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Figural Interpretation and the Logic of Supersession

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Religious Studies

by

Timothy Snediker

Committee in charge:

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June 2024

The dissertation of Timothy Snediker is approved.

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June 2024

Figural Interpretation and the Logic of Supersession

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by

Timothy Snediker

For Elyse

## Acknowledgements

The bulk of this dissertation was written during the genocidal campaign waged by the State of Israel against the Palestinians of Gaza. I wish to acknowledge the bravery, the dignity, and the memory of the martyrs and those who survive them.

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## ABSTRACT

### Figural Interpretation and the Logic of Supersession

By

Timothy Snediker

This dissertation is an investigation of the logic of supersession in the Christian tradition, especially the way that supersession is articulated and enacted in the figural interpretation of scripture in the Latin West and the afterlives of figural interpretation in modern philosophies of history. ‘Supersession’ is a word that describes the Christian doctrine that God’s covenant with the Jews is fulfilled in the Christian gospel, such that, by its inheritance and actualization of the promises of the so-called Old Testament, the Christian church claims to have assumed the sacramental and eschatological vocation of God’s chosen people. Supersession means, minimally, that Christians are the ‘true spiritual Israel,’ and has for many decades been closely—and rightly—associated with anti-Judaism and with the perils of antisemitism. This work investigates the historical genesis and structure of the logic of supersession by way of Erich Auerbach’s pathbreaking study of the Latin term *figura*, in which Auerbach shows how *figura* gained the unprecedented and powerful sense of ‘historically real prophecy’ in the Latin Church fathers, especially Tertullian of Carthage and St. Augustine of Hippo. This work aims to show that figural interpretation and the logic of supersession place the Christian tradition in a peculiar double-bind. For, in order to confirm the truth of the gospel, Christians must affirm the truth of Judaism and Jewish scripture. Without the prophetic, historical truth of Judaism, the proper, eternal truth of the gospel is

exposed to grave danger. Christians must love what they hate and hate what they love, namely, their erstwhile co-religionists, Jews.

Figural interpretation and the logic of supersession also give rise to a unique concept of history as a promissory totality, governed by providence and bounded by an eschatological horizon. This study attends to the contradictions generated by the conjunction of history and eternity in the historical consciousness of the Latin West, especially the paradoxical love-hate for the very world in which the Christ appeared, and to which the Christ delivered the eternal gospel. The first chapter, “The Logic of Supersession,” sets the stage for the argument by introducing the reader to the basic concepts, problems, sources, and methods of the dissertation. The second chapter, “Figural Interpretation,” offers a close reading of Auerbach’s landmark essay “Figura,” and shows how figural interpretation was a decisive weapon in early Christian polemics against Jews and heretics both. The third chapter, “History and Universality,” considers the implications of Auerbach’s later work, *Mimesis*, and draws out some of the consequences of Auerbach’s theory of figural interpretation for contemporary scholarship on the history of Christianity. The fourth chapter, “Eschatology and Secularity,” takes up the work of Karl Löwith, especially his *Meaning in History*, to stage a discussion of the paradoxes generated by the logic of supersession in the uneasy conjunction of secularity (or worldliness) and eschatology. The fifth, and final, chapter, “The True Religion,” explores the afterlife of the logic of supersession in the thought of G.W.F. Hegel, especially the way that Hegel endeavors to ‘save’ the truth of Christianity by staging the supersession of Christianity in and through the absolute truth of the philosophical Idea.

*Now, these things happened to them as figures, and they were written down to instruct us, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.*

— St. Paul

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## Introduction

*About us the Christians cannot be in doubt. Our existence guarantees for them their truth.*

— Franz Rosenzweig

One of the peculiarities of the Christian tradition is the fact that, in order to recognize themselves as Christians, Christians must recognize their Jewish origins. This specifically Christian act of self-recognition is not an instance of an abstract negative judgment, where, for example, I gain knowledge about myself by way of comparing myself to something I am not (e.g., I am not a neutron star; ergo, I am something other than a neutron star). It is rather a paradigm of a negative determination or an essential difference (e.g., I have a mother; ergo, I am someone's child) that places the identity of Christians in a highly determined and concrete relation to what it—Christian identity—is not.

Since the second century, Christians have often been given to understand themselves as the 'true Israel,' or the perfection of Judaism, produced and protected by a new covenant that at once fulfills and annuls its antecedent. Most Christians understand that they are not Jews, even if they do not know exactly why or how they have ceased to be Jews or have never been Jews. Here is a contradiction worth dwelling upon. Christians are, as Justin Martyr puts it, the 'true Israel' not in spite of the fact that they are not, or are no longer, Jews, but for that very reason and on those very grounds. Christians stand in a special, dialectical relation to Jews. They are not abstractly non-Jews (they are not mere gentiles or goyim); they are, rather, concretely 'not-Jews' (they are the true, concrete, and positive identity of the negative,



abstract difference between Jews and gentiles). Christians are not non-Jews but ‘not-Jews,’ which is to say: Christians are the truth of what it is to be Jewish. The negativity, or the difference, at play in the Christian relation to Jews is not a general, abstract negativity but a specific and concrete relation of transcendence. The name for this relation of transcendence—in which Christians recognize themselves in and through the identity of the truth *of* the truth of Judaism—is supersession.

By and large, Christians regard Jews and Judaism as being, on the one hand, the true antecedents of Christianity and, on the other hand, false claimants to the truth of that antecedence. The Jewish covenant with God, and the messianic prophecies that structured the religious ideologies of the exilic and Second Temple periods, must have been true in order for the Christian gospel to be true. In the logic of supersession, what is superseded is true and complete for itself but false and incomplete in itself: Jewish monotheism is true for the Jews, and necessarily so, but it is false in itself, because it lacks the truly concrete and universal form of the Christian gospel, in which monotheism is, so to speak, for all. In order for Christianity to be what it is in truth, in order for Christians to recognize themselves as Christians in truth, the Jews must be, or become, what they are in truth, namely, the prophets, or the prefigurations, of their own supersession.

While the logic of supersession plays out at many registers of Christian belief and practice, its significance and power were never more apparent, and never more pressing, than in the early centuries of the common era, when the nascent Christian churches were undergoing the arduous process of self-differentiation for the sake of their self-recognition. Historically, the struggle to achieve, or to defend, what was activated in and through the logic of supersession took the form of a debate over the true and proper interpretation of the only

scriptures then available to the Jews and the not-Jews (for there was as yet no ‘New Testament’ canon), which the not-Jews—the incipient Christians—would soon come to call the ‘Old Testament.’ Beginning with the epistles of Paul in the first century CE, the scriptural canons of the Jews (their creation myths, their histories, their prophets, their wisdom literature) were subjected to a radically revisionary hermeneutical procedure. The persons, events, animals, symbols, and songs of the nations of Israel and Judah were interpreted by Christians as *historically real prophecies* that were, as was reported in what would become the ‘New Testament,’ fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, with the formation of the specifically Christian canon of scriptures, this not-Jewish (but not non-Jewish) hermeneutics would become a fully-fledged system of interpretation, in which the Old Testament was read and understood as an intricate network of promises and prophecies of the Christ-event and the eschatological future. This revisionist hermeneutics, in which the logic of supersession was crystallized, came to be called figural (or typological) interpretation.

In the Latin tradition of figural interpretation, there is a heavy, often extreme, emphasis placed upon the literality of the historical realities recorded in the Old Testament. The reasons for this emphasis are both historical and theological. Historically speaking, the early Christians were assailed on several fronts. They were criticized by their erstwhile co-religionists, the Jews, for having accepted a pretender as the true messiah. They were criticized by their pagan countrymen, Hellenistic Romans, for having embraced an irrational

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<sup>1</sup> I take the expression ‘historically real prophecy’ from Erich Auerbach, whose work on the figural interpretation of scripture (and, *ipso facto*, of historical reality) informs the argument of this dissertation as a whole and serves as the guiding light for the investigations undertaken in Chapters 2 and 3. I introduce Auerbach in more detail in Chapter 1 below (see §4).

and unpatriotic monotheism. And they were criticized by those among their own ranks, heretics, who disputed key tenets (which were not yet fully articulated doctrines) of the nascent faith. Figural interpretation became a privileged weapon in the rhetorical and theological arsenal of the church fathers; it served as a necessary, and radical, defense of the truth of the gospel, for while the truth of the gospel is eternal, it is also something given in history. The historical stakes of the truth of the gospel are grounded in Christianity's central theological claim, namely, that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has not merely assumed a human form, but has literally become human, and has done so in a particular time and place in history. The mystery of the Incarnation—whatever the vicissitudes of its construal—lies at the heart of every faith that can meaningfully be called Christian, but it also gives rise to a set of vexing and paradoxical tensions in the Christian understanding of the conjunctions of time and eternity, history and eschatology, literality and spirituality, finitude and infinity, reason and revelation, knowledge and faith. The basic problem is this: God has been really and truly revealed in history, but history is really and truly transient; history is ultimately nothing, but it is nonetheless a nothing of the utmost significance. This problem structures the whole course of the investigation that follows.

The radical 'biblical literalism' of figural interpretation is an important symptom of the problem. If the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament were not literally and historically real, then the Christ in whom they found their fulfillment might turn out to have been a shadow or a charlatan. If the Jews (with whom God's revelation began) and their history (in which God's revelation plays out) were not literally and historically real, then the true Jews—Christians—might turn out to be the truth of nothing and no one, and the advent of Christianity might turn out not to have been, after all, the temporal, temporary, expectation of

the eternal Kingdom of God. If the Old Testament is not the literally and historically true promise of its own literally and historically real fulfillment in the gospel proclaimed by the New Testament, then the meaning of history, and the identity of the Christians who bear witness to it, might turn out to be naught but bald assertions, fantasies, or delusions. If the Jews are not *the* Jews—I emphasize the definite article—then Christians are not Christians.

Figural interpretation was developed and deployed most comprehensively by theologians in the Latin West, but the basic, formal structure of the logic of supersession is operative throughout the history of the Christian tradition. As is the case with any instance of identity formation, Christians cannot recognize themselves without a minimal reference to what they are not, yet Christian self-recognition is distinguished from other such processes of identification in that Christians are *truly* what they are not. Christians recognize themselves in and through their supersession of the Jews. The logic of supersession demands that there be a structural position or term (‘the Jews’) that is capable of serving as the historical antecedent of the true religion, in terms of which the ‘not-Jews’ recognize themselves as the ‘true Jews;’ that is, in terms of which Christians recognize themselves—and often demand to be recognized—as Christians. Thus, if one wishes to conceive of a standard or criterion by which to recognize Christians as Christians, one could do worse than adopt the Christian criterion. That is to say: one way to recognize Christianity—so as to make it an object of inquiry and to plumb the depths of the various problems and questions that constitute it, differentiate it, and consummate it—is to attend to the distinctive ways that it reckons, and the fact that it must reckon, with the Jews. This study is devoted to the investigation of certain developments and crises of those reckonings.

The pre-eminent crisis of figural interpretation and the logic of supersession was the

advent of, or passage to, modernity. Modern historians are no longer attuned to prophecy in the way that their theological forebears were; biblical criticism distinguishes between myth, legend, and historical reporting. Philosophers are less likely to look to scripture for insight into the logic or rationality of world history, though scripture may be—and often is—mined for its moral and ethical content. The predominance of figural interpretation as the hermeneutical key to the understanding of history has given way—even in what remains of Christendom—to historicism, structuralism, existentialism, positivism, materialism, and various other methodological approaches to conceiving the meaning of history (if any meaning is attributed to history at all). That said, the conception of history as a providential totality remained, well into the nineteenth century, an intellectual lodestone of western thought, though not without undergoing numerous modifications, secularizations, and transformations.

