

# The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Legitimacy: On the Roots and Future of Political Theology

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## Abstract:

This essay traces the roots of the problem of political theology to the Hebrew prophetic tradition's attempts to reconcile the political experience of the Jewish people with their special relationship to a just and powerful God—in other words, their attempt to answer the problem of evil. It gives an account of the origins of this tradition as well as the apocalyptic thought that grew out of it, ultimately giving rise to Christianity. It then turns to contemporary debates in political theology, arguing that they are often blind to this history due to the influence of Carl Schmitt. Drawing on Jacob Taubes, it shows that Schmitt himself is best understood as a representative of the post-Constantinian political theological paradigm that viewed the earthly ruler as heading off apocalypse. With the broader prophetic-apocalyptic perspective in mind, it turns to the modern world and asks if there is a secular answer to the problem of evil. It argues that modern paradigms of government and economics stand in basic continuity with the prophetic-apocalyptic tradition, with the major difference being that human freedom has replaced God as the principle of legitimacy. Observing that those modern paradigms now seem to be exhausted, it calls for a renewal of critical and creative theological thought to develop new, more livable paradigms for the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** political theology, apocalyptic, Hebrew Bible, Schmitt, Taubes, Agamben

## I.

The modern discipline of political theology starts from the homology between God and the earthly ruler, but the historical experience that stands at the root of the political theology of the West starts from their radical disjuncture. I am speaking here of the historical experience of the Jewish prophets and intellectuals who attempted to make sense of their special relationship to God in the light of almost inconceivable setbacks and catastrophes: the apostasy of the majority of their fellow Israelites from the divine covenant, the destruction of their kingdom and way of life, and their exile in a foreign land.

These Hebrew thinkers could have been forgiven for turning their backs on their defeated God and bowing down in worship to the foreign gods who had so thoroughly proven their superior power. Instead, they responded to incalculable loss with a bold theological risk. In the face of

their God's apparent defeat, they doubled down and claimed that their local God was actually the God of all the earth. Far from being defeated by the pagan empires, the God of Israel had orchestrated their rise—and eventual fall.

The basis for this outlandish claim goes back to the Torah, particularly the Book of Deuteronomy. This book consists primarily of a long speech put into the mouth of Moses, in which he recounts the history of Israel's relationship to God and reiterates the divine commandments on the eve of Israel's entry into the promised land. The story is one of human ingratitude in the face of divine grace and favor: even after God showed his mighty power by liberating the Israelite slaves from their oppression in Egypt, the people rebelled against his rule, to the point where God condemned the Israelites to wander in the desert for forty years so that the rebellious generation could be superseded by their children. The terms of the covenant are clear: "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known" (Deuteronomy 11:26-28).<sup>1</sup>

For the intellectuals who collected and consolidated Israelite history and legend, Deuteronomy provided a convenient framework for understanding the political vicissitudes their country had experienced throughout its tumultuous history. Though the term is somewhat anachronistic, the Deuteronomistic paradigm provided them with something like an answer to what we would now call the "problem of evil"—that is to say, the problem of how to reconcile faith in a powerful and beneficent God with the experience of evil and suffering. Their solution preserved faith in God by claiming that the apparent evils they suffered were not truly evils, but were instead well-deserved punishments aimed at putting the people back on track.

This theological paradigm figured God as law-giver and law-enforcer. Yet instead of legitimating an easy parallel between God and the earthly ruler, this theocratic paradigm rendered every earthly king a potential rival to God's reign. The Book of Deuteronomy itself envisions the possibility of a just king who serves as something like a faithful functionary for the divine ruler, submitting fully to the divine law:

When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy

<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel. (17:18-20)

By contrast, the remainder of the Deuteronomistic history (the segment of the Hebrew Bible made up of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings) is significantly less optimistic about the prospects for an Israelite king. In the famous passage where the Israelites demand that the prophet Samuel appoint a king, Samuel predicts that the king will oppress the people:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day. (1 Samuel 8:11-18)

For his part, God makes the rivalry explicit when he claims that "they have rejected me from being king over them" (8:7). Subsequently, in the view of the Deuteronomistic historian, the fate of Israel hangs on whether the king is a divine functionary within God's rule or a rival to the theocratic ideal.

