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THE MODERN PHILOSOPHERS' PAUL: RECLAIMING PAULINE
INTROSPECTION AND REVIVING LEGACIES OF ANTI-JUDAISM

I. Introduction

During the last two decades Paul the apostle has been the object of intense debate among continental theorists and their many commentators. Philosophers such as Jacob Taubes, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek have discussed the letters and legacy of the author who is commonly imagined to be one of the founders of an ancient religion: Christianity. They have done so in manners that have reopened and actualized possible connections between philosophy, theology and psychoanalysis. The recent turn to Paul within continental philosophy has resulted in arguments for the overlapping of religious and secular, theological and psychoanalytical perspectives on human existence. What has been a surprise to many academicians is that cases made for this particular kind of overlapping during the last decades have been forcefully made through readings of Paul.

At the outset, the primary reason for the turn to Paul among some of these philosophers was the need for the renewal of the passion for a global political leftism within the new post-cold war era of the hegemony of global capitalism. According to Alain Badiou, global capitalism constituted a powerful fragmentation of all identities, leading the public opinion to imagine only particular identities to be defended within politics, but no Universal causes or major political projects involving all people without regard to these particular identities. Within this historical context the Pauline formula from Gal 3:28 would for Badiou "ring" as a Universalist interruption of the status quo fixed on various particularisms.¹ Within the French philosopher's imagination Paul was a completely secularized thinker, whose thought and militancy could be applied within the contemporary political circumstances. Slavoj Žižek would follow Badiou and read Paul with the same hermeneutical presupposition. One of the striking features of Badiou's revolutionary Paulinism, was that the political nature of Paul's Universalism was argued for as a proceeding from a Pauline theory of the Unconscious and also from an affirmation of the irrelevance of modern Lacanian psychoanalysis for leftist politics.

Jacob Taubes' lectures from 1987 about the political theology of Paul are often seen as the first in a series of interventions into the debate about the philosophical value of Paul's letters, in the past and in the present. Although the reasons for Jacob Taubes' turn to Paul were different from Badiou and Žižek, Taubes' readings of Paul do also situate the legacy of this ancient figure in relation to modern psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud is considered by Taubes as no less than a "direct descendent of Paul".²

II. Paul – the theorist of the Unconscious

On one hand, Paul's letters contain a theory of the subject's Unconscious, in

¹Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 9.

² Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 89.

Badiou's reading.³ Badiou reads Romans 7 as a description of the blind automatism of desire, which is unleashed by the Law, as the working of the human unconscious that makes the subject fixed on the law and hinders it from taking action. Only the interruption of the Truth-Event that Paul declares, which is the model for Badiou's contemporary Truth-Events, is able to release the subject from this unconscious automatism and consciously take action in loyalty to the Universalism of this Event. On the other hand, any discourse that remains fixed on the law and that does not overcome the whole domain of law remains unable to enter the domain of the properly political. The consciously chosen loyalty to the Universalism grounded by Badiou's Truth-Event 'is no being-toward-death'.⁴ Badiou's revolutionary subject is supposed to be free from any dialectics that involves the forces of death, which Badiou sees as tied to the proscriptions of the law. The mastery of the literal tradition of the law remains at the level of the Jewish discourse, in the scheme of the French philosopher.⁵ It has not reached the discourse of the gospel, the discourse of Paul, which is totally illegal in the sense of being free from any law. The Lacanian division of the subject, which for Lacan (and for Žižek) remains forever split and may only momentarily be consciously reconciled or restored,⁶ can be transcended, in Badiou's vision. In other words, one can reach a subjective level where one can do without Lacanian psychoanalysis. This sort of Pauline subjectivity can uncover and free itself from the very same human unconscious that the "Jewish science" of psychoanalysis remains fixed on, according to Badiou's philosophy.⁷

When the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek first enters the scene of these recent discussions of the contemporary philosophical relevance of Paul, he does so both in admiration to Badiou's theory of the Truth-Event and as well as with strong criticism of Badiou's dismissal of psychoanalysis as a tool for grounding the subjective militancy and action in loyalty to the Truth-Event. When Žižek defends the necessity of psychoanalysis in the foundation of revolutionary political action, it happens through his reading of Romans 7. Within Žižek's Hegelianism the "death drive" of psychoanalysis corresponds to 'the night of world' and the negativity of Jesus' cross in Hegel. Žižek cannot, as Badiou, simply do away with the ontological condition of negativity in order to affirm the positivity of the new order that arises in the subjects' loyal actions to the Truth-Event. The cross of Jesus has a salvific meaning for Žižek, although a secularized one.

The problem Paul reflects upon in the passage of Romans 7, according to Žižek, is not 'the standard morbid moralistic one' that he criticizes Badiou for taking it to be. For Žižek, Paul is not describing how to get rid of impulses of the sinful desire, but how to break out of the automatism of blind desire and at the same time 'assert my living passions only in the disguise of their opposite, as a morbid death drive'.⁸ Badiou's Paulinism is in a sense naively ascetic, in Žižek's view. He favors a Paulinism that in his view more realistically recognizes that the subject is both its subjective assertion of its loyalty to the Truth-Event carried out in revolutionary action as well as the irreducible gap of the Lacanian subject between thought and action in which the human unconscious continues to be operative as the speech of the Other. Although Žižek makes this revolutionary Paulinism inherently tied to the legacy of the

³ Badiou, 80.

⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁶ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 44-48.

⁷ This presupposition of Paul's transcendence of the subjective level of negativity and its forces of death remains one of the most problematic aspects of Badiou's reading. In the words of Larry L. Welborn, "Badiou's most significant failure to understand Paul occurs at this point... Badiou insists that Jesus' death does not belong to the operation of eventual grace." Larry L. Welborn, "The Culture of Crucifixion," in *Paul and the Philosophers*, ed. Ward Blanton and Hent de Vries (2013), 139.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 2008 ed. (London: Verso, 1999), 173-74.

"Jewish science" of modern psychoanalysis, Badiou's deeply antinomian Paul is reproduced in Žižek's version of the apostle. The law in Paul's letters is interpreted as a trap to escape for the subject. The question is not whether the Pauline subject should free itself from what these two philosophers' Paul presupposes as the Jewish law. The question is to what degree the subject can be rid of the effects of the human unconscious. And although they claim to discuss purely secularized meanings of the "Jewish" and the "Christian", in the religious content that is supposedly being secularized by their procedures there is a Jewish law inferior to the Christian gospel. Implicit in this secularizing extraction of the true kernel of Paul's religion is the consolidation of the familiar trope in Christian history of the sterile automatism of the Jewish subject obliged by the law. In other words, when Žižek produces the image of an ancient apostle with insights that are crucial for modern psychoanalysis a Christian stereotype of the repressive burden of the Jewish law comes reaffirmed.

III. *Paul as the precursor of Freud*

In the moment the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben launched his reading of Paul's universalism as an alternative to Badiou's,⁹ he did so *in memoriam* of Jacob Taubes (1923-1987),¹⁰ a Jewish rabbi and philosopher, born in Austria. When Jacob Taubes gave his lectures published as *The Political Theology of Paul* this emphasis on the political in Paul interestingly ended with and became extended to the psychoanalytical in Paul. While Žižek reads Paul through Lacan, Taubes considers the apostle through Freud and Nietzsche. And while Žižek regards Paul as the first Christian who breaks once and for all with the Jewish community and its law, Taubes perceives Paul as a Jewish antinomian that broke with the Jewish law but never definitively with Judaism. Nonetheless, Taubes as well as Žižek both consider Paul to be a subversive antinomian, which derives from his presumed break with Jewish lawfulness and Torah-centered piety. Both erect the notion of Paul as a theorist of the unconscious on the basis of what they consider to be Paul's view of the Jewish law, as an example of law in general, in Romans 7.¹¹ For Žižek the fundamental likeness of Paul's and Lacan's program is the aim of affirming oneself as a human subject free from the law of the Father. For Taubes this fundamental likeness is also found in relation to the question of the law. Like Paul, Freud attempts to suspend the law, in Taubes' view. For Taubes' Freud this includes the Mosaic law as given in the father-religion of Judaism. Still, Freud's modern program of suspension goes further as it is directed against civil law and bourgeois custom.¹²

Taubes had already in his 1957 essay "Religion and the Future of Psychoanalysis" established this likeness between Pauline redemption from the Jewish law and Freudian healing from the neurosis-producing civil law, particularly through a reading of a work by Freud which at the time was rarely discussed: *Moses and Monotheism*. In this work, Taubes senses Freud's admiration for Paul's break with the law and the authority of the Mosaic religion:

It cannot be accidental that whenever Freud discusses the message of Paul, he takes the Apostle's side and "justifies" his message of salvation. In the religion of Moses (which represents for Freud the paradigmatic case of religion as authority), there is no room for the direct expression of the murderous father-

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ The 'sin' described by Paul in Romans 7 is interpreted by Žižek as the process of how "[m]y actual life-impulse, my desire appears to me as a foreign automatism that persists in following its path independently of my conscious Will and intentions." Žižek, 173. Based on Nietzsche's *Daybreak*, Taubes reads Romans 7 as testifying to the view that behind the human subject "there are forces at work that undermine the conscious will". Taubes, 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, 90.

hate.¹³

While the religion of Moses only increased the guilt of the community and burdened man, Paul's new religion alleviated the very same guilt through the Christian illusion of expiation. Although, as Taubes makes clear, Freud considered Paul's good news of redemption from guilt as a delusion, Freud still admired Paul's implicit confession of the murder of God, inherent in Paul's message.

What fascinated Freud in the message of Paul was the implicit confession of guilt contained in his good news. The evangel was at the same time a dysangel, the bad news of the original crime of man.¹⁴

Taubes considers Freud as a direct descendent of Paul not least since Freud proclaims his psychoanalysis to possess the power to liberate man from the burden of his secret guilt, to consciously break through and suspend the forces of the Unconscious. While guilt cannot be expiated in Freudian psychoanalysis, as in Paul's religion, it can be acknowledged. In that way, it can provide partial redemption in Freud's atheist universe. While in Paul atheism is implicit, in Freud it is explicit, in this reading. Nonetheless, what is a common feature in both Paul and Freud is the suspension of the law of the Father, in Taubes' opinion.