An exemplary instance of such a transformation is found in Hegel's philosophy. Hegel's absolute idealism conceives of history as the process by which *Geist* (i.e., the mind, but also the cultural or ethical spirit of a people) comes to recognize itself as the social and political outworking of the purely rational concept, whose principle is freedom. Hegel argues that what theologians call providence is a sub-conceptual, religious way of describing the hidden activity—or the cunning—of reason itself, which works, so to speak, behind the scenes to achieve its own ends, namely, freedom and the unity of thinking and being. The aim of modern philosophy, on Hegel's account, is to make explicit what remains implicit in the basic, rational character of reality; in other words, philosophy seeks to know the mind of God in itself (i.e., in logic) and as it manifests itself in history (i.e., in absolute spirit). Significantly, Hegel argues, especially in his late lectures on religion, that the historical path

of spirit necessarily passes through determinate stages of religious consciousness, and that Christianity is the true consummation of spirit's historical self-recognition. Christianity is the truth; its spirit bears witness to spirit's truth. It lacks only the rational form of the concept, which only philosophy—here, Hegel himself—is equipped to provide.

What is interesting about Hegel's philosophies of history, spirit, and religion is the fact that Hegel's problem is a version of the problem—call it the 'eschatological problem'—that vexes the figural interpretation of scripture and history, namely, the ultimate unity of truth and history. As I mentioned briefly above, what results from the figural exegesis of scripture, structured as it is by the central datum of the Incarnation, is a concept of history in which human life and existence—everything captured by the theologeme 'flesh'—is literally and truly real but is also estranged from its ultimate truth. Figural interpretation defends the truth of the gospel, and the true identity of Christians, by taking historical reality as its basis, but the history in question is not the history of Christianity. What is called the history of Christianity is conceived—by Augustine in particular—as an empty interim or hiatus between the Incarnation and the eschaton, in which, apart from conversion (the heart's hidden turning), nothing really happens. All that will ever really happen is the return of the Christ in glory, but the return of the Christ in glory is not an historical event. It is the other side of history. In the figural construal of history, the only historical reality in question is that of the Jews—namely, scripture's testimony to their calling, their covenant with God, and their messianic prophecies—and the fulfillment of that history in Jesus the Christ. But the history of the Jews is, therefore, only the history of their supersession, only the history of Christian self-recognition.

In Hegel's version of the eschatological problem, the task of philosophy is to grasp the

truth of history conceptually, without any reference to a transcendent ‘beyond’ or an eschatological future. In the early years of his career, Hegel subjected Christianity to harsh criticism, often on the grounds that the Christian tradition is irreducibly compromised by the eschatological form of its faith. Yet, as I remarked just above, by the end of his life Hegel had arrived at an understanding of the rational necessity for a comprehensive and radical defense of Christianity, which is not merely one religion among others, but the true, consummate religion that contains and comprehends—viz. supersedes—the negativity, not only of Judaism, but of all religions. The eschaton is no longer deferred and delayed; it is not the other side, not the absolute limit, of history. Christians need not await it, nor worry over it, for the last things are the first things. Christians are eternally what they are temporally: living witnesses to the truth of spirit. The truth of spirit is that history is not just what happens, nor is it the will or command of a transcendent God, but rather the free activity of making-happen, of making the presence of God really and historically present. History is what is done rationally and what is done rationally is done freely.

For Hegel, religion and philosophy have the same content. They differ only in the form that the content assumes in its development. What religions represent as God (rationality itself) is comprehended by Hegel’s speculative idealism as the absolute Idea. In figurative interpretation, the true content (the unity of humanity and divinity) is implicitly present in the Old Testament; once history arrives at its kairotic moment of truth, when the time is fulfilled and the Christ appears, then what was once implicit only needs to be properly interpreted, or spiritually understood. In Hegel, the true content is already present in Christianity; it only needs to be rationally comprehended, its truth truly thought. What Hegel proposes is the supersession of Christianity by speculative philosophy. Hegel’s ‘gift’ to Christianity is the

history it claimed for itself but could never keep for itself. As we will see in what follows, the speculative redemption of the history of Christianity does not come cheap. In order to recognize themselves in modernity—in order to be reconciled to the world—Christians must be the superseded rather than the superseding; they must assume the place—the structural position—they long reserved for the Jews. Happily, that place was a place fashioned from love (for supersession is naught but the charity of history), and it will have been by this love that they, recognizing themselves, are recognized.

The dissertation proceeds as follows. I begin, in Chapter 1, by giving a fuller explanation of the problems posed by the logic of supersession, both for its principal proponents (Christians) and its principal objects (Jews). I argue that supersession should be understood not merely in terms of the *replacement* of Jews by Christians in the covenantal relationship with God, but rather in terms of the *fulfillment* or *completion* of the Jewish covenant by the Christian gospel. This is an important distinction, for the logic of supersession is not a logic of exclusion but of inclusion. While the Jews are, on the Christian account, subject to damnation for their refusal to recognize the Christ as the Christ, and thus soteriologically excluded, the Jews are historically included and implicated in the soteriological scheme itself. The Jews bear witness to the very truth that announces and requires their supersession. Chapter 1 also introduces two of the major components of the theoretical armature of the dissertation: the works of the twentieth-century philologist Erich Auerbach and the nineteenth-century philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. I conclude Chapter 1 with a reflection on method and a meditation on St. Augustine's doctrine of *caritas*.

In Chapter 2, I take up Auerbach's study of the semantic development of the Latin word



*figura*, which is most fully articulated in his 1938 essay, “Figura.”<sup>2</sup> I develop his argument that the usage of *figura* in the Latin fathers should be understood in terms of its power to render, or revise, the prophecies and histories of the Old Testament as ‘historically real prophecies’ of the coming of the Christ and the truth of the gospel. I argue that figural interpretation should be understood as the concrete, historical-hermeneutical outworking of the logic of supersession.

In many ways, Chapter 2 is the heart of this work, not only because it was Auerbach’s study of figural interpretation that inspired this project in the first place, but because it is in Chapter 2 that the real stakes of figural interpretation and the logic of supersession for Christian self-recognition become clear. These stakes are signaled by the shape of the struggle waged—by both the Greek and the Latin fathers—against the second-century heretic, Marcion of Sinope. Marcionism posed a uniquely dangerous threat to the orthodoxies of the second and third centuries. Marcion affirmed that the Old Testament was the literally and historically real record of the Jewish covenant with God, and he affirmed unreservedly that Jesus was the Christ. However, he denied that the Old Testament had anything at all to do with the gospel; in fact, he denied unequivocally that the God of the Jews was the father of Jesus the Christ. Marcion’s theology was dualistic. To the vengeful God of the Jews he opposed another, disinterested, alien God, who, he claimed, is the true father of Jesus the Christ and whose gift of salvation is absolutely unconditioned and unwarranted. Marcion thus threatened to sever the link between creation and redemption, between the Jews and the true Jews. In short, he

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<sup>2</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Selected Essays: Time, History, and Literature*, trans. Jane O. Newman, ed. James I. Porter (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014) [*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (A. Francke Verlag, 1967): 55-92]; cited hereafter as SE, with page numbers from the German original included in square brackets.

threatened to make Christianity unrecognizable.

The bulk of Chapter 2 is devoted to following the thread of Auerbach's reading of Tertullian of Carthage and St. Augustine of Hippo as partisans of the figural (and literal) interpretation of scripture, though I also pause to consider an important, alternative mode of interpretation (spiritual exegesis) as it is exemplified in the works of Origen of Alexandria. The central burden of this chapter is to show that figural interpretation and the logic of supersession give rise to a concept of history as a really existing totality governed by providence. Figural interpretation binds together time and eternity. The whole that results from that providential binding is what the mainstream of the western theological, philosophical, and literary traditions call history. Following Auerbach, I argue that figural interpretation works on two axes: an immanent 'horizontal' axis, in which the resemblance and similitude of Old Testament figures to their New Testament fulfillments are taken as proof of the temporal reality of God's revelation, and of the truth of the gospel; and a transcendent, 'vertical' axis, in which the figures and their fulfillments are united in the eternity of the mind of God, and upon which the orthogonal winds of the eschaton take flight. The vertex of the horizontal and the vertical, of immanence and transcendence, of time and eternity, is the Incarnation. Those who bear witness to that vertex are God's eternal people, the 'true Jews'—Christians.

In Chapter 3, I deepen my engagement with Auerbach's theory of *figura* by turning to his monumental work of 1946, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, in which Auerbach charts the development of historical consciousness by way of a virtuosic, panoramic reading of the history of realism in western literature.<sup>3</sup> Many of Auerbach's critics

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<sup>3</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. William R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) [*Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der*

and inheritors have rightly remarked that *figura* and figural interpretation play a significant role in Auerbach's masterwork; some suggest that *figura* is the 'skeleton key' to his thought; a few even suggest that *figura* is Auerbach's own, personal theory of history. I am convinced, on the contrary, that these readings of Auerbach are misguided and misleading. I therefore begin Chapter 3 with a review of Auerbach's reception history among literary theorists. I argue that the literary theorists (especially Hayden White) do not seem to have appreciated the subtlety of Auerbach's critical investigation of the Christian origins of figural interpretation, and (2) that the universalism attributed to Auerbach's theory of history is unwarranted. Auerbach is not interested in defending this or that conception of universal (or world) history as such. He is interested in how it is possible to conceive—concretely and realistically—of something like universal history in the first place.

As James I. Porter has persuasively argued, Auerbach is less interested in defending figural interpretation and its concept of history on its merits than in showing what made figural interpretation possible, namely, the Jewish, monotheistic conception of universal history. In conscious rebellion against the increasingly, and eventually catastrophically, Nazified Romance philology of his day, Auerbach practices something like a "Judaizing philology" or an "Old Testament Realism."<sup>4</sup> His interest in *figura* is ambivalent. On the one hand, figural interpretation is narrowly philo-Judaic. It is structured by a hermeneutical

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*abendländischen Literatur* (Tübingen, A. Francke, 2015)]; cited hereafter as M, with page numbers from the German original included in square brackets where relevant.

<sup>4</sup> James I. Porter, "Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Autumn 2008): 115-147; James I. Porter, "Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach's Theory of *Figura*," *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Autumn 2017): 80-113; James I. Porter, "Old Testament Realism in the Writings of Erich Auerbach," in Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land, and Jonathan Boyarin (eds.), *Jews and the Ends of Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 187-224.

commitment that prohibits the interpreter from forgetting their original, and unique, subject: the history and scriptures of the Jews, which the deeply antisemitic scholarship of Auerbach's time actively sought to erase. Figural interpretation preserves Judaism from oblivion. On the other hand, figural interpretation is deeply anti-Judaic. Its theological infrastructure is premised upon the inadequacy and instrumentality—and, as often as not, the evil—of Jewish religious life and thought. Figural interpretation preserves Judaism, but not for Jews.

Thus, the central task of Chapter 3 is to trace the appearances and functions of *figura* in Auerbach's *Mimesis*, so as to show that, while Auerbach is undeniably enthusiastic about the powerful resources that *figura* furnishes to literary realism, he is not ultimately a partisan of figural interpretation as such. My analysis centers on the first two chapters of *Mimesis*, where Auerbach endeavors to show that the development of western historical consciousness is principally indebted, not to the literatures and historiographies of Greek antiquity, but to the innovative 'mixture of styles' found in the biblical literary tradition. *Figura* is among the most radical instances of the literary mixture of styles, where what is high, sublime, and divine is represented, not as transcendence, but as that which emerges in and through the energetic, immanent depths of everyday life. However, as Auerbach makes clear, figural interpretation arrives somewhat late on the scene and appropriates, rather than invents, the literary realism and nascent historical consciousness of the Hebrew scriptures, in which monotheism and prophecy give rise to a distinctively Jewish concept of universal history. I argue that Auerbach's hermeneutics should be understood as a sort of literary-historical symptomatology, in which a given theological premise (i.e., the concept of God) can be interpreted as the symptom, not the cause, of a basic mode of comprehension of reality. I conclude Chapter 3 with a reflection on the Christian symptom (namely, the Incarnation), and

on the deep antagonism—between historical reality and eschatological ultimacy—to which figural interpretation and the logic of supersession give rise.