Earthly rulers thus become a site of intense theological reflection, a trend that is only intensified when successive waves of imperial conquest in the ancient Near East lead to the final defeat of the Israelite kingdoms and the transfer of their intellectual elites to the imperial center. The Hebrew prophets responded to this development with an extension of the Deuteronomistic scheme: they claimed that the pagan kings were actually a tool that God was using to punish and purify the remnant of Israel. When their usefulness to God ran out, however,

they would be punished for their own injustice and wickedness. The prophet Jeremiah's account is exemplary here:

Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, *my servant*, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. For many nations and great kings shall make slaves of them also; and I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands. (Jeremiah 25:8-14; emphasis added)

The ambivalence between ruler-as-functionary and ruler-as-rival reappears in an intensified form, insofar as this passage figures Nebuchadrezzar as both "my servant" and as an enemy to be defeated by God. By contrast, other rulers are depicted as more or less entirely positive, most notably Cyrus of Persia, who financed the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem as part of an imperial policy of encouraging local religions to keep the peace. Thus the prophet Isaiah can call Cyrus God's "anointed... whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes" (45:1)—a divine role Cyrus can fulfill even though the Word of the Lord, addressing Cyrus, can say, "you do not know me" (45:4).

Within this political-theological scheme, the Jews are encouraged to suspend judgment of the pagan rulers under whom they must live. God will judge in his own due time, and until then, the duty of the Jewish community is to be as faithful as possible to the law and to contribute positively to the surrounding community:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your

daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

Over the centuries that followed, this prophetic paradigm provided the basic model for the Jewish community's relationship with earthly powers. From this perspective, the model Jew is a figure like Joseph or Daniel, who rises to a high government position and yet maintains his Jewish identity, leading the earthly ruler to give glory to the God of Israel.

At times, however, historical conditions became so extreme that this careful balance could no longer be maintained. One such period was the brief but tumultuous reign of the mad king Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BCE (recounted most vividly in the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees, widely available in standard translations). The ruler of one of the Hellenistic empires that resulted from Alexander's conquest, Antiochus attempted to impose Hellenistic culture and religion on the Jews, defiling their temple and forcing faithful Jews—under threat of torture and death—to violate the Torah by eating pork. Within both the Deuteronomistic and prophetic paradigms, this turn of events was incomprehensible: they were brutally persecuted, tortured, and even killed precisely *for* being faithful to God's law. Hence the king is no longer God's unwitting servant, but his conscious and willful enemy. Yet though it stretches the Deuteronomistic-prophetic paradigm nearly to the breaking point, this newly emerging apocalyptic paradigm does not depart from it entirely. Even the king conceived as demonic plays a necessary role in God's plan, as he serves as God's final enemy, whose defeat ushers in the messianic age.

The radical evil of the earthly ruler in the apocalyptic scheme thus paradoxically leads to a more elevated cosmological status. If he is to be a rival to God, he must operate not only on the earthly political plane, but on the spiritual plane as well. Hence the rich imagery of apocalyptic literature, which produces a kind of spiritual overlay for geopolitics—above all in Daniel, whose apocalyptic later chapters narrate the history of world empires up to the time of Antiochus (the "little horn" of the vision). Here we are as far as possible from Schmitt's homology between the divine and earthly ruler. The most relevant theological homology from the perspective of apocalyptic thought is, rather, that between the earthly ruler and God's demonic enemy.

From this perspective, we can see that it is not accidental that

the leaders of the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus belonged precisely to the priestly class rather than to the remnants of the ruling dynasty. Within the apocalyptic worldview, at least at this stage of its development, the prospect of a “good king” is no more acceptable than the rule of a “good emperor” on the model of Cyrus. A return to the theocratic ideal is the only legitimate option once the earthly ruler becomes God’s cosmic rival.