Taubes' move of uniting the two figures goes in the opposite direction of what is often deemed to be a more accurate understanding of Paul within the apostle's historical context within the field of New Testament studies for the last 50 years or so, inaugurated by Krister Stendahl.¹⁵ Six years after Taubes 1957 essay Stendahl attempted to refute what he considered as a Christian misunderstanding of the apostle, of Paul as "the hero of the introspective conscience".¹⁶ Paul's writings were not centered on introspection, as if his problem articulated in a text like Romans 7 primarily was psychological or anthropological. Far from it, in Stendahl's eyes Paul's purpose in this passage in the letter to the Romans was "to explain why there is no reason to impose the Law on the Gentiles".¹⁷ Paul was first and foremost concerned with salvation history, not psychology nor Christian introspection, according to Stendahl. With his criticism of what he saw as a Christian and particularly Protestant distortion of Paul's message, Stendahl paved the way for readings centered on Paul's Jewishness rather than Paul's presumed break with Judaism.

From his Jewish perspective, as a scholar and a rabbi, Taubes deemed Paul to be a thoroughly Jewish figure that never left Judaism in a historical and conceptual sense. For Taubes that does not mean that the Christian readings of Paul as a figure of introspection are misguided. Far from it, Paul's turn inward, his introspective conscience, is a result of Paul's messianism, of "the inner logic of the messianic".¹⁸ When messianism cannot be realized historically or externalized it has to be internalized in a historical community if it is to survive. In Taubes' view this happened in the first Pauline communities.

In other words, Taubes reclaims Paul's introspective consciousness and its relevance for the genealogy of modern psychoanalysis. Moreover, Taubes

¹³ From *Cult to Culture: Fragments Towards a Critique of Historical Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 338.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 338-39.

¹⁵ Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Real Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 250.

¹⁶ Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *The Harvard Theological Review* 56, no. 3 (1963): 199.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁸ Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 10. "Turning the messianic experience inward, Paul opens the door toward the introspective conscience of the West." *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Towards a Critique of Historical Reason*, 5.

considers the Pauline introspection to be inherently Jewish, to be a product of Jewish messianism. If this Pauline introspection is thought to be Jewish is it then free of anti-Judaism?

IV. Affinities with European anti-Judaism: Freud and Schmitt

What Taubes does not draw the reader's attention to, neither in this essay from 1957 nor in his Heidelberg lectures held at the end of his life in 1987, is the implicit anti-Judaism in Freud's privileging of the Pauline son-religion over the Mosaic father-religion in the therapist's last completed work, *Moses and Monotheism*. Taubes points in his 1987 lectures to *Moses and Monotheism* as a starting point for a paradigmatically new understanding of Paul.¹⁹ In this way Taubes can be said to make his philosophical readings of Paul, that preceded the ones undertaken by Agamben and others, dependent upon a Freudian criticism of Judaism. This criticism is on one hand so harsh that commentators of Freud's work discuss to what extent it reflects existing anti-Semitic discourses at the time. On the other hand its target is the carnal and ritual practices of Judaism, such as circumcision. The refined and abstract Judaism Freud defends, which moves from its primitive and carnal expressions to the "heights of sublime abstraction",²⁰ comes close to what has been imagined to be Judaism's counterpart: The non-carnal, no-ritualistic and spiritual Christianity. Following Daniel Boyarin, Freud's last will, so to say, consists of "an assimilation of Judaism itself to Protestantism, the sublime faith".²¹ Since Freud wrote this attack on the origins of Jewish monotheism on the eve of the catastrophe of the European Jewry, the work's relation to traditional Judaism remains all the more perplexing.

That said, it is typical of Jacob Taubes' intellectual life to bring such a scandalous work to the fore *as a Jew*. This was not the only time Taubes provoked by using his position and authority as a Jew to resettle questions about relations between Jews and Gentiles, Jews and Christians or between victims and perpetrators. Not only was Freud's wild, speculative and perhaps immoral attack on the religion of the European Jewry praised by Taubes in his turn to Paul. Taubes' attempts of rehabilitating the former Nazi Carl Schmitt appeared as even more reckless and provoking. In his 1987 lectures, Taubes presents his encounter with the former Nazi and political theorist Carl Schmitt as one of the very reasons for why Paul concerns him as a Jew. In this way a powerful symbol of not only anti-Judaism, but also of anti-Semitism, is put at the forefront of Taubes' turn to Paul. Carl Schmitt was, after all, one of the two major German figures that Jacob Taubes and many others appreciated as great intellectuals, but who also became supporters of the Nazi regime. The second one of these two major intellectuals was, of course, Martin Heidegger. Their complicity with a regime that produced the Holocaust made the very invocation of Carl Schmitt's name by the Jewish scholar Jacob Taubes problematic, to put it mildly.