In Chapter 4, I undertake a critical reading of a work by one of Auerbach's contemporaries, the twentieth-century German philosopher Karl Löwith, whose 1949 *Meaning in History* is a text ripe for an inquiry such as this one.<sup>5</sup> Löwith's book is principally concerned with the problem of determining the meaning of history. The problem lies in the fact that, if history is to be meaningful in and for itself, then that meaning must be both ultimate and universal. For Löwith, the conception of the ultimacy and universality of history is pre-eminently the prerogative of Christian eschatology. The competing view of history that predominated in antiquity, in which history was conceived as an indefinite, periodic cycle, cannot, in Löwith's view, properly account for history as a meaningful totality imbued with a determinate direction, movement, an ultimate purpose. Löwith's complaint is that secular modernity has inherited both the Christian eschatological idea of history and the ancient cyclical idea of history, at the cost of shearing away their respective essential—and essentially contradictory—features. The modern, philosophical view of history is progressive, but inchoate and incomplete, since historical progress is conceived as a mere procession of indefinite determinations, rather than a meaningful experience, in view of an ultimate redemption, of finitude and suffering. In other words, Löwith is vexed by a version of the eschatological problem. Universal history can be universal only on condition that it has a definite, and final, end. In such an end, the senses of *terminus* and *purpose* are, or will be, united. The meaning of history, if it is the true meaning of true history, must arrive from

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Löwith. *Meaning and History*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1949).

outside of history.

What is interesting about Löwith's criticism of the idea of progress, especially as it manifests in the philosophies of history characteristic of the modern age, is that he formulates his criticism in terms of the secularization of Christian eschatology. Löwith understands Christianity as an originally and constitutively eschatological religion. On his account, every concession made by Christians to the worldliness, or the secularity, of the world is a betrayal of their originary eschatological vocation, namely, their faithful, anxious, expectation of the eschaton. For Christians, secular, historical progress is not only undesirable but actually impossible, since the only historical events that matter have already transpired in the life, death, and resurrection of the Christ. Löwith's book is a classic example of a declension narrative. As time goes on, the original eschatological pathos of the Christians of antiquity is watered down, compromised, and eventually abandoned. Löwith's argument takes the unusual form of a historical regression from the modern era, where the idea of progress reigns supreme, to the antique origins of Christian eschatology. Löwith thus reads the decline of the meaningfulness of history backwards, ascending from the empty, contradictory, worldliness of Burckhardt and Marx to the radical, eschatological anti-worldliness of St. Augustine and his Christian forebears.

More interesting, still, are Löwith's repeated claims that the Christian eschatological view of the meaning of history is grounded in the interpretation of prophecy. While Löwith makes no reference to Auerbach's theory of figural interpretation, he makes it clear that the Christian notion of the fulfillment of prophecy is at the heart of their eschatological consciousness. On the one hand, Löwith recognizes the importance of the Jewish tradition in the interpretation of prophecy. On the other hand, he consistently collapses the distinction

between Jews and Christians, sometimes resorting to the hyphenated term ‘Jewish-Christian,’ but more often simply effacing the Jews altogether. It seems to me that this effacement is a symptomatic manifestation of the logic of supersession. For Löwith, the Jews are absolutely necessary to the Christian eschatological concept of history, but are ultimately insignificant with regard to the story of its secularization. I argue, *pace* Löwith, that the eschatological problem (especially the increasingly delayed return of the Christ) that confronts the Christian tradition is, in fact, downstream from the more fundamental constitutional problem—what is often called the ‘parting of the ways’—especially as it manifests in the the question of Christian self-recognition.

Because Christians recognize themselves by way of what they are not (namely, the Jews), the historical identity and development of Christianity is not simply a matter of worldly renunciation, indifference to world history, and expectation of the eschatological future. Perhaps the most pivotal tenet of the Christian faith—the Incarnation—is inextricably bound up with the prophetic past, with the secular (*viz.* worldly) history of a sacred people. The tendency toward secularization is not alien to Christianity but is literally incarnated in the Christ, who, though he proclaimed a kingdom that is not of this world, is believed to have really and truly lived in this world, and died and lived again for the sake of its redemption. Löwith objects to the ‘immanentization of the eschaton,’ but the primary eschatological event, the Incarnation itself, was the proclamation that God—the God of the Jews—dwells among human beings, in history and in the world. The doctrine of the Incarnation (and the figural interpretation thereof) is an index of the fundamental tension in the Christian comprehension of reality; namely, that Christian thought and practice are pulled in two principal directions, both toward and away from the world in which God’s presence is not

only spiritually understood but literally and really experienced as such.

One of the principal villains of Löwith's book is none other than Hegel, whose philosophy of history, Löwith avers, represents the *coup de grâce* for Christian faith. Löwith laments the fact that Hegel's rational defense of Christianity evacuates it of all its eschatological content, robbing Christians of their eschatological identity and consigning modernity to an empty, progressivist confusion. I suggest, on the contrary, that, whatever the defects of the modern idea of progress, Hegel's thought is not a betrayal of Christianity but a most profound gift to Christians. What is on offer in Hegel's so-called secularization of Christian doctrine is not the disappearance of Christianity but its supersession, through which the lasting antagonisms of the Christian tradition—between time and eternity, history and eschatology, flesh and spirit, literality and allegory, knowledge and faith, world and God—can be reconciled once and for all.

In Chapter 5, I turn to Hegel himself. I argue that Hegel's early disapprobation of the Christian tradition, which was due especially to the eschatological estrangement of Christians from their world, gives way, in his later philosophy of religion, to a full-fledged defense of Christianity as the privileged exponent of the rational unity of history and truth. I begin Chapter 5 by introducing several key themes and concepts of Hegel's thought, such as the distinction (and, therefore, the relation) between representational and conceptual thought, and the corresponding problem of determining the place of history in the logical development of the rational concept. I then turn to Hegel's early criticisms of the 'positivity' both Judaism and Christianity—especially the tragic fate of the gospel of love preached by Jesus—so as to set the stage for his recuperation of the positive content of Christianity in his monumental



work of 1807, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and thereafter.<sup>6</sup>

The bulk of Chapter 5 concerns the way that Hegel inherits and deploys the basic insights of figural interpretation while stripping it of its eschatological and representational form. In Hegel's eyes, the figures of consciousness and figures of spirit that animate spirit's lengthy journey, from its abstract origins to its concrete culmination in the absolute concept, must be rationally comprehended as moments of spirit's self-recognition. The figures of history must be recollected as abstract moments of spirit, so that spirit, emptying itself of its merely positive content, can recognize itself in its truth, namely, that it is the agent and patient of history. What was, and what is, called God is, in truth, naught but the rational idea itself. What Christianity was, and is, is naught but the adumbration or prefiguration of the absolute Idea.

In the final section of Chapter 5, I turn to Hegel's 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, where he defends Christianity as the true, consummate—or fulfilled—religion.<sup>7</sup> When Hegel claims that that Christianity is the fulfilled religion, he means that it contains, as moments of its self-understanding and its conceptual development, the insights and partial truths of all other determinate religions. Christianity is not one religion among others, but the truth of religion itself. I argue that Hegel's philosophy, which he insists is the truth of the

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<sup>6</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 9 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1980); cited hereafter as GW 9. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* are from G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Since the pagination of GW 9 appears in the margins of Pinkard's edition, I refer only to GW 9 in the body text.

<sup>7</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion, Bands 1-3*, ed. Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1983, 1985, 1984); cited hereafter as VPR. All translations of Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* are from G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Volumes 1-3*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1984, 1987, 1985). Since the pagination of VPR is included in the margins of Hodgson's edition, I refer only to VPR in the body text.

truth of religion, is the crest of the thousand-year wave of the logic of supersession. In Hegel, the Christian principle of self-recognition is itself superseded, but for that very reason is preserved and elevated into its true, philosophical form. For Hegel, Christians are the living witnesses to the truth of spirit, the very figures of their own fulfillment.

## Chapter 1: The Logic of Supersession

*Christianity constitutes itself by constituting its others—its enemies, in fact.*

— Daniel Colucciello Barber

### §1 Not Yours, but Ours

According to tradition, Justin Martyr, a recent Christian convert, and Trypho, a Jewish refugee, encountered one another in Ephesus, in the middle of the second century of the Christian era. Justin's record of the encounter—*Dialogue with Trypho*—is composed, as the title suggests, in the form of a dialogue, in which the author attempts to convince his interlocutor to convert to Christianity. Justin's *Dialogue*, and indeed his work as a whole, is notable for the way it establishes the narrative unity of the history of salvation. R. Kendall Soulen describes Justin's account of salvation history in terms of four central episodes: creation, fall, redemption, and final consummation.<sup>1</sup> The first two episodes (creation and the fall of humanity into sin) are recounted in the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures; the latter two episodes (redemption accomplished in the Christ, and the final consummation in the Parousia and the Last Judgment) are described in the books of the Christian New Testament. In his earlier work, the *First Apology*, Justin had spilled a great deal of ink on the relation of the Hebrew Scriptures to the revelation of the Christ and the redemption accomplished therein. Justin's aim was to prove the truth of Christianity by demonstrating that the events recorded in the New Testament are, in fact, fulfillments of prophecies laid out centuries prior

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 37.

in the books of the Hebrew Prophets.

In the *First Apology* (Ch. 53), Justin poses the following rhetorical question.

Why should we believe a crucified Man that He was the First-begotten of an Unbegotten God, and that he will pass judgment on the entire human race, unless we had found testimonies concerning Him foretold before He came and was made Man, and unless we had seen events happen just as foretold?<sup>2</sup>

Justin's apology—be it that of his *Apologies* or of his *Dialogue*—is animated by a peculiar exegetical strategy: the interpretation of prophecy. Such a strategy is unlikely to convince modern readers, who are no longer much attuned to prophecy, but we can nonetheless understand the warrant of Justin's approach: he wishes to avoid the charge that he is making bare assertions, or, worse, spinning fables (e.g., “of the supposed sons of Jupiter”), without being able to furnish any proof of his claims. Trypho's reluctance notwithstanding, it turns out that Justin's argument was (and, for some, remains) extremely compelling; as we'll see in the chapters that follow, the history of Christianity bears witness to its prodigious—indeed, world-historical—success.

I begin this study with Justin not only because he is among the earliest and most significant of the patristic Christian authors, but in order to highlight a specific moment in the *Dialogue*. I have in mind the passage in Chapter 29, where Justin describes his confidence in his argumentation, appealing to Scripture as his guide and guarantor:

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<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, “First Apology,” in *The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation, Vol. 6: The Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, ed. Hermigild Dressler, et al. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 90.

I am positive that I can persuade by these words even those of weak intellectual faculties, for the words which I use are not my own, nor are they embellished by human rhetoric, but they are the words as David sang them, as Isaias announced them as good news, as Zacharias proclaimed them, and as Moses wrote them.

Justin then addresses himself directly to Trypho, appealing to the latter's intimate knowledge of the very texts being marshaled in defense of Christianity:

Aren't you acquainted with them, Trypho? You should be, for they are contained in your Scriptures, *or rather not yours, but ours*. For we believe and obey them, whereas you, though you read them, do not grasp their spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Thus is inaugurated in the textual archive of Christianity an idea whose career has spanned millennia, and spawned an exegetical tradition that continues, in some quarters, to this day: the Hebrew Scriptures do not, in the last instance, belong to the Jews. The national and historical documents of the Jewish people are, in fact, and ultimately, the remit of Christians. Every word of the Old Testament proclaims the good news enacted in the New. This act of appropriation is but one clause of Justin's expansive case for the Christian church's claim to be the "true spiritual Israel."<sup>4</sup> As we'll see in what follows, Justin's words—"not yours, but ours"—are absolutely decisive for the historical emergence of

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<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," in *The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation, Vol. 6: The Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, 191. My emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> Justin is credited as the first Christian author to deploy the phrase "true Israel" in relation to the nascent, though rapidly expanding, Christian church. See Justin Martyr, "Dialogue," 165: "We have been led to God through this crucified Christ, and we are the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants of Juda, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, who, though uncircumcised, was approved and blessed by God because of his faith and was called the father of many nations."