This is the context within which we must understand the New Testament’s calls for the coming of the “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven”—as well as its straightforward portrayal of Satan as the ruler of this world. This latter point is clear above all in the temptation of Christ, where Satan’s offer of worldly power makes no sense unless he really has worldly power to give. More dramatically, the author of Revelation associates contemporary Roman rulers with demonic forces and appears to anticipate a direct take-over by Satan in the near future. And throughout the Pauline epistles, there are references to expelling someone out of the community to make their way through the world as “handing that person over to Satan.” For the New Testament authors and the early Christian writers known as the Church Fathers, Christ did not come to suffer the punishment due for our individual sins, but to set us free from the demonic powers that rule this world.

What enabled the Hebrew prophets to make their bold, counterintuitive gesture? Why double down on their apparently defeated God instead of setting him aside? It is likely impossible to know for sure, but we can trace elements in the Hebrew theological tradition that made their daring gambit plausible. First, the God of the Hebrew Bible is not only a god of power, but a God of law—and justice. Second, already in the Torah God cannot be limited to a merely local relationship to the Israelites, because he is portrayed as using the Israelites themselves to carry out his judgment against the injustice of the land of Canaan. Nor indeed can he be limited by any created image:

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sounds of the words but saw no form; there was only a voice.... Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the sea. (Deuteronomy 4:12, 15-18)

Hence the prophets can envision God’s demand for justice as transcending even the written Torah itself, as when Jeremiah declares that God will make a “new covenant” that will transcend the old insofar as “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (31:33).

This God of justice stands in stark contrast to the Greek and Roman mythological tradition, where the gods are often forces of chaos and destruction. Though the Greco-Roman gods have some inchoate relationship with certain unwritten laws surrounding hospitality and burial rites, it is difficult to come away from a reading of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, for instance, with a view that the gods are systematically committed to law and justice in general. It is this moral and political difference—and not, as an anachronistic liberalism would have it, simple intolerance—that underwrites the prophetic critique of pagan idolatry. A false idol is a god who is hungry for glory and power, while the God of Israel can say, “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). Indeed, this conviction that the gods of the other nations were power-mad tyrants provided a crucial background to the apocalyptic diagnosis that the world is ruled by demonic forces opposed to divine justice.

## II.

Students of contemporary debates in political theology could be forgiven for being unfamiliar with much of this history. This context is completely absent from Badiou, Agamben, and Žižek’s studies of the Pauline epistles, for instance. As a result, even though Badiou claims to have utterly no interest in the traditional reception of Paul’s thought, he winds up reproducing many of its most toxic elements—most notably its strident anti-Judaism. Žižek offers a more pro-Jewish reading, claiming that Paul offers to Gentiles the same “unplugged” stance toward the law enjoyed by Jews, but his reading is ahistorical and anachronistic, drawing on Eric Santner’s work on the psychodynamics of Judaism and projecting that theory onto the very different situation of the first century.<sup>2</sup> For his part, despite the fact that his scholarly work on Walter Benjamin has given him a deep knowledge of Judaism, Agamben makes very limited reference to the Hebrew Bible or Jewish tradition, preferring to concentrate on Paul’s influence on the Western tradition.

Within the emerging mini-canon of contemporary philosophical engagements with Paul, only Jacob Taubes’s *Political Theology of Paul*

2 I discuss Badiou and Žižek’s readings of Paul at greater length in Kotsko 2008.

fully situates the Apostle in the context of Jewish political theology, and thus only Taubes is able to present Paul's intervention not as merely analogous to politics (as in Badiou), but as directly and irreducibly political: "the Epistle to the Romans is a political theology, a *political* declaration of war on the Caesar." More than that, Paul and his contemporaries are struggling against the dominant political theology of their age: "Christian literature is a literature of protest against the flourishing cult of the emperor."<sup>3</sup>

The same broad historical perspective, first developed in his path-breaking study *Occidental Eschatology*, allows him to contextualize Carl Schmitt within the tradition of apocalyptic thought.<sup>4</sup> Putting it in slightly different terms than Taubes does, we can view Schmitt's political theology as a recent outgrowth of a profound reversal that took place within Christian political theology after Constantine. Within the apocalyptic framework, these political developments were tantamount to the devil converting to Christianity.