While Carl Schmitt did not substantially inform Jacob Taubes' readings of Paul, his name gave a powerful background to it. Independently of Schmitt's theses, Taubes considers Pauline Christianity as a Jewish heresy, as a messianic tradition that never actually broke definitively with Jewish messianism. It is based on this that Taubes is eager to understand the role of Christianity in the rise of Nazism. At the outset, Taubes is convinced that there are some "Christian premises" that were taken away in order to pave the way for German Christians' support for Nazism, for instance the Catholic Carl Schmitt.²² This is a main concern for Jacob Taubes' intellectual activity from

¹⁹ After quoting lengthy passages from *Moses and Monotheism* Taubes proclaims that "[o]nly now can an interpretation of Paul be begun – on an entirely new level". *The Political Theology of Paul*, 94.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (Letchworth: Hogarth Press, 1939), 33.

²¹ Boyarin quoted in Eric L. Santner, "Freud's Moses," in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 59.

²² In one of his many letters to his wife at that time, Susan Taubes, Jacob Taubes wrote: "I intend to show that

the post-war time and until his death, a few weeks after the lectures on Paul in 1987. For these lectures he also prepared the audience by giving them a letter he had sent to Carl Schmitt himself in 1979, where Taubes wrote the following:

Although I in no respect take lightly the fact that the Nazi program talked of "positive Christianity" and took this "seriously" with regard both to Catholicism and Protestantism (wanted to take seriously, and could do: Hitler and Goebbels never left the "church", and, if I am right, they paid their church tax right up to the end!), the "race question was introduced and adumbrated according to a political "theozoology"... I only wish to learn how to "understand" why the boundary was not thought to be there, despite Romans 13.²³

Taubes thinks it is obvious that the words in Romans 13, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (NRSV) would be used to convince Christians to subject themselves to any governing authority, including a Nazi regime. It is less obvious for him, however, why the boundary was not thought to be there in relation to the Jews, based on what Paul writes in the same letter, in the chapters 9 to 11. And this is a text Taubes sits down to read together with the former Nazi professor Carl Schmitt, in order to challenge Schmitt's anti-Semitism. Taubes triumphantly declares that he has convinced Schmitt about what the core point of verse 28 in chapter 11 is: When Paul writes about the elected people of Israel that "As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved" (Rom 11:28), this does in no way mean for Paul that Jews are enemies of Christians on an interhuman level, that Jews should be attacked, persecuted and even killed. According to Taubes, the term enemy concerns a larger salvation drama between God and his people. Israel is still part of God's salvation plan, according to the letter to the Romans, in Taubes' reading. All Israel will be saved. They are still the elected people. Anti-semitism has no Christian legitimacy whatsoever. Christian anti-Semites have misunderstood Paul and a core point in Christianity, in Taubes' view.

V. Reading the philosophers' Paul in the aftermath of Holocaust

The complicity of Christianity in the extermination of the Jews should be considered as a crucial factor if we are to explain why the young rabbi Jacob Taubes begins to read Paul's letters in the New Testament and engage with the Pauline legacy. In the beginning of the 1950s, Taubes had, as a young scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, been exposed to the public display of photographs from the concentration camps. With ongoing reparation negotiations between West Germany and the young state of Israel, Taubes witnessed some of the reactions among Jews in the new state, just some years after the war, and # wrote in one of his many letters to his wife, the Simone Weil-scholar Susan Taubes:

... one learns how deep the wound is. I believe we must bear all of that in mind when we move on the 'heights' of German philosophy. The events of National Socialism are part of the cross of our age and address us as well. I'm still standing without the shadow of an answer – my entire compass is destroyed, for the rift between 'Europe' and my people is a rift straight through myself. Those in the church have it easy!²⁴ (end of quote)

Most of Taubes' relatives in Poland were killed in the camps, although his mother and father were saved, since they had moved from Austria to Switzerland a couple of years before the persecution in Vienna, where they

between Hegel and us the deluge took place, i.e., the Christian premises for the concepts of truth, science, etc. ... were taken away." Pareigis' translation of a letter written in German. Susan Taubes, *Die Korrespondenz Mit Jacob Taubes 1952: Herausgegeben Und Kommentiert Von Christina Pareigis* (Paderborn: Fink, 2013), 80.

Christina Pareigis, "Searching for the Absent God: Susan Taubes's Negative Theology," *Telos*, no. 150 (2010): 99.

²³ Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 111.

²⁴ Taubes, 30. Letter to Susan Taubes, written 7 January 1952 in German. Translated in Pareigis, 109.

had formerly resided, began to escalate with the Nazi invasion.