Christianity, and for the world it wrought, be that world ancient, medieval, or modern.

## §2 Supersession

There exists a word in the modern theological lexicon that describes the Christian appropriation of Jewish scriptures (but also their religion, history, and life). The word is *supersession*. Unfortunately, this word tends to conceal as much as it reveals, and thus demands not only scholarly attention but also, as I argue throughout this work, philosophical elaboration. The central aim of this dissertation is to show that the word ‘supersession’ marks the boundaries of a profoundly vexing problem for thought. The problem is vexing because, even as it signals the problem, supersession offers itself up as the solution; it is a problem that can only be presented as having been solved. Throughout this work, I refer to this problem as the problem of the constitution of Christianity. The problem can be stated provisionally, and abstractly, in the form of a question: how did Christianity become what it is? That the answer—supersession—is both exceedingly obvious and terribly obscure is an occasion for thought.

While much of the discourse on supersession has, in the course of the last century, occurred primarily in theological circles (see below, §3), I argue that supersession is, and must be, a question of paramount importance for philosophy of religion, for the academic study of Christianity, and for the study of religion writ large. Specifically, I argue that while the logic, or conceptual grammar, of supersession is at work in the earliest Christian authors—even, if ambiguously, in the foundational letters of St. Paul—it is ‘crystallized’ in late antiquity, and that its chief alchemists were the Latin theologians Tertullian of Carthage and St. Augustine of Hippo. The theological furnace in which supersession attained its

decisive doctrinal and exegetical shape was the practice of *figural interpretation*, a mode of reading Scripture in which the persons and events of the Old Testament are interpreted, as Erich Auerbach explains in his powerful and influential study, “Figura,” as “historically real prophecies,” which are fulfilled or completed in the persons and events of the New Testament, especially the life and person of Jesus the Christ. (As we’ve just seen, Justin is an obvious and important forerunner of this practice.)

In the course of this work I hope to show that supersession is badly understood if it is reduced to ‘replacement theology,’ in which Jews are ejected from the history of salvation and Christians assume the covenantal place vacated by Israel. While the rubric of ‘replacement’ should not be rejected outright, it is essential to keep in mind the theological and philosophical consequences of the notions of prophecy and fulfillment for the constitution of Christianity. Supersession is neither wasteful nor exclusive, but rather conservative and inclusive, and is for that very reason paradoxically progressive: grace is given once and for all, but history accumulates, presses onward, and, like the Psalmist’s cup, overflows with soteriological mysteries.

It happens that this logic of supersession bears a striking resemblance to a well-known, though not often well-understood, modern philosophical concept: the infamous *aufheben* of G.W.F. Hegel’s philosophical system. The most common English rendering of *aufheben* is ‘to sublimate,’ which, while it has a somewhat mystifying effect, is typically preferred for the way that it signals the difficulty of translating Hegel’s philosophical idiom, and thus advises caution to the reader.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to gloss the role played by the term *aufheben* in Hegel’s

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<sup>5</sup> See Terry Pinkard’s brief discussion of the problems posed by *aufheben* for the translator: G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), xxxix-xli.

thought, but a few points can be quickly enumerated. *Aufheben* has at least three meanings in ordinary German usage: ‘to cancel or negate,’ ‘to preserve,’ and ‘to raise up.’ Hegel’s technical usage of the term plays upon all of these meanings, though he sometimes privileges one or another, depending on the context.<sup>6</sup> Generally speaking, Hegel uses the term to describe a pivotal moment in a process of self-overcoming. In such a process, a term is confronted by its own negativity or inadequacy, and so negates or ‘sublates’ itself, generating a new, more adequate form of itself.<sup>7</sup>

In the opening passages of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, the concept of being (*Sein*) is found to be empty, barren of any determination whatever. Such pure being is identical to its apparent opposite, nothing (*Nichts*), and the two terms thus vanish into one another. Yet, because being and nothing are also distinct from one another—i.e. they are at once the same and not the same—the double movement of their vanishing results in what Hegel calls their truth, namely, becoming (*Werden*) (GW 21.69-70). Becoming is the determinate unity of the movement of being and nothing, a sort of equilibrium in which nothing (which is coming-to-be, *Entstehen*) and being (which is ceasing-to-be, *Vergehen*) are poised together; but for this very reason, becoming, which is nothing but the being and nothing that have vanished in it, is itself a vanishing, the “vanishing of the vanishing itself [*Verschwinden des Verschwindens*

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<sup>6</sup> Hegel himself enumerates two meanings of *aufheben*. His point, however, is not to deny a third, but precisely to gesture toward the fact that the word is inherently speculative because of the way it unifies—and thus ‘elevates’—its opposite meanings. Put otherwise, the German word ‘*aufheben*’ is itself ‘sublated’ in Hegel’s thought. See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81-82; *Wissenschaften der Logik, Gesammelte Werke*, Band 21 (Felix Meiner, 1985), 94-95 (Cited hereafter as SL/GW 21).

<sup>7</sup> On the conceptual genealogy of the term *aufheben* in Paul, Luther, and Hegel, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 99ff.



*selbst*]” (GW 21.92-94). Becoming is thus the result of a double determination (*Bestimmung*) or negation (*Aufhebung*) of being and nothing; it is a ‘vanishedness’ or a ‘being-vanished’ (*Verschwundenseyn*), which is not—not exactly—nothing.

There is much to be said about this. For the purposes of this brief introduction, let us simply note two decisive features of Hegel’s account of the “sublation of becoming [*aufheben des Werdens*].” First, becoming is not the result of a *mutual* or *reciprocal* negation of being and nothing, since this would imply that being and nothing are external to one another.<sup>8</sup> Hegel insists, on the contrary, that “each rather sublates [*aufhebt*] itself in itself and is within it the opposite of itself” (GW 21.93). While it is indeed a ‘third term’ in the logical course of the *Logic*, becoming is not a ‘third thing’ that is added to being and nothing. Nor is becoming, strictly speaking, a ‘second thing’ added to the unity of being and nothing. It simply *is* this unity, the truth *of* the negativity of being.<sup>9</sup> As the truth of being and nothing,

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<sup>8</sup> One very commonly hears that Hegel’s thought proceeds in a three-step process, beginning with a thesis (positive moment), followed by an antithesis (negative moment), and culminating in a synthesis of the two prior moments (negation of the negative moment, yielding something positive). As can be seen from our very cursory survey of the opening of the *Logic*, this is a false and misleading image of Hegel’s thought. Not only are the terms ‘thesis,’ ‘antithesis,’ and ‘synthesis’ foreign to Hegel’s philosophical lexicon, but their application to Hegel’s thought—even as a heuristic device for an ‘introduction’ to Hegel—serves only to disfigure and obscure. For Hegel’s commentary on the use of term ‘synthesis’ in Kant and Jacobi, and Hegel’s aversion to the word as a term of art for his own thought, see GW 21.83: “The synthesis which is the point of interest here must not be taken as a tying together of *external* determinations already at hand. Rather, the issue is twofold: one of the genesis of a second next to a first, of a determinate something next to something which is initially indeterminate, but also one of *immanent* synthesis, of synthesis *a priori*—a unity of distinct terms that exists in and for itself. *Becoming* is this immanent synthesis of being and nothing; but because the sense most closely attached to ‘synthesis’ is that of an external gathering of things externally at hand, the name of synthesis, of synthetic unity, has rightly gone out of use” (emphasis in original).

<sup>9</sup> It might be objected that Hegel himself insists that, as the unity of being and nothing, becoming is a “third [*ein Drittes*]” (SL 69/GW 21.80ff) with respect to them. But Hegel’s point is that becoming is different from its moments only inasmuch as it is their unity; or, conversely, that being and nothing have no subsistence except in their unity. The ‘third’ is not a third thing but one thing, namely, the transition (*Übergehen*) of being into nothing and nothing into being. Indeed, in the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel goes so far as to say that becoming “is the first concrete thought, and thus the first concept,

becoming is not superadded to them or to their unity, but is in a very real sense already ‘there;’ it arises in and through the self-negation of the negativity of being itself. Indeed, the entirety of the long and winding thread of the *Logic* unspools in this manner.

The second point is closely related to the first. The negation at play here is not a simple negation (in the sense of a deletion), which would result in mere nothingness, but what Hegel elsewhere calls a “determinate negation [*bestimmte Negation*]” (GW 9:57). In the remark to the section on becoming, Hegel avails himself of the distinction (and, therefore, the relation) between immediacy and mediation.

What is sublated [*aufhebt*] does not thereby turn into nothing. Nothing is the *immediate*; something sublated [*ein Aufgehobenes*] is on the contrary something *mediated*; it is something non-existent but as a result that has proceeded from a being; it still *has in itself*, therefore, the *determinateness from which it derives*. (GW 21.94, emphasis in original)

In their self-negation, being and nothing lose their immediacy, but, inasmuch as they are unified in and through their opposition to one another, they are nonetheless preserved as mediating moments (*Momente*) of their truth. Certainly, these moments ‘vanish,’ but their vanishing is not a banishing, and the vanishing of their vanishing is how their truth—namely,

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whereas being and nothing are empty abstractions.” See G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. Klaus Brinkman and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 143; cited hereafter as EL. For the German original, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke, Band 8: Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse, 1830, Erster Teil: Die Wissenschaft der Logik mit den mündlichen Zusätzen*, eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Suhrkamp, 1970); cited hereafter as W 8. The danger against which Hegel is warning in the passage from *The Science of Logic* is that the power of the understanding (i.e., abstraction), distracted by the “various empirical shapes [*vielfache empirische Gestalten*]” that arise in and through becoming, will ignore their unity and their movement, leaving them separated from one another, motionless.

that they are untrue, incomplete, even promissory—emerges. We will return to this question in more detail below (§28, §30), but for now we can note that what is ‘gained’ through sublation is, again, not something added from without, but something revealed, consummated, or fulfilled *in what is already there*. One of the questions I wish to articulate in this work, at least with regard to Hegel’s thought, follows directly from this point and can be posed in a preliminary fashion as follows: does history unspool in the same manner as the *Logic*?<sup>10</sup> As we’ll see, the answer is not as simple as one might suppose, irrespective of one’s opinion on the compatibility of Hegel’s logical investigations with his discussions of empirically documented history.

As for the resemblance between the terms *aufheben* and supersession, it is striking that some English translations of Hegel’s work have rendered *aufheben* as ‘to supersede’—though not with any consistency.<sup>11</sup> This is another case where a word conceals as much as it reveals. An attempt to simply and quickly explain supersession by way of *aufheben*, or vice versa, is liable to result in equivocations, imprecisions, and question-begging. It is not enough to juxtapose the terms and indicate the points at which they resemble one another, not least because resemblance is an external relation and does not illuminate the inner consistency of concepts. On the other hand, the question is not altogether hopeless.