Once the earthly ruler was no longer God's cosmic rival but his faithful servant, Christianity was able to step back from its apocalyptic outlook and embrace the relative stability of something like the Jewish prophetic model. Yet a total reversion to the prophetic model was impossible within the terms of Christianity insofar as Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection had already begun the apocalyptic sequence. In conceptualizing this strange new development, Christian theologians drew on an enigmatic passage from the (likely spurious) Pauline epistle of 2 Thessalonians:

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day [of Judgment] will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? And you know what is now restraining [*katechon*] him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains [*katech n*] it is removed. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his

3 Taubes 2004, pg. 16.

4 See Taubes 2103 and the appendices to Taubes 2004.

coming. (2:3-8)

It is impossible to reconstruct with confidence what the author of the passage originally meant by the *katech n* or *katechon* (the personal and impersonal grammatical forms, respectively), but post-Constantinian interpreters seized on the ambiguous term to designate the Christian ruler's role in staving off the advent of the Antichrist—and hence delaying the apocalypse.

Schmitt himself emphasizes the importance of this concept in *Nomos of the Earth* when describing the European political theology of the medieval period:

This Christian empire was not eternal. It always had its own end and that of the present eon in view. Nevertheless, it was capable of being a historical power. The decisive historical concept of this continuity was that of the restrainer: *katechon*. 'Empire' in this sense meant the historical power to restrain the appearance of the Antichrist and the end of the present eon; it was a power that withholds (*qui tenet*), as the Apostle Paul said in his Second Letter to the Thessalonians.... The empire of the Christian Middle Ages lasted only as long as the idea of the *katechon* was alive.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, he explicitly cites the concept as a way of overcoming what in his view was a historical deadlock introduced by Christianity's apocalyptic orientation: "I do not believe that any historical concept other than *katechon* would have been possible for the original Christian faith. The belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world provides the only bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire...."<sup>6</sup> It is on the basis of the *katechon* that Taubes will later describe where his thought deviates from Schmitt's, despite their shared apocalyptic outlook:

Schmitt had one interest: that the Party, that chaos did not win out, that the state stood firm. At whatever cost.... That is what he later called the *katechon*: the restrainer who holds back the chaos bubbling up from the depths. That is not the way I think about the world, that is not my experience. I can see myself as an apocalyptic: it can all go to hell. I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is. But I understand that another does invest in this world and sees the apocalypse, in whatever

5 Schmitt 2013, pp. 59-60.

6 Schmitt 2013, pg. 60.

shape or form, as the adversary and does everything to subjugate and suppress it, because, from there, forces may be released that we are incapable of mastering.<sup>7</sup>

From this perspective, we can see that the decisive question in political theology is not sovereignty, but apocalyptic. Schmitt's focus on sovereignty, which has been so deeply shaped the contemporary field of political theology, actually presupposes a prior answer to the more fundamental question of apocalyptic. And apocalyptic is a *political* theological question because it grows out of a long history of theological developments that closely tied the theological problem of evil to the political problem of the ultimate legitimacy of the earthly rulers. Within the Christian framework, the choice is between the apocalyptic paradigm, in which the earthly rulers are God's illegitimate rivals, or the katechontic paradigm, in which the earthly rulers are God's legitimate, if provisional, servants. Yet since the katechontic paradigm can never fully dispense with the apocalyptic framework if it is to remain Christian, it is constantly threatened with apocalyptic dissolution—a prospect that was welcomed by the avowedly apocalyptic early Christian movement, but that gradually came to be viewed as a terrifying eventuality to be staved off at all costs.

The Schmittian framing of the discipline of political theology thus limits it to a very narrow—and deeply reactionary—corner of the intellectual options that developed in the Jewish and later Christian traditions. It influences political theologians to read early Christian sources anachronistically, through a post-Constantinian katechontic lens that obscures their more radical apocalyptic stance. And it encourages them to ignore contemporary theological movements that renew the apocalyptic protest against the illegitimacy of the earthly powers: Latin American liberation theology, radical black theology of North America, postcolonial theology, feminist theology, queer theology—movements that, despite the clichés about the supposedly intrinsic narrowness of “identitarian” intellectual approaches, are in a rich and continual dialogue with each other and with more traditional theologians as well. The Schmittian enclosure dooms us—we mostly white, mostly male political theologians—to continually replicate the intellectual construct of “The Christian West,” with all its deadlocks and blinders.