We still live in the shadow of Holocaust, the Shoah. When we read texts that are considered Christian texts, and whether we do so as pious believers, tireless secularists or critical scholars, we do so after Holocaust. Moreover, it should be difficult and morally impossible to discuss the reception of Paul in contemporary philosophy with a focus on anti-Judaism without, at the outset, having been interpellated and held responsible in relation to the cultural memory of Holocaust. This is not least the case since Taubes himself accentuates the intimate relation between his readings of Paul and anti-Semitism. He declares that for him this is a matter of understanding history.²⁵

Conceptually it is possible to consider anti-Judaism as an expression of a conscious rejection or deliberate criticism of certain ideas about the divine and the religious practices that follow from it. One might be against certain Judaic ideas or practices, as a Jew or non-Jew. As a modern philosopher and Jewish rabbi Jacob Taubes evidently fought against specific strands of Judaism when he privileged antinomian messianisms, whether it was in the form of Pauline Christianity, Jewish Sabbatianism or ultra-orthodox Judaism.²⁶ Opposition can be verbal as an expression of the freedom of speech. And it is surely possible and legitimate to oppose whatever religious views or practices that one wishes to distance oneself from, according to a late modern worldview. Nonetheless, I cannot help but hear how "anti-Judaism" sounds strikingly different from "anti-Christianity". "Anti-Judaism" is a term that remains loaded by the memory of the extermination of Jews, by the memory of the nearly immemorial past, immemorial in its ungraspable and radical evil. We should not forget that the European history of anti-Judaism is filled with religious persecution, ethnic segregation, political suppression and racism in the form of anti-Semitism, a history that culminates in Holocaust. Jewish religious ideas and the historical fate of its adherents cannot be totally isolated. Ideas that might run counter to the normative claims of Jewish theologies are "wrapped up" in a violent European history, in particular are Christian caricatures of Judaism thoroughly wrapped up in this European violence.

Simplistic caricatures still lives on in popular imagination and cover the complexity of the historical and conceptual origins of what we label as "Judaism" and "Christianity". Besides, such stereotypes of two mutually exclusive entities serve to define and maintain clear boundaries between what is "Judaism" on one hand and "Christianity" on the other.

VI. Žižekian anti-Judaism

On the background of this one could ask whether it happens in Slavoj Žižek's understanding of these two religions that remnants of anti-Judaism are being reproduced when the Slovenian philosopher is to read Paul.

For Žižek, Paul's thought is a model for radical and revolutionary politics in the present. Following the French philosopher Alain Badiou's reading of Paul, for Žižek Paul's absolute commitment to one event that the apostle declares to reveal the highest truth, namely the event of Jesus' Resurrection, this commitment becomes a model for radical political action in opposition to what Žižek regards as the hegemonic liberalism of our day that discourages the individual to commit to any political cause at all. Moreover, Žižek also adheres to Badiou's thought of a Truth-Event in opposition to what the Slovenian Marxist considers to be a predominant relativism that blocks any radical

²⁵ "I work with theological materials, but I think in terms of intellectual history, of actual history." Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 69.

²⁶ During the last decade of his life Taubes "travelled to Jerusalem, where he frequented a hasidic *schul* in Mea Shearim, the town's ultra-orthodox quarter". Martin Treml, "Reinventing the Canonical: The Radical Reading of Jacob Taubes," in *Escape to Life. German Intellectuals in New York: A Compendium on Exile after 1933*, ed. Eckart Goebel and Sigrid Weigel (Berlin/Boston: Gruyter, 2013), 465.

politics with the argument that no historical event provides any truths or guidelines for political action. In contrast to this, Žižek affirms in agreement with Badiou that there are indeed Truth-Events in our modern age like the October Revolution in 1917 or the Arab Spring in 2011 or other revolutionary events. But for people to become loyal to these Truth-Events they must undergo something similar to what Žižek sees as Paul's conversion and the loyalty to the Truth-Event that follows from it: People must break out of the domain of law, as described by Paul in Romans 7, according to Žižek. As already mentioned this is a breakout Žižek discerns in Paul through Lacan's psychoanalysis. Paul's insights in the law as described in Romans 7 are seen as consistent with Lacan's version of psychoanalysis and become a basis for the subject's political involvement. Žižek writes: #

[T]he opposition of liberalism and fundamentalism is structured in exactly the same way as the one between Law and sin in Paul, i.e., liberalism itself generates its opposite... Fundamentalism is a reaction - a false, mystifying, reaction, of course - against the real flaw of liberalism, and that is why it is again and again generated by liberalism. Left to itself, liberalism will slowly undermine itself - the only thing that can save its core is a renewed left. Or, to put it in the well-known terms from 1968, in order for its key legacy to survive, liberalism needs the brotherly help of the radical left.²⁷ (end of quote)

Simply put, the problem of today's politics is that people are 'good liberals' only concerned with the interests of particular groups and not the common good for all; in other words, for Žižek, most people are not true Universalists. They are trapped and not able to break out from the domain of the law of today, that is, the ideological frame of liberal democracy, and they are not capable of moving on to the domain of illiberal and revolutionary love. In Žižek's view, liberalism allows for particular struggles for the liberal rights of women, for sexual minorities or for ethnic groups but in the moment the radical left institutionalizes its social demands into political dogmas that are considered to be true and valid for everyone it breaks out of liberalism. It becomes illiberal. And for Žižek, this is precisely what Paul did: He elevated a Jewish sect limited to particular interests into a dogmatic and institutionalized Universalist religion. In this way Paul is the model for illiberal Universalist struggles in our time that would want to reinvent communism. How is this connected to anti-Judaism?