There is, as I argue throughout this work, an integral relation between what modern

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<sup>10</sup> At the very least, logic and the history of *philosophy* share a beginning, namely, Parmenides. See EL 137-139.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., the translation of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* by A.V. Miller (G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977]), which has long served as the standard Anglophone text of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. I note in passing that Pinkard’s more recent translation of *Phänomenologie des Geistes* seems to have eschewed ‘supersession’ and ‘to supersede’ altogether, perhaps on account of the very same theological overtones that the present work seeks to thematize.

theologians call ‘supersession’ and what Hegelians call ‘sublation,’ but to determine the structure and significance of this relation requires that we refuse to settle for easy answers. For one thing, to focus one’s attention solely on the question of the conceptual isomorphism of supersession and sublation is to miss the forest for a single, ostentatious tree. One should consider, too, the parades of *Gestalten des Bewußtseins* (figures of consciousness) and *Gestalten des Geistes* (figures of Spirit) as they appear and disappear in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*; the language of completion or consummation (*Vollendung*) and fulfillment (*Erfüllung*) that pervades Hegel’s thinking; the decisive question of the conceptual status of the concept of *Vorstellung* (representation, picture-thinking, figurative thinking) in his philosophy of religion; and, above all, the meaning of actuality (*Wirklichkeit*). One should, in short, endeavor to think supersession concretely, in the historical instances of its practice (i.e., figural interpretation in the Christian tradition), and to approach Hegel not as a thinker whose thought can be summarized by a single technical term, but as a member of a historic, Christian tradition, even if—or rather, especially if—Hegel himself is the ambiguous culmination of that tradition. I take up these lines of inquiry in more detail in Chapter 5 below.

In what follows, I argue that our understanding of supersession is incomplete and abstract if we lack an account of the concrete, historical practice of figural interpretation. Furthermore, I argue that our understanding of figural interpretation suffers if we ignore or dismiss the claims it makes about (and on) temporality and history. To put it another way: the logic of supersession is a *historical* logic, supported materially by a textual and intellectual tradition, namely, the tradition of figural interpretation in Latin Christianity. It is historical in at least two senses. First, it is historical in the basic ‘historicist’ sense. The logic of

supersession arose or emerged at a determinate time and place, under specific social and political pressures, and it must therefore be interrogated, wherever possible, according to the facts of those determinations and pressures. Second, and somewhat in contrast to the first, it is historical in the ‘properly historical’ sense: the logic of supersession is a logic, or conceptual grammar, of history as such. Accordingly, history is not simply the contingent *succession* of events, but necessarily proceeds according to a plan whose verticality points up both the eternity of the mind of God and the inexorability of Providence. In the Christian tradition, history is, ultimately, salvation history. Yet the identification of (secular) history with (sacred) salvation history is fraught with numerous tensions and problems, to which we will turn in the latter chapters of this work. Supersession is the shape of history’s soteriological torsion, the grammar of its declensions; so, too, its contradictions.

This, I hasten to add, is why figural interpretation features so prominently in this work. Figural interpretation gives the *warrant* or the *reason* of supersession; it is one of the principal ways that Christians, especially those dwelling in the Latin precincts of the tradition, ground their claim to supersession. We can say at this point, if only provisionally and abstractly, that without the warrant of the historically real prophecies in scripture, the Christian claim to be the true Israel loses a critical pillar of its support. Or, put differently: absent the ground of the historically real prophecies secured by figural interpretation, Christianity runs the risk of just appearing as just another religion, one among others. Doubtless, one could simply affirm this latter statement and—assured that religions have always been numerous and various, have always conducted numerous and various disputes with one another, and have always given and taken numerous and various cues from one another—take leave of the problem altogether. Yet the problem would remain outstanding,

and I argue that such a line of flight, tempting as it is, would lead only to equivocation and misunderstanding. For now, let it suffice to say that supersession is not reducible to a question of inter-religious disputes and dialogues, where one religious community claims to have surpassed another, or all others.<sup>12</sup> Daniel Colluciello Barber is not wrong to say that Christianity needs more than heresies in order to secure its constitution: Christianity needs other religions, too.<sup>13</sup>

Christianity is marked, writes Barber,

as the truth of religion, but Christianity can identify itself in terms of true belief only if there is at the same time a category of religion whose goal is true belief. That is to say, Christianity needs not only heresies, but also other religions. After all, if the Christian religion is true, there must be other religions that are false—otherwise

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<sup>12</sup> It is tempting, for instance, to say that Islam is also a supersessionist religion (perhaps the supersessionist religion par excellence), because it claims to be the final revelation, but my (very far from expert) sense is that this isn't quite right. Islam claims to be the complete version of a primordial faith. It is not the completed version of Judaism and Christianity, but is simply itself: the final revelation. Torah is not, for Muslims, a prefiguration of the revelation to come; Torah is also the record of the revelation of the primordial faith, except it has been corrupted and distorted in time. The truth of Islam was revealed to the prophet Jesus, and was the basis of his teachings and life, but the record of it—because it was not written down—has been lost; what Christians call the Gospels are chronicles and eyewitness accounts of the prophet's life, not the Gospel itself. We might say that, in contrast to Christians, Muslims do not recognize themselves by way of conversion or supersession, but by way of reversion—or recession—to the origin. On the concept of reversion in Islam, see Timothy Snediker, "Submission Without Conversion: Immanence and Subjectivity in Islam," in *Resonance: A Religious Studies Journal* 1 (Fall 2016): 1-28. Obviously, it would take us much too far afield to delve into the role of the prophets in Islamic theology (i.e., whether Moses and Jesus, for instance, are *figurae*). I only mention Islam here because I want to acknowledge the potential objection, as well as take the opportunity to preemptively point out how, in my reading, the logic of supersession is tightly indexed to Christianity.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Colucciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 88-114. See also Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 39-63.

Christian truth has no meaning except as a singularity among singularities.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, Christianity needs one ‘religion’ in particular. I take the precaution of adding scare quotes around the word religion in order to signal my basic agreement with Daniel Boyarin’s argument in his 2004 *Borderlines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. Boyarin remarks that,

while Christianity finally configures Judaism as a different religion, Judaism itself, I suggest, at the end of the day refuses that call, so that seen from that perspective the difference between Christianity and Judaism is not so much a difference between two religions as a difference between a religion and an entity that refuses to be one.<sup>15</sup>

Along these lines, and very much in keeping with the position of the present study, Barber writes:

At the level of historical genesis, Christianity would seem to be derivative [e.g. deriving from Judaism], and so the invocation of a plane of religious truth allows Christianity to present itself as, on the contrary, originary. It is subsequent at the level of history, but antecedent at the level of religion. Yet for this to work, Judaism must also be understood at the level of religion—if it is not a religion, then it cannot enter into comparison, and if it cannot enter into comparison, then it cannot be identified as lacking. What is therefore at stake in the Christian invention of religion is a massive

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<sup>14</sup> Barber, *On Diaspora*, 94.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Borderlines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 7-8.

act of interpellation.<sup>16</sup>

Here, it is Christianity which at once names itself and Judaism as religions, so as to claim the status of *vera religio* for itself—a pretension that would be illegible unless there were a competing religious claim to the truth.

What distinguishes the doctrine of supersession from a mere entry in a religious competition, and from a simple assertion of succession, is the fact that a supersessionist project *lays claim* to what it surpasses or succeeds. Christianity does not leave its Jewish antecedents behind when it takes its leave of the ‘old covenant.’ It does not, strictly speaking, take leave at all. The supersessionist gesture consists in conserving and configuring its Jewish antecedents as necessary but negative moments in the trans-historical sweep of Christianity’s claim to truth. That is to say, the problem of supersession is a matter of the inclusion of the Jews in salvation history, not of their exclusion.

This leads us to a decisive paradox of Christian tradition. While Christian doctrine and practice has, throughout the ages and more often than not, been aggressively hostile to Jews and Judaism, there nonetheless persists in the essential documents of Christian theology a paradoxical love for Jews and Judaism.<sup>17</sup> In Christian thought, antisemitism and anti-Judaism are necessarily joined by something like a theological philosemitism and philo-Judaism,

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<sup>16</sup> Barber, *On Diaspora*, 94-95.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), esp. 276-277, where Fredriksen concludes that, for Augustine, the Jews as Jews “are the servants of the church.” For an incredulous response to Fredriksen, see Ryan Szpiech’s review of *Augustine and the Jews*: “It is only with the most ‘charitable’ of interpretations (as Augustine himself might say) that this Christian belief in the value of Judaism as a key player in its own supersession can ever be equated to a ‘defense of Jews and Judaism’ (as Fredriksen deems it)” (Ryan Szpiech, “Jewish History and Culture in Late Antiquity, Review of Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*, in *Association for Jewish Studies* 35, no. 2 [November 2011]: 419-421).



without which antisemitism and anti-Judaism run the risk of losing their objects of contempt, and without which Christianity risks a fatal undermining of its own constitution, which demands a compromise between a lasting hatred for the Jews and a perverse love for the same. This Christian love takes a variety of forms, but one of the essential and constituent elements of the Christian attitude toward the Jews is that the truth of the Christian gospel depends on the truth of the testimony of the Jews to their chosenness.<sup>18</sup> If the Jewish covenant is false, so, too, is the Christian. That a covenant can be called ‘new’ only if there exists an ‘old’ covenant to which the ‘new’ relates itself is self-evident, even obvious. The Christian claim is much more radical. The New Testament is not simply new in relation to what it construes as the Old. Rather, the New Testament is the truth *of* the truth of the Old Testament. The gospel is the truth *of* the truth of Judaism. Christians are the truth *of* the truth of the Jews. Love is the truth *of* the truth of the Law. The logic of supersession is condensed in this series of genitive phrases. What is superseded—at once cancelled and preserved—is not what is false but what is true in the false, what is complete in the incomplete, what is promised in the promise.

### §3 The Critique of Supersession

In the wake of the Shoah, an increasing number of Christian theologians have begun to own up to the antisemitic and anti-Judaic legacy of the doctrine of supersession. Today, it is

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<sup>18</sup> One of the most important articulations of this ‘love’ for the Jews in the Christian tradition was given by St. Augustine of Hippo. I return to this below (§6). See Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine, in Four Books*, trans. J.F. Shaw (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library); cited hereafter as OCD; all references to OCD cite the book and section number (e.g., OCD 3.6). All references to the Latin original (*De doctrina Christiana libri quatuor*) are drawn from the S. Aurelli Augustini Opera Omnia; URL: [https://www.augustinus.it/latino/dottrina\\_cristiana/index2.htm](https://www.augustinus.it/latino/dottrina_cristiana/index2.htm)

widely accepted among scholars that the doctrine of supersession is, and has been historically, a major source of antisemitic and anti-Judaic sentiments among Christians, and among certain of their secular counterparts.<sup>19</sup> In 1965, based on an overwhelming consensus among representatives of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI promulgated a declaration, entitled *Nostra Aetate* ('In Our Time'), on the relation of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions, that established something of a blueprint for what David Novak has called a 'soft' supersessionism.<sup>20</sup> In particular, the Vatican repudiated the centuries-old antisemitic charge of deicide, suspended final judgment on the covenantal status of the Jews, and explicitly acknowledged the Jewish patrimony of the Christian faith. A decade after the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, Rosemary Radford-Ruether published *Faith and Fratricide*, an important and forceful study of the Christian theological roots of antisemitism.<sup>21</sup> More recently, Jewish and Christian thinkers from various traditions and denominations have engaged in lengthy (and laudable) criticisms of the doctrine of supersession. Let us consider the shape and significance of the critique of supersession as it exists today.

Novak's distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' supersession makes for a simple point of entry into the contemporary debates about supersession. At the outset of his influential 2019

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<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014); William James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), esp. notes 8-12 (pp. 340-341).

<sup>20</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Nostra aetate," Oct. 28, 1956, URL: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html). See David Novak, "Supersessionism Hard and Soft," *First Things* (February 2019), URL: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/02/supersessionism-hard-and-soft>. All references to Novak in this section refer to this source.