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7 Taubes 2013, pg. 54.

### III.

At the dawn of modernity, this katechontic vision of Christianity began to lose its hold, as the Christian God seemed to be less the guarantor of justice than a force of chaos akin to his pagan predecessors. While there were radical apocalyptic protests, by and large the secular state emerged as the only force that could subdue the violence of religious conflict. Even at this historical moment, the memory of the deep association between the earthly powers and the demonic still exerts its influence, as Hobbes could figure the state as the Leviathan, a mythical creature that readers of the Book of Job had traditionally associated with the devil.

This basic continuity is a clue that we are dealing here with a mutation in political theology rather than a radically new beginning. Just as in the more explicitly theological schemes, the ruler is not self-legitimizing, but needs some outside principle of legitimation. In the Hobbesian paradigm, free human consent replaces the divine decree—and like the divine decree, this human consent is irrevocable, so that anything the ruler does, whether good or evil, is legitimated by the choice to submit to his rule. And in keeping with the katechontic scheme, anything he does is preferable to the apocalyptic scenario of the war of all against all that his rule staves off.

In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben has shown that the theology of divine providence stands at the genealogical root of modern concepts of economy—the invisible hand is a secularization of the hand of God. Here again, the principle of legitimation changes from God's will to human free will, as expressed through market mechanisms that aggregate and balance individual choices into a single outcome. And again, even apparently evil results are legitimate and necessary insofar as they reflect the outcome of human freedom.

Agamben begins *The Kingdom and the Glory* with the declaration that there are “two paradigms”—the political theological and the theological economic. He leaves unspecified exactly when and where these paradigms hold and how we should view the relationship between them. From the perspective of the present investigation, I would suggest that we view them as distinctively modern paradigms, which are both legitimated by reference to human freedom and which normally coexist. Under “normal” conditions of liberal democracy, they achieve some form of harmony that allows them to mutually legitimate each other—the state, founded in popular sovereignty, is the custodian of the economy, founded in freely chosen contracts, and the economy founds the

strength of the state.

Like the God of the prophetic paradigm, the legitimating principle of human freedom expresses itself only indirectly, and sometimes in apparently counterintuitive ways. The connection with the prophetic paradigm goes deeper, however, insofar as the modern subject is always “in exile.” In theoretical discourses, our entry into the spheres of the state and market is often figured as requiring us to leave some logically prior, more “natural” state, and our submission to the laws of state and market is presented as a necessary evil given the impossibility of fully actualizing human freedom in the world. We alienate our political power by electing representatives and alienate our productive power through the regime of wage labor. In short, we are never fully “at home” in the institutions of the state or in the marketplace—and as Agamben points out, the fact that the modern secular paradigm cuts off all hope of eschatological fulfillment renders our condition always potentially hellish.<sup>8</sup>

The modern prophetic paradigm of liberal democracy attempts to hold the two powers of state and economy in balance. Under extreme conditions, however, apocalyptic protests emerge that not only shatter the balance, but attempt to eliminate one power entirely.

Fascism asserts popular sovereignty and seeks to permanently overcome the imbalances introduced by the free play of the economy. This leads to a fixation on “foreign” elements within the body politic, which are symbolically associated with the negative effects of the economy, as in the Nazi campaign against the Jews or contemporary movements opposed to immigrants or Muslims in Western countries. Such movements are often deeply legalistic, desperate to find legal legitimation for their violations of the law. It is distressing to realize that arguably everything the Nazis did in Germany was formally legal. More recently, the Bush administration aggressively deployed “legal tools” to legitimate its extra-legal actions in the War on Terror.