First, there is something very familiar with the conception of law as something particular, often restricted to ethnic interests, as something to be liberated from, in order to enter the true domain of universal love. In Žižek's eagerness to posit a radical rupture with the political status quo through a breakout of what Žižek calls the perverse logic of transgression that the law incites, he deprives the law of any positive meaning. For Žižek this law cannot be reduced to the Jewish law, since it is identical to what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called *the symbolic* or *the law of the Father*, which is the law imposed on every human being from childhood when the subject is confronted by the social order. Moreover, Žižek underlines that Jews have an exceptional relation to the law, since they have already freed themselves from its perverse logic, which is otherwise a universal tendency in human subjects, since the Jews have already perceived the emptiness and impotence of God's law, as witnessed in the book of Job.²⁸

Second, this 'exceptional' Jewish relation to the law signals the presence of a presupposition from Žižek's understanding of Judaism and Christianity. For him they name two clearly delimited entities identified as religions that play their roles in a larger scheme of world history that Žižek derives from Hegel,

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 154. The same passage is pasted into "The Jew Is within You, but You, You Are in the Jew," in *What Does a Jew Want? On Binationalism and Other Specters*, ed. Udi Aloni (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 172.

²⁸ Allow me to be a bit polemical; this is a philosopher that appears to know Jews' true spirituality, what he calls "the fundamental position of a Jewish believer", because he has read the book of Job and he knows Franz Kafka. *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, 2008 ed. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 56.

as exemplified from Žižek's work *Less Than Nothing* from 2012: #

The passage from paganism to Judaism is one of sublimation (the dead god survives as the symbolic Other); the death of Christ is not sublimation, in other words it is not the death of the real God who is resurrected in the Holy Ghost as the symbolic order... In strict parallel with this double move from paganism to Judaism and from Judaism to Christianity is the move from traditional authoritarian power to democracy and from democracy to revolutionary power.²⁹ (end of quote)

For Žižek this passage from Judaism to Christianity constitutes a decisive shift forward. Žižek's account is progressive. It means that the idea from common European anti-Judaism of the inherent inferiority of Judaism compared to Christianity is intact and reinforced in Žižek's renewed Hegelianism. The Christianity that Žižek regards as the highest is, of course, a secularized Paulinism that takes it for granted that "the Big Other", which Lacan calls it, or God, does not exist. Nonetheless, Žižek's modern secularity privileges Christianity over Judaism as a religion most worthy of philosophical secularization. While "the dead god survives as the symbolic Other" in Judaism, Christianity effectively acknowledges God's non-existence when Jesus dies on the cross and in that way Christianity paves the way for the true atheism, the true atheism which has to pass through Christianity. Christianity has in this sense a higher philosophical value than Judaism, in Žižek's Hegelian scheme.

Moreover, Žižek's repeated descriptions of law in general, but also of Jewish law in particular, reproduce another aspect of European anti-Judaism, seen in Immanuel Kant; that the Jewish law is devoid of reason. Interestingly, some of the background for Žižek's turn to Paul is his agreement with Alain Badiou that one of the symptoms of the non-Universalist and still particularist ethics of difference of our time, that blocks the political mobilization for Universalist causes, is to be found in the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. As Michael Fagenblat writes in this book #

The claim, as made by [Alain] Badiou, [Judith] Butler, [Dominique] Janicaud, and [Gillian] Rose, that Levinas' thought amounts to a pious and dogmatic assertion of nonrational Law recapitulates the modern philosophical critique, instituted by Spinoza and adopted by Kant, of the nonphilosophical character of Judaism as such.³⁰

Since in Levinas the encounter with the Other in no way can be reduced to ethnic or cultural difference, as Badiou thinks, Žižek's dismissal of Levinas and Derrida can be regarded as yet another form of anti-Judaism, in my opinion.³¹

Third, in order to argue for the necessity and usefulness of Paul as a model for contemporary political action Alain Badiou establishes some historical parallels between our time and Paul's time. In likeness to Badiou's endeavor, Žižek emphasizes the uniqueness and novelty of Paul's Universalist break with the particular interests of his time. He overtakes and uses the historical parallels from Badiou, when Žižek writes that,

... what we need today is the gesture that would undermine capitalist globalization from the standpoint of universal Truth, just as Pauline Christianity did to the Roman global Empire.³²

Paul as a revolutionary model hinges upon his rupture with what Žižek calls

²⁹ *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London; New York: Verso, 2012), 119.

³⁰ Michael Fagenblat, *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 4.

³¹ Badiou admits that the particularist ethics he criticizes is only vaguely Lévinasian. The French philosopher appears to criticize a *wirkungsgeschichte* of Levinas' work and claims that 'the ethics of difference' is the work's effect. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), 20.

³² Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 251-52.

“the Roman way” and “the Jewish way”:

It is here that Saint Paul can still show us the way: the endeavor of his “political theology” was precisely to ground a new collective (of believers) which avoided the debilitating choice between the “Roman” way (the multiculturalist tolerant empire of legal rights) and the “Jewish” way (ethnic fundamentalism).³³

Paul breaks with the Jewish way, which is characterized by nothing less than ‘ethnic fundamentalism’. Paul’s universalism breaks through the spell of a Jewish fundamentalist attachment to ethnic boundaries. Again, Žižek’s Paul is nurtured by elements from the old story of a Christian supersession of a Judaism limited to the ethnic.