<sup>21</sup> Rosemary Radford-Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Origins of Anti-Semitism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974). I turn to Radford-Ruether in more detail below.

essay, “Supersessionism Hard and Soft,” Novak avers that while supersession *seems* to be a “core Christian belief,” a closer examination reveals that there are two kinds of supersessionism. ‘Hard’ supersessionism is a strict version of ‘replacement theology,’ in which Christians have wholly and irreversibly assumed the covenantal role of the Jews in salvation history. ‘Soft’ supersessionism, by contrast, rejects the rhetoric of replacement in favor of a qualified embrace of something more like ‘fulfillment theology,’ in which Christianity is understood to have brought something new to the Jewish covenant with God, but without displacing or replacing the Jews as the people of God. Since Novak, a Jewish theologian and philosopher, is interested in inter-faith dialogue with his Christian counterparts, it is obvious that he prefers the latter, ‘soft’ version of supersession, since it fosters, rather than prevents dialogue. A ‘soft’ supersessionism maintains both the fact of Jewish exceptionalism while allowing for Christians to join the covenantal community, even if at some remove (and not without tensions, due to the evangelical mandate of Christians). Indeed, Novak himself registers concerns about the predominant strains of ‘soft’ supersession (some of which we will turn to in a moment), since, in the Christian eschatological schema, Judaism will ultimately be overcome by Christianity at the end of time (and, therefore, “Judaism is still taken to be proto-Christianity”).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Rather unhelpfully, Novak equivocates on the meaning of supersession, attributing the tendency to Jews as to Christians. It seems to me that the idea of ‘Jewish supersessionism’ is, ultimately, a category error stemming from a misunderstanding of the singularity and specificity of supersession. As I have already suggested above, and as I’ll argue throughout this study, supersession has a specific theological and hermeneutical sense. To supersede is not simply to surpass, or replace, or overcome, what is superseded. To supersede is to lay claim to a text, tradition, or idea, and to make *what is claimed* the basis of the truth of one’s own position. This means that what is superseded is—as in Hegel’s dialectical understanding of the generation of the true—both negated and preserved. Supersession is not a matter of refuting or repudiating a prior religion or tradition, but of making the incompleteness or falsity of what is prior (here, Judaism, the Old Testament) the ‘proof’ of the truth of the superseding (here, Christianity, the gospel). Supersession has a specifically Christian form. The idea that there exists a ‘Jewish supersessionism’ depends on the idea that the Jews appropriated and

Novak's constructive proposal for reckoning with the problem of supersession amounts to an eschatological deferral. Since only God decides who may enter the covenant, "neither Jews nor Christians can anticipate what God will do at the end of the world's time." While Novak encourages dialogue between Jews and Christians, he rejects theological relativism, "which is why supersessionism cannot be avoided in good faith. It can only be disciplined by nuanced theological reflection." Much of the contemporary theological critique of supersession plays out along these lines. It seems evident to most of those critics that 'hard' supersessionism is unacceptable and that whatever will become of the Christian understanding of supersession must necessarily confront the problem in good faith, by way of theological reflection and inter-faith dialogue.<sup>23</sup> 'Soft' supersession seems to be the future of

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incorporated the heathen religions of the ancient Near East. While there is certainly some truth to the idea that Judaism, like any human tradition, emerged in and through its historical, social, and political contexts, the *claim* of Judaism is a claim to a covenantal relation to a distinctive, unique, and universal God. The Jewish tradition does not claim that the God of Israel is the fulfillment of a prophecy given by the priests of Ba'al; on the contrary, the God of Israel is understood to be absolutely and wholly other than any other deity. The Jewish tradition does not claim that Caananite religion was true, but that Judaism (or the monotheistic cult of the temples in Jerusalem) is the truth. Even if the ancient Hebrews appropriated this or that custom from their religious others, this is not an instance of supersession, but of what Jan Assman calls the 'Mosaic distinction.' See Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Jan Assman, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). Judaism claims to be the one, true religion. Christianity, for its part, claims to be the true religion as well, but it does so on the basis of the truth of the Jewish religion. Christianity (or the Gospel) is true if and only if Judaism (or the Old Covenant) was true. *This*, not a simple historical succession, nor a rational argument, nor a theological polemic, is how we should understand the logic of supersession. It seems clear to me that, if one wishes to say that certain factions of Judaism believe themselves to have superseded Christianity (since, as Novak rightly points out, Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism actually emerge more or less simultaneously in the wake of the razing of the temple in 70 CE), one can do so only by way of equivocation. What is meant by such supersession is not what is meant by supersession in the specifically Christian sense that I explore in this study. For a discussion of the problem of 'concept creep' in scholarly debates about supersession, especially the trouble with extending the semantic range of the term to cover any religious group that claims to be superior to any other religious group, see R. Kendall Soulen, "Supersession," in *Encyclopedia of Jewish-Christian Relations Online*, eds. Walter Homolka, Rainer Kampling, Amy-Jill Levine, Cristoph Marksches, Peter Schäfer, and Martin Thurner (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter), URL: <https://www.degruyter.com/database/EJCRO/entry/ejcro.9724136/html>.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Carl E. Braaten and Robert M. Jensen (eds.), *Jews and Christians: People of*

Jewish-Christian dialogue; the softer, the better. Let us consider a few examples of the Christian theological, political, and philosophical attempts to articulate, and to soften, the supersessionist tendencies of their tradition.

In *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, R. Kendall Soulen argues that any attempt to overcome the “legacy of supersessionism in Christian theology” must attend to the “canonical narrative” that governs the interpretation of the Bible.<sup>24</sup> Soulen’s mention of the “canonical narrative” (he also calls it the ‘standard model’) refers to a concept that he develops to come to grips with the fact that supersession seems to be inextricable from Christian doctrine and practice. In short, the standard model, or standard canonical narrative, refers to the basic Christian understanding—which Soulen believes was crystallized in the late second-century in the works of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons—of the theological and narrative unity of the Bible and the consequences that follow, for the relations of Jews and Christians, from that unity.<sup>25</sup> Soulen argues that supersession may be differentiated into three models: punitive, economic, and structural. Punitive supersession is distinguished by its polemical and often antisemitic form. The gist of the punitive view is that God has abrogated his covenant with Israel because the Jews have rejected the gospel (Soulen cites Melito of Sardis as a paradigmatic theological voice of the punitive view).<sup>26</sup> Economic supersession,

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*God* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), whose table of contents reads somewhat like a ‘who’s who’ of the critique of supersession.

<sup>24</sup> Soulen stresses that a canonical narrative is distinct from the biblical canon itself. A canonical narrative is an interpretative instrument that gives theological and narrative unity. See Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 13-17.

<sup>26</sup> Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 29-30.

according to Soulen, poses a greater threat to contemporary Christian theology (and, *ipso facto*, to inter-faith dialogue). Because its hostility toward Jews and Judaism is muted, its effects are more insidious. The term ‘economic’ in economic supersession refers to the Christian understanding of God’s economy (*oikonomia*), namely, the fact that the divine economy has shifted from its original locus in Israel to the Christian church. The economic view poses a greater danger than its punitive counterpart because it “logically entails the ontological, historical, and moral obsolescence of Israel’s existence after Christ.”<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, economic supersession is, as Soulen puts it, “deeply interwoven with the narrative and conceptual fabric of the standard model [of Christian triumphalism] as a whole.”<sup>28</sup>

The lasting influence of the standard model is most evident in Soulen’s third category of supersession: the structural view. The standard model, Soulen writes,

is structurally supersessionist *because it unifies the Christian canon in a manner that renders the Hebrew Scriptures largely indecisive for shaping conclusions about how God’s purposes engage creation in universal and enduring ways.* Whereas economic and punitive supersessionism designate discrete problems *within* the standard model, structural supersessionism designates a problem that pervades the standard model as a whole.<sup>29</sup>

Soulen’s central criticism of structural supersession turns on the fact that it pushes the Jewish scriptural and religious elements of the biblical canon into the background, while

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<sup>27</sup> Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 30.

<sup>29</sup> Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 31. Emphasis in original.

foregrounding the key episodes of the biblical canon (i.e., creation, fall, incarnation, eschaton) that are of paramount importance for Christians.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the work, Soulen is principally concerned to identify and overcome the economic and structural logics of supersession; his aim is to defend theologically what some contemporary churches have already affirmed ecumenically: the irrevocability of God's election of the Jews. The latter half of *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* takes up the task of giving a constructive account of a nonsupersessionist theology. In brief, Soulen proposes that Christians acknowledge that God's election of Israel is "not merely preparatory and prefigurative in nature," but that "God's history with Israel and the nations is the permanent and enduring medium of God's work as the Consummator of human creation, and therefore it is also the permanent and enduring context of the gospel about Jesus."<sup>31</sup>

Here, I make no attempt to adjudicate on the concrete failures and successes of Soulen's vision for a nonsupersessionist (or, more recently, post-supersessionist) Christianity. In any case, I am neither personally nor academically interested in the vicissitudes of inter-faith dialogue, though I do appreciate the work being done in those areas of religious life and culture. Instead, I want to focus our attention, briefly, on the import of his account of *economic* and *structural* supersession for the present study. My own account of the logic of

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<sup>30</sup> Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 31-32. Soulen sums up the problem as follows: "The standard canonical narrative unifies the Christian canon into a single coherent witness only as it simultaneously refracts that witness asymmetrically into a dominant creaturely-universal foreground and a subordinate Israelite background. [...] *As a result, God's identity as the God of Israel and God's history with the Jewish people become largely indecisive for the Christian conception of God*" (ibid., 33; emphasis in original).

<sup>31</sup> Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 110. Like many Christian theologians, Soulen places the blame for the problem of supersession on latent gnostic tendencies in the tradition. For a similar criticism of supersession, but along explicitly political lines, see Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel after Christendom: The Politics of Election* (Boulder, CO: Wipf & Stock, 1999).

supersession is indebted to the clarity afforded by Soulen’s categories, but my approach differs inasmuch as I am interested in the way that even the critique of supersession tends to reinforce the logic of supersession itself. It seems to me that the logic of supersession breeds not only hostility towards Jews and Judaism, but also a certain, paradoxical and perverse, love for the Jews. Call it ‘charitable supersession,’ the bright-eyed cousin of the punitive supersession outlined by Soulen. Even when the Jews are restored to their proper place in the covenant with God by charitable Christian theologians, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Christians need the Jews—that Christians need Jews to be *the* Jews—in a way that would never hold conversely. Thus, we might have cause to question, at both philosophical and political registers, the logic of the love that undergirds the critique of supersession. I return to this problem, as it surfaces in the work of St. Augustine, below (§6).

It seems to me, too, that the very thing that Soulen believes can reconcile Jews and Christians is, in fact, closer to the kernel of the problem itself. Soulen avers that Christians should recognize the relevance of the history of the Jews for Christianity, instead of relegating that history (and the scriptures that document it) to the theological dustbin. As we’ll see in what follows, it is this very ‘relevance’ of the history of the Jews that proves extremely problematic for the Christian tradition, especially in its Augustinian precincts. In short, it is the Christian *claim* on the history of the Jews that lies at the heart of the logic of supersession. In the Latin tradition of figural interpretation, the histories recorded in the Old Testament—and their culmination in the Incarnation, as reported in the New Testament—are literally and historically real prophecies and fulfillments, but they are also the only properly historical content there is.<sup>32</sup> All other historical events and developments, even where they

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<sup>32</sup> For a comparatively rare discussion of supersession from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, see Harold Smith, “Supersession and Continuance,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 2



impinge upon the life of the church, are but chaff for the fires of the eschaton. From the perspective developed in the following chapters, Soulen's proposal, that Christians should learn to better appreciate the role of the Jews in the history of salvation, sounds like a sermon to the choir. The anti-supersessionist attempts to restore Jews and Judaism to their 'proper' place in the economy of salvation often ends up re-centering the Christian experience of time, history, and eternity. While such an approach may indeed open up more chances for inter-faith dialogue, there remains—per Boyarin and Barber—the conceptual problem of the Christian interpellation of Judaism as a religion in the first place. If Christians, by and large, cannot be indifferent to Jews and Judaism, it is because—as we said above—they need Jews to be *the* Jews and need Judaism to be the antecedent, even the 'proof,' of the gospel. If Jews cannot be indifferent to Christians, it is likely not due to any immanent necessity in Jewish religious life and thought, but, rather, due to the fact that so many Christians—even the charitable, post-supersessionist theologians—cannot seem to stop calling (upon) them.