By contrast, Communism attempts to destroy the state, conceived as an illegitimate tool of class domination, and aggressively develops the “material conditions for full communism,” in the hopes of ushering in a new economic order of unprecedented abundance and freedom, unmarked by the contradictions and injustices of capitalism. Communist regimes often flaunt their defiance of conventional political legitimacy, for instance by stealing elections seemingly on principle,

<sup>8</sup> Agamben 2011, pg. 164.

even when they would win easily. This principled illegitimacy still holds in contemporary China, where the Communist Party is not a legally registered organization and where conventional state institutions “exist” in some sense but are basically ignored.

If these paradigms have any descriptive power, then they vindicate many elements in Agamben’s contemporary attempt to expand the political theological enterprise—for instance, his “two paradigms” in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, his insistence in *Homo Sacer* and elsewhere that liberal democracy and totalitarianism participate in the same deep structure. Yet they also show the limitations of his project, cut off as it is from the deeper political theological roots of the Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic traditions. Once his insights are reconsidered in light of those more foundational paradigms, things fall into place much more elegantly.

#### IV.

The question that remains now is whether we are at the threshold of a new political theological configuration. At the very least, it seems indisputable that we are at least living through the exhaustion of the modern secular model legitimated by human freedom. Does anyone seriously believe that liberal democratic institutions provide a workable forum for free and equal citizens to collaboratively develop solutions to serious problems? And in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, can anyone with any intellectual integrity trust that the economy is a reliable tool for increasing human welfare and expressing human freedom? In theory, there are many plausible plans for using state power to reform the economy and return us to the more promising trajectory experienced in most Western countries in the early postwar era. Yet there is apparently no appetite to attempt such measures in any major developed nation, where political elites are essentially all devoted to the neoliberal project of aggressively deploying state power to exacerbate all the most destructive aspects of capitalism.

In short, the modern answer to the problem of evil has failed. Popular sovereignty and economic freedom are no longer sufficient to the task of legitimating our world order and explaining away its apparent evils as part of a broader good. Indeed, in contemporary discourse, the function of these principles is limited almost exclusively to blaming the everyday citizen for the evils in the world. Why do they keep electing these fools? Why don’t they turn up and vote sufficiently often or with sufficient enthusiasm? Why don’t they choose environmentally

sustainable consumer goods, or healthier food? Why don't they develop the job skills necessary to boost employment and global competitiveness?

These types of complaints should not be surprising, given the role of free will in the Christian theological tradition. We are accustomed to viewing free will as the epitome of human dignity, but for mainstream theologians, its primary purpose was to absolve God of responsibility for the existence of evil, off-loading it instead onto his creatures. Free will is first of all a mechanism for producing blameworthiness—free choice is a trap.

But what would it mean to think beyond the horizon of human freedom? Is it possible to find another principle of legitimacy to make our lives livable without forcing us to deny our experience of evil? Or is our only option an absolute apocalyptic refusal to grant any legitimacy to this world? Taubes teaches us that this latter option historically develops into something like Gnosticism—and here we might think of certain Western Marxists or even the later Schmitt, who persist in the work of uncompromising criticism with no genuine reference to the eschatological hopes that founded their discourse—and ends in total nihilism.<sup>9</sup>

If theology has any future, its task must be to grapple with these questions. This will require us to rethink the nature of theology as an intellectual enterprise, setting aside clichés about “belief in God” or the necessity of faithfulness to some presently existing “religious” community. Instead, we should view theology more broadly as a discourse on “ultimate concerns,” on what is most meaningful and meaning-making, and what is more, as a critical and historically-invested discourse on ultimate concerns. This will allow us to recognize modern political theory and economics as a theology of human freedom. There is much critical work to be done in this vein, and Goodchild's *Theology of Money* might serve as one productive model.

Yet more urgent is the constructive task of theology, which at its most powerful actually *creates* new and promising visions of what our ultimate concern could be, of what our life together might mean—or, perhaps better, of what meaning we might collectively give to our lives. To have any purchase, these new meanings cannot be completely disconnected from what came before them, nor can their ultimate effects be predicted and accounted for. Like the Hebrew prophets, we

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9 See, for example, Taubes 2010, pg. 73.

must take the creative risk or renewing and transforming our tradition against almost impossible odds.

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