What remains excluded from, or at least very hard to imagine, within Žižek’s philosophy, is the rationality of Judaism centered on the Torah, with Universalist meanings or pretensions, something that for instance can be found in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas.³⁴ By contrast, in Žižek’s thought the law is always something to be delivered from, not something one can rationally adhere to as an expression of Universal love. For Žižek there can be no rational nor any politically radical lawfulness, neither Jewish nor Christian. Love is always beyond law.

It is hard not to see how Paul defends Torah-centered lawfulness without entirely skipping passages like the one in Romans 7 when Paul affirms that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Rom 7:12). Žižek skips the whole problem, since he simply and consistently jumps over this verse when he quotes Romans 7.³⁵ But is this not what Christians have done for centuries? Žižek is not special in this regard. Having already met Paul through the modern psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan and overtaken its Augustinian-Lutheran presuppositions, Žižek is merely a Christian reader. Although he is an atheist, he reads like a Christian when he approaches these aspects of Paul. Žižek inherits some patterns of thought that are not always helpful if we are to understand Judaism and Christianity, patterns or stereotypes that remind us that Paul is one of the names of a problem: “Paul” remains, in a way, another name for anti-Judaism. The strengthened associations of this name with anti-Judaism may be regarded as one of the significant effects of the recent turn to Paul in continental philosophy.

VII. Taubes’ Nietzschean Paul

Like Žižek, Taubes also reads Paul as an illiberal and radical political figure. He is eager to tear Christian interpreters of Paul out of their comfort zone, with its typical conventions and common ways of reading Paul.³⁶ On one hand, Taubes uses what he sees as a Jewish illiberal tradition of antinomianism, of breaking with Torah-centered lawfulness and rabbinic conservatism, manifested in the 17th century rabbi Sabbati Zevi, a tradition from Paul to Zevi that Taubes maintains to reinstate Paul as a major figure of radical Jewish messianism.³⁷ Paul and Zevi both become powerful examples of an inherently Jewish rupture with the conservative observation of the Law – both the Torah as well as laws in general.

³³ *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, 2004 ed. (London: Verso, 2002), 316. Here Žižek refers to Jacob Taubes’ ‘outstanding’ *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus*, though he does not quote Taubes in one single place in his work.

³⁴ For instance as laid out and rationally explained in “The Temptation of Temptation” in Emmanuel Lévinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 30-50.

³⁵ See for instance, Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 145-98.

³⁶ One example is Taubes’ reading of Romans 9-11 in which he emphasizes the reaffirmation of God’s election of the Jewish people. “The apostle takes the election of Israel seriously. This is embarrassing for modern Christianity, but that’s the way it is. It’s embarrassing.” Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 47.

³⁷ *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Towards a Critique of Historical Reason*, 5.

One of the primary means by which Taubes achieves to install Paul as Jewish, and not primarily or only Christian is an embrace of Friedrich Nietzsche's reading of Paul. As Taubes makes clear, Nietzsche has been his best teacher on Paul.³⁸ Moreover, according to Taubes no one has understood Paul better than Nietzsche, not even the exegetes and experts in the specialized field of New Testament studies. Taubes affirms boldly that Nietzsche's 'historical insight still remains unsurpassed by the New Testament exegetes'.³⁹ In Taubes' view it is 'Nietzsche's intention to uproot Christian values'⁴⁰ that leads the German philosopher to the decisive historical conflict that is manifested in Paul's letters.

In Taubes' works we encounter a 20th century Jewish rabbi and philosopher, Jacob Taubes, that reads what is commonly seen as a Christian apostle, Paul the apostle of the New Testament, through the eyes and through the anti-Christian polemic of the 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. The Jew reads the founder of Christianity through the anti-Christian.

Of course, the exploitation of Nietzsche's work for Nazi ideology is well-known, and Taubes sees no value in Nietzsche's ideal of an Overman, or in the revival of aristocracy in the modern age. This is nonsense for him.⁴¹

In contrast, the rhetorical intensity of Nietzsche's attack on Pauline Christianity serves Taubes to discern the true nature of Paulinism.

Then Paul appeared – Paul, the chandala hatred against Rome, against "the world," become flesh, become genius, the Jew, the eternal Wandering Jew par excellence. What he guessed was how one could use the little sectarian Christian movement apart from Judaism to kindle a "world fire"; how with the symbol of "God on the cross" one could unite all who lay at the bottom, all who were secretly rebellious, the whole inheritance of anarchistic agitation in the Empire, into a tremendous power.⁴²

Nietzsche's problematic use of anti-Semitic tropes in his polemic is well-known, and Nietzsche appears to turn Paul's Jewishness and his hatred to Rome against the apostle. But when Nietzsche dismisses Paul as nothing but a Jew, Taubes all the more appreciates this as a historical insight of Paul's Jewishness. And in the same way, when Nietzsche attempts to despise Paul's movement apart from Judaism due to the movement's anti-imperial anarchism and social origins in the lower classes, Taubes all the more turns this polemic of Nietzsche into a basic framework for understanding Paul – in opposition to powerful Christian voices and interpretations in the nearly 2000 years of reception history of Paul's letters.