Other criticisms of supersession, such as Vincent W. Lloyd's 2011 *The Problem with Grace*, come closer to the position taken in this study, but often at the cost of too much abstraction. Lloyd—rightly, in my view—conceives of supersession as a distinctively Christian concept, but he characterizes it as a relatively simple matter of Christian universality (i.e., grace) superseding Jewish particularity (i.e., law).<sup>33</sup> Doubtless, the relation—and the conflict—between universality and particularity is, indeed, an important

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(Spring 2014), pp. 247-273. As with virtually every Christian 'critic' of supersession, what Smith identifies as *non-supersessionist* in his tradition (i.e., the cherished value of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament) is, in fact, what is patently supersessionist in it. Everything turns on what, exactly, is meant by the 'value' of Old Testament prophecy.

<sup>33</sup> Vincent W. Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

element of the logic of supersession, but it seems to me that the pivotal role of hermeneutics, and the concept of history that results from the figural interpretation of scripture, is an important, and more concrete, addition to the critique laid out by Lloyd.<sup>34</sup> Yet another set of entries in the critique of supersession can be found in the works of Peter Ochs and George Lindbeck, both of whom articulate their theological and philosophical projects in terms of a return to what Hans Frei calls the ‘classic’ model of biblical hermeneutics.<sup>35</sup>

Ochs, a Jewish philosopher and avowed fellow-traveler of Frei and Lindbeck, refers to the set of Christian theologians who are invested in this project of overcoming the presumed deficits of modern hermeneutics and biblical criticism as ‘post-liberals.’ What Ochs and his Christian comrades share is a commitment to what Ochs calls “scriptural reasoning,” which, broadly construed, is motivated by a desire to return to a ‘classic’ hermeneutical mode of biblical interpretation in which the text can be read as ‘history-like,’ that is, as realistic narrative.<sup>36</sup> Upon its retrieval, and freed from the fetters of modern historical-critical methods, the classic hermeneutic can return to scripture its unique and comprehensive semiotic potentialities. What is interesting about this project is that it is frequently articulated

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<sup>34</sup> For two related works, both of which levy interesting, but ultimately unsatisfying criticisms of the logic of supersession, see Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*; and J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For a recent article that (rather dubiously, in my view) relies on the ‘anti-racist’ conceptual framework of Ibram X. Kendi to forge an anti-supersessionist theology, see Daniel Joslyn-Seimiatkoski, “Towards an Anti-Supersessionist Theology: Race, Whiteness, and Covenant,” *Religions* 13(2), 129 (January 2022): 1-13. The other entries in the special issue of *Religions* in which Joslyn-Seimiatkoski’s piece appears are all dedicated to the problem of supersession.

<sup>35</sup> The door to this return was opened most dramatically in Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>36</sup> See Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 21-31, for his gloss of various approaches to scriptural reasoning.

as a critique of the doctrine of supersession. In *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews*, Ochs assembles a dream team of Christian theologians who, he claims, have managed to recover a classic vision of Christology while maintaining a perfect (or near-perfect—Ochs considers John Milbank somewhat suspect) record of non-supersessionism.<sup>37</sup>

Let us consider the leading example of Ochs's book, the Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck, whose work Ochs describes as an attempt to return to an authentic Christian reading of scripture, so as to repair the schisms that plague the Christian tradition. Ochs notes that, while this reparative project is pre-eminently concerned with Protestant-Catholic relations, it has its proper beginning in a concern for "relations between the church and the people Israel."<sup>38</sup> That is to say, to solve for the problem of supersession is to find the formula for the repair of the primary schism in the Western Christian tradition, that between the various Protestantisms and the Catholic Church from which they have taken leave. Before turning briefly to Lindbeck himself, I want to highlight a feature—I emphasize that it is a *feature*, not a bug—of Ochs' presentation of Lindbeck and, more generally, of all his interlocutors. Namely, that the post-liberal approach to scripture is pervaded by what we might call 'figural reasoning.'

In an earlier iteration of his study of Lindbeck, Ochs makes this explicit, writing that post-liberal theologians are given to reading scripture as a "set of instructions" for the reading of scripture itself, and that this set of instructions includes advice about "how *not* to

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<sup>37</sup> Ochs devotes a chapter to each of his subjects: George Lindbeck (who stands also for Hans Frei), Robert W. Jenson, Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, Daniel Hardy, David Ford, and John Milbank.

<sup>38</sup> Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 36. Cf. Peter Ochs, "Judaism and Christian Theology," in David F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd edition (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 650.

overlook the enduring place of the people Israel in the gospel narrative.”<sup>39</sup> Failure to abide by these instructions is tantamount to heresy (a charge leveled liberally by post-liberals at their liberal and anti-liberal foes alike). When Christians are freed from this heresy, they will have learned to read the gospel properly, “as both a narrative of the life of Christ and a reading of the history of Israel.”<sup>40</sup> In this reparative mode of reading, “to read one text of scripture is also to re-read some other text of scripture. *Figural reading is indigenous to the gospel narrative.*”<sup>41</sup> Near the conclusion of the same essay, amid a comparison of post-liberals and their interlocutors in the precincts of Radical Orthodoxy, Ochs remarks approvingly that “Lindbeck depicts the Church *as* Israel: not to replace the Jewish identity of Israel, but to adopt that identity as also the type of the Christian community to whom [God’s] Word is addressed.”<sup>42</sup> For Ochs and his fellow travelers, ‘figural’ tends to function as a sort of get-out-of-jail-free card, especially inasmuch as it furnishes them with a classic, ‘post-critical’ key to the modern, critical cage. It also affords them the luxury of an end-run around the problem posed by Rosemary Radford-Ruether in her 1974 work, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. In the final, decisive chapter of that book, Radford-Ruether articulates the problem of supersession with clarity and precision (though without using the word ‘supersession’). She argues that christology itself is the fundamental source of

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<sup>39</sup> Ochs, “Judaism and Christian Theology,” 649. Emphasis in original.

<sup>40</sup> Ochs, “Judaism and Christian Theology,” 649. Cf. Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 18: “[The post-liberals] tend to rediscover each Gospel *as itself* a rereading of the Old Testament narratives of the history of Israel.” Cf. George Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability,” *Modern Theology* 13, no. 4 (1997): 433-434.

<sup>41</sup> Ochs, “Judaism and Christian Theology,” 649. My emphasis. Notably, years later, when Ochs reiterates these points in *Another Reformation*, he elides the claim about the indigeneity of figural reading to the gospels. Cf. Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 37-38.

<sup>42</sup> Ochs, “Judaism and Christian Theology,” 658.

Christian anti-Judaism and antisemitism, and thus—as Ochs has pointed out—presents Christians with the “either-or choice of affirming classical Christology *or* freeing themselves of the evils of supersessionism.”<sup>43</sup>

The ‘ultimatum’ (this is Ochs’ term) derives from the fact that classic christology “historicizes the eschatological event,” reifying and transforming the Jewish expectation of the messiah from a political-theological promise into a universal, even cosmic, hinge of history. As a result, “Christ becomes the vengeful instrument to persecute that people [i.e., Israel] who hoped for his coming and who fail to recognize in such a Christ their own redemption.”<sup>44</sup> However, Radford-Ruether wonders:

is it possible for Christianity to accept the truth of this refusal without at the same time rejecting totally its own messianic experience in Jesus? Is it possible to purge Christianity of anti-Judaism without at the same time pulling up Christian faith? Is it possible to say ‘Jesus is Messiah’ without, implicitly or explicitly, saying at the same time ‘and the Jews be damned’?<sup>45</sup>

Radford-Ruether’s answer to her own question is: likely not. She offers constructive proposals for a “new covenantal theology,” but she also admits that there exists an obvious

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<sup>43</sup> Radford-Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 246-251. Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>44</sup> Radford-Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 246.

<sup>45</sup> Radford-Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 246. Cf. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 251, and n.12 on 341: “What adds to the difficulty of the supersessionist problematic is that it draws its original power from the very serious tension that emerges out of Christianity’s central claims regarding Jesus Christ. Those tensions are authentic and present a fundamental challenge to Jewish self-understanding. No critique of supersessionism can avoid this deeper point of real conflict that must be acknowledged.”

solution to the problem: conversion to Judaism. There is nothing,” she writes, “to prevent any Christian from accepting this option and using Christianity as a way to full conversion to Judaism.”<sup>46</sup>

Obviously, Radford-Ruether does not elect to take this path. Nor does Lindbeck. As I said above, the latter attempts something of an end-run around the problem, now construed as an ultimatum. He does so by displacing the question from christology to ecclesiology, and accomplishes this displacement by availing himself of the distinction—in typological hermeneutics—between what he calls *antitype* and *ectype*. In brief, ‘antitype’ refers to what Auerbach understands as the ‘fulfillment’ pole of the figure-fulfillment matrix (see below, §8). A type-figure is complemented by its antitype-fulfillment. By contrast, an ectype has a different relation to its type: “the grammar of the Israel/church relation is better articulated as that of *prototype to ectype*.”<sup>47</sup> In place of the concept of historically real prophecy (*typos/figura*), which is destined to be fulfilled, Lindbeck sets the example, paradigm, or prototype (here, Israel) to which corresponds a mimetic ectype (the Church). This allows Lindbeck to claim that the logic of supersession (typified, so to speak, by christology) is a later modification and distortion of the original, ‘biblical,’ gospel message.<sup>48</sup> The upshot of this return to a pre-supersessionist (and thus non-supersessionist) hermeneutics is that the

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<sup>46</sup> Radford-Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 255. For her constructive proposals, see *ibid.*, 257-261.

<sup>47</sup> George Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness,” 435; my emphasis.

<sup>48</sup> “The articulation of the grammar of this relationship in reference to Christ was that Israel, the Messianic people, is the type of which Jesus, the Messiah, is the antitype, the fulfillment. In post-biblical generations, the church was increasingly said to be the antitype or fulfillment of Israel, not as identical to Christ, but as replacing Israel in the status of the Messianic people. The Jews became simply pre-Messianic. This supersessionism, however, is a distortion of the grammar of the relationship in some New Testament writers, most notably Paul” (Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness,” 434).

church is no longer conceived as the replacement or fulfillment of Israel, but as its expansion and imitation. The problem of supersession is not so much solved or resolved so much as shown to have been a misunderstanding; Christians have simply failed to follow the example of their election, namely, the Jews. Once this misunderstanding is rectified, and the originary identity of the church as ‘Israel-like’ is reaffirmed, then even christology can be redeemed from its supersessionist sins.<sup>49</sup>

Such projects of *ressourcement* (i.e., the attempt to return to the ‘original’ understanding of scriptural and patristic texts) are common in twentieth-century theology, especially in France and Germany.<sup>50</sup> In Lindbeck’s case, one cannot help but notice a contradiction between, on the one hand, his insistence on the uniqueness and untranslatability of the gospel and, on the other hand, his confidence that there exists an original version of the construal of that gospel that, because it is provided by the originary gospel itself, can be accessed and reactivated by contemporary theology. As Werner Hamacher, channeling Walter Benjamin, once put it, a text can only be called ‘original’ if it is translatable.<sup>51</sup> The same should be said

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<sup>49</sup> Lindbeck: “What, however, if the Israel-like church in its original version does not replace but rather expands Israel to embrace Gentile believers? One advantage from the perspective of continuity with the historic tradition is that the classic Christological claims are on this view undiminished. Israel’s story and Jesus the Messiah continue to be related as type to antitype, promise to fulfillment, shadow to reality. It will be recalled that in ecclesiology in contrast to Christology, however, Israel and the church are, in this original version, prototype and ectype, not, as they have been through most of later Christian history, type and antitype. The terms are archaic, but not the contemporary significance: the church of believers in Christ has never been scripturally or normatively the fulfillment of Israel” (“The Gospel’s Uniqueness,” 437).

<sup>50</sup> We will encounter some of the partisans of the so-called *Nouvelle Théologie* below: Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac (see §10). To this Francophone pair can be added the Germans Karl Rahner and Hans Küng, among others. On the history and development of the French projects of *ressourcement*, see Jon Kirwan, *An Avant-Garde Theological Generation: The Nouvelle Theologie and the French Crisis of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> “The essence of language lies in its translatability—in this, it imparts not its contents but rather its impartibility to another language. Only with respect to its translation, its status as translatable, does a text become an original; and only with respect to the language of the translation does the language

for the gospel, and for its interpretations and translations (and, *ipso facto*, its distortions). The classic hermeneutics to which Lindbeck wishes to return is itself a translation, a distortion of the gospel. *Pace* Lindbeck, distortion is the form of appearance of truth in history. There is no right of return to a pure and self-identical origin in which distortion is avoided and the problem of supersession is defused.<sup>52</sup>

It turns out that Lindbeck's work is symptomatic of a profound misunderstanding of Auerbach's study of *figura* (for other symptomatic cases, see my discussion of Auerbach's reception among literary theorists below, §14). Lindbeck enumerates four formal characteristics of the classic hermeneutics: (1) canonical interpretation (i.e., diverse texts are read as a single work—to wit, *the Book, the Bible*); (2) interpretation is governed by a conceptual grammar (i.e., the central subject matter is the Christ *who has come*); (3) the narrative (and meta-narrative) realism of scripture is privileged; finally, (4) the realism of scripture's narrative structure is "enfleshed" by figural interpretation, which extends the plain sense of scripture—i.e., its local construal by its given audience—to worlds and histories beyond its initial manifestation.<sup>53</sup> The post-liberal theological gambit is an attempt to rehabilitate each of these features for modern Christian theology and practice, while shearing

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of the original become language" (Werner Hamacher, "Intensive Languages," *Modern Language Notes* 127 [2012]: 493).

<sup>52</sup> On the need to confront, rather than explain away, the problem of supersession, see Amy-Jill Levine, "Supersessionism: Admit and Address Rather than Debate or Deny," *Religions*, 13(2), 155 (Spring 2022): 1-12.

<sup>53</sup> Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness," 431-432. For his understanding of the plain sense of scripture, as opposed to an unchanging literal sense, Lindbeck credits both Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in Garrett Green (ed.) *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 59-78; and Hans W. Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, eds. G. Hungsinger and W. Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 117-152.



away their supersessionist baggage. We can glimpse the difficulty of such a task in each case. Regarding (1), there is Lindbeck's principled admission that "Old Testament" is the only "honest name" for the Christian selection, ordering, and use of the texts comprising the canon of Jewish scripture.<sup>54</sup> In the case of (2), we recognize the christological dilemma confronted by Radford-Ruether. Non- or anti-supersessionist Christians must confront the fact that the central tenet of their faith—the Incarnation—is, to put it lightly, in significant tension with the messianic tradition of their Jewish interlocutors. Moreover, in (3) and (4), where historical narrative is innervated by the unique powers of figuration, Radford-Ruether's objection to the "historicizing of the eschatological event" turns its fatal screw. Because the success of Lindbeck's argument turns on (4), the question of figural interpretation, I leave the other features aside for now, though I hasten to add that their 'non-supersessionist' fates are intimately bound up with the supposed capacity of figural interpretation to loose the bonds of supersession. Let us consider the claim of that capacity.

On Lindbeck's account, figural interpretation comprises a number of different literary modes: typology, tropology, anagogy, analogy, and metaphor.<sup>55</sup> It is notable that Lindbeck uses the terms 'figural interpretation' and 'figuration' more or less interchangeably, even though the latter term seems better suited to the description of literary production than to the interpretation of literature, be it scripture or otherwise. Indeed, there seems to be a subtle, yet profound, elision at play here, for it is not at all clear that figural interpretation can bear the historical and hermeneutical load assigned to it by its identification with figuration. There is,

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<sup>54</sup> Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness," 434. I happen to agree with Lindbeck on this point, though I take it as a tacit admission of the ultimate intractability of the problem of supersession.

<sup>55</sup> Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness," 432.

apparently, nothing that figuration cannot do with a given literary object. The specificity and singularity of the figural interpretation of scripture, as it is practiced by Christians, thus disappears into what appears as a generic mode of ‘scriptural reasoning.’<sup>56</sup>

Lindbeck is concerned, as is signaled in the title of his lecture (“The Gospel’s Uniqueness”), to establish the uniqueness of the gospel while maintaining a pluralistic attitude toward the scriptures and world views of other traditions. In order to do so, he must first show that the classic hermeneutic that reveals the gospel’s uniqueness is not itself unique. Lindbeck argues that figural interpretation is not limited to the hermeneutics of Jewish and Christian scripture, but is something like a universal hermeneutical mode, characteristic of premodern literatures, but tragically foreclosed to the modern mind. On the one hand, the claim of figuration is comprehensive and unlimited; it can, in principle, be applied to scripture in a way that illuminates “all worlds and all world views”:

In conjunction with the other features we have mentioned (i.e., canon, grammar, and narrative), figuration turns the Bible into a cross-referencing, inter-glossing semiotic system which can be used even now, some would claim, to assimilate by redescription all the worlds and world views which human beings construct in the course of history.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, figuration, as it is practiced in classic hermeneutics, is not formally unique

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<sup>56</sup> I discuss this specificity and singularity in more detail below (see §§8-11).

<sup>57</sup> Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness,” 432. Here, Lindbeck is content, even enthused, to misconstrue Auerbach’s theory of *figura* as the skeleton key to world history and its literatures *tout court*. We’ll see below (§14) that this very misunderstanding causes a number of literary theorists to treat Auerbach’s theory of *figura* with a good measure of historicist skepticism. In any case, it is worth noting that what the literary theorists regard with suspicion, the theologians celebrate and even instrumentalize in service of the gospel.

to Christianity.

Finally, figuration cannot be escaped when using a particular text to interpret other realities. Much as Jews and Christians read the universe through their scriptural canons, so the Greeks saw themselves through Homeric eyes [...] Similarly, mechanistic materialists of a now defunct kind interpreted all reality through the lens of Newton's physics.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, figural interpretation is a generic name for comparative or inter-textual reading. It is practiced, with more or less sophistication, in every premodern literary culture and, in an abortive manner, in modern contexts such as that of the Newtonian materialists. The historical specificity—the uniqueness—of figural interpretation is reappropriated by Lindbeck as a general principle of writing historical narrative. As we'll see in more detail below (Chapter 2), nothing could be further from Auerbach's intentions.

Lindbeck exploits a distinction between typological and figural interpretation. This allows Lindbeck to avail himself of the Greek rubric of prototype and ectype, thus avoiding the supersessionist figure-fulfillment rubric that obtains in Auerbach's construal of the Latin *figura* as historically real prophecy. At the same time, Lindbeck elides figural interpretation with what he calls 'figuration.' This causes the singularity (i.e., the christianity [sic]) of figural interpretation to be obscured by its generalization to inter-textual reading (i.e., 'figuration' broadly construed). As we'll see below, Auerbach's critical account of the theological payload of *figura* neutralizes both of these moves *avant la lettre*. The ecclesiological typology of Israel's expansion ultimately reduces to the supersessionist

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<sup>58</sup> Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness," 433.

grammar of fulfillment (Israel is incomplete: the Christians are missing) and is indelibly structured by the Christological experience (Israel's expansion is a historical event: the Incarnation).

In spite of the good intentions of its well-meaning critics, the problem of supersession is very likely intractable. This is so for at least two reasons. First, the proposed solutions to the problem inevitably avail themselves of the very source of the problem, namely, the figural interpretation of scripture, according to which "historically real prophecies" in the form of persons and events (figures, or types) in the Old Testament are fulfilled in historically real persons and events (fulfillments, or antitypes) in the New Testament. Second, if Christians were to resolve to finally abandon the basic, supersessionist gesture of figural interpretation, they would thereby risk the erosion of several of the most fundamental grounds of the Christian faith: scripture, prophecy, and history.

We might say that there are four 'options' regarding the problem of supersession. They may be divided into two categories: anti- and philo-Judaic. In the first, anti-Judaic category, we have the option for classical, 'hard' supersession, typified by the conceptual grammar of replacement; and the option for Marcionism, which jettisons Judaism and the OT *tout court*. In the second, philo-Judaic, category, we have Radford-Ruether's option to abandon christology, and—at the limit—to convert to Judaism; and the option for 'soft' supersession, typified by the conceptual grammars of fulfillment or expansion. In the Radford-Ruether (philo-Judaic) and Marcion (anti-Judaic) options, the Christian tradition risks the loss of its distinctive historical identity as the 'true spiritual Israel,' or the true locus of God's covenantal desire. In the Radford-Ruether option, Christians are ultimately Jews in denial; in the Marcion option, Christians jettison their Jewish antecedents and therefore cannot

recognize themselves as the ‘true Jews,’ for there remains nothing—or rather no one—to which the truth can oppose itself. In the ‘hard’ (anti-Judaic) and ‘soft’ (philo-Judaic) options for supersession, the Christian tradition safeguards the theological and historical warrants of its priority and superiority to Jews and Judaism, but it remains supersessionist. There is apparently no Christian solution to the problem of supersession, for the solutions are not Christian and the other available options, be they ‘soft’ supersession or ‘hard’ supersession, are—precisely—not solutions.

What I hope to show in this study is that the critique of supersession, such as it is, has yet to fully comprehend the logic or conceptual grammar of supersession, which is *both* anti- and philosemitic, *both* anti- and philo-Judaic. I aim to sort out the hate and the love, to show that love too often serves hate, and that the co-articulation of love and hate in the logic of supersession ultimately serves to constitute and legitimate the history of Christianity, even—and especially—where Christianity is called by other names, such as ‘Europe,’ ‘the West,’ ‘the civilized world,’ or ‘*Geist*.’ As we’ll see in the chapters that follow, Christian thought tends to be caught in an intractable reckoning with its Jewish antecedents, which—or rather, *who*—refuse to be converted into mere figures of their own overcoming.

In my view, the problem of supersession can be illuminated, and better understood, by way of the work of the twentieth-century German-Jewish philologist Erich Auerbach, especially his readings of Tertullian and Augustine (readings which, it turns out, are influenced by none other than Hegel). There is something of a ‘conceptual relay’ between the Latin Fathers and Hegel. Hegel repeats in his own way and in his own time what Tertullian and Augustine rehearsed in their own way and in their own time: they signal to each other across the centuries. But we have at our disposal another, older word for such a relay:

tradition. For good reason, we understand tradition as something that is passed on, or handed down. In fact, we receive tradition as something of a gift. Augustine, for instance, did not have me in mind when he penned his *Confessions*, nor did Paul think of me when he wrote to the churches at Corinth and Ephesus. Each of them had an audience, at once imagined and actual, but I am an inconceivable member of that audience. Thus their words arrive as a grace. They did not intend to speak to me, yet their words have been carried—and carry. They were delivered to me, though they were not addressed to me. Every living tradition demands of its members that they participate in its life and afterlife by means of a potent mixture of fidelity and betrayal, love and hate.<sup>59</sup> Indifference is the sole outlaw of tradition, for love and hate are on the hither side of thinking. On the other side, there is but indifference and death. A dead tradition may thus be defined as a tradition with readers but no critics.

The critic is one who, in handing on what is handed down, also hands back. In the context of the present work, it is not a matter of, for instance, saying that Hegel is Tertullian or that Tertullian is Hegel, or that one or the other is ‘in’ the other. It is rather a matter of giving Tertullian to Hegel and giