1993, p. 100, 2006, p. 72)

Gershom Scholem polemically views the essence of early Hasidism in the idea that “every individual is the Redeemer, the Messiah of his own little world.” (Scholem, 1995, p. 251) But there could also be a positive meaning in the irony of Scholem. Every human being, bearing a residual spark of this weakness, becomes a possible carrier of messianic potential. Taubes extends this Pauline–Benjaminian constellation into the *Passagen-Werk*, where he detects a feminine messianism in Benjamin’s scattered references to the “weaker sex,” “women,” and “sisters.” In Taubes’s reading, these traces imply a feminised figure of the redeemer (Erlöser) and of redemption (Erlösung). (Taubes, 2006, p. 72) This feminine dimension of messianism in Taubes’s thought remains largely unexplored and invites further investigation.

Conclusion

Against the modern, post-Enlightenment philosophy of history—with its commitment to linear, homogeneous time—Taubes insists that such continuity is not an empirical insight but a metaphysical presupposition. The past does not present itself as a fixed image within a seamless temporal sequence. It persists as an unresolved, unredeemed remainder. The Kantian–Hegelian–Marxian model of history as a chain of homogeneous “now-points” is deconstructed by Taubes. Following Benjamin, he exposes a more originary structure beneath this linear façade: a fractured temporality in which the past interrupts the present. This deeper structure reinforces that the apocalyptic in Taubes is not an event within history but a force that destabilises the very metaphysics of history itself.

What is the “below” of the apocalypse? In his later writings, Taubes moves away from any clear or positive depiction of the apocalyptic. Instead, his thoughts gravitate toward a constella-

tion of dualities: Urgeschichte and history, the messianic and the profane order, linear and contracted time, and sovereign power and messianic force. These tensions reveal an underlying negativity that challenges the symbolic order. He develops a negative metaphysics of history: a structure of historical existence defined by an unrepresentable central force that interrupts representation. Whether evoked as the Real image or the Messiah, the apocalypse “from below” becomes increasingly attuned to this subterranean, unspeakable force at the centre of history. The apocalypse, then, is the ephemeral Real image of history. It emerges in messianic intensity in the sense of suffering—the moment that shatters the apathy of the heart and the contraction of time, in which the forgotten or unredeemed Past forces itself back onto the surface of history. The apocalypse emerges as a non-identical excess of history. It appears only through allusions and fractured images because it exceeds the representational logic that sustains historical reason and political order. Finally, the apocalypse is this silent centre, discernible only in the fissures and “inexpressible groanings,” where history loses its self-identity.

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