And by embracing Nietzsche's view that Pauline Christianity is nothing but a rebellious anarchism and hate against the Empire, Taubes effectively removes the decisive conflict from the relation between Judaism and Christianity and transfers or relocates it in the opposition between the Roman Empire and the apostle who invented the symbol of "God on the cross". Moreover, for Nietzsche the "philology of Christianity" is a manifestation of the long history of Christian dishonesty, of how the Christian interpreters cover up and manipulate the Jewish roots of its Pauline faith. And this is another polemical critique of Christianity that Taubes appropriates from Nietzsche. In that way, Taubes also subverts Christian anti-Judaism. This anti-Judaism is undermined from within, from the foundation of Christianity itself, from Paul's letters – with the help of the anti-Christian philosopher *par excellence* Friedrich

³⁸ *The Political Theology of Paul*, 79.

³⁹ *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Towards a Critique of Historical Reason*, 77.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴¹ Taubes is eager to appropriate Nietzsche's countermodels, not Nietzsche's alternatives to these countermodels.

The Political Theology of Paul, 80.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. H.L. Mencken (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), § 58.

Nietzsche.

VIII. Conclusion

Both Taubes and Žižek read Paul as a sort of predecessor to modern psychoanalysis and both connect this view to their readings of Romans 7. Žižek and Taubes share the ambition of reading Paul from within the Jewish tradition,⁴³ without being precise on the range of this tradition. They both frame Paul's Jewishness through an engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis.

Inspired by Nietzsche and Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, Taubes draws a line from Paul to Freud, sometimes through Augustine and Luther.⁴⁴ For Taubes these are all figures who have seen that the subject suffers from a powerlessness with regard to the unconscious forces that can invade the subject against the subject's will. For Taubes no one has taught such a radical doctrine of original guilt as Freud, since Augustine and Paul. And like Paul, Freud attempts to suspend the force of law on the subject, according to Taubes. In that sense Freud is a Paulinist, and Paul a predecessor to Freud's Jewish science.

Žižek also draw a line of continuity between Paul and psychoanalysis. He draws on Jacques Lacan's view of Romans 7 as describing the same phenomenon as Freudian psychoanalysis and in that way Žižek strengthens the link established by Lacan.

Taubes' as well as Žižek's readings of Paul rather serve as a challenge to the Jewishness of the supposedly Jewish science of Freudian psychoanalysis, given Paul's legacy at work according to their views of Freud and Lacan. But their readings also lay bare the intimate connection between Pauline introspection and anti-Judaism, particularly in the unwillingness to think through the possibilities of a rational adherence to Jewish law, even for radical political purposes with Universalist ramifications. Notions such as the Pauline overcoming of Jewish law or the Universalist break with particularism emerge out of a Christian European history. In these ways, both philosophers' ambitions to read Paul within a Jewish framework are tempered by what to a significant extent appears as a reproduction of Christian readings. The Christian, and particularly Protestant, reception of the apostle is confirmed by the fact that both philosophers consider Paul to be an antinomian. Furthermore, in the case of Taubes, the chosen preference for Nietzsche and Freud ties his reading to a Christian metaphysical tradition, however much Nietzsche and Freud are supposed to resist it.

All the same, unlike Žižek, Taubes engages with Romans 9-11 in order to combat an anti-Semitism founded on Paul, in his positioning with regard to the legacy of Carl Schmitt. It is particularly through a reading of these chapters that Taubes' Paul acquires a more Jewish identity, as someone who takes the divine act of election of the Jewish people seriously and as someone who considers the salvation of Israel to be a primary concern for Paul's God.

I am a Norwegian reader of this turn to Paul within recent continental philosophy. As Norwegians we are raised to think that our country is founded on Christianity, in some or other way; that we have some kind of Christian cultural heritage, which is a rather vague idea that you can appropriate for diverse and also contradictory political purposes on the Left and the Right. Žižek attempts to appropriate something akin to this for the Left, with his repeated and simultaneous appeals to "the European legacy" and "the Christian legacy". While the philosopher maintains that the true atheism has to go through Pauline Christianity he also claims that this atheism is uniquely

⁴³ Žižek affirms that "one should read Paul from within the Jewish tradition". Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 10.

⁴⁴ Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 87.

European and constitutes a European legacy worth fighting for.⁴⁵ With this kind of populist rhetoric, the question should be raised of whether Žižek risks strengthening the political forces he claims that he is combatting; namely the continual displacement of the question of economic justice and redistribution from the political agenda of the powerful, what Žižek labels “the culturalisation of politics”.⁴⁶ The question remains of whether Žižek’s appeals to the recovery or rebirth of the Christian Europe do not fall into a populist rhetoric that fuels political conflicts around cultural markers and religious divisions. Is there really such a thing as a Christian Europe that has overcome Judaism? Is not Taubes closer to the historical truth that Christianity is, in several ways, inherently Jewish?

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⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, 2009 ed. (London: Profile books, 2008), 118.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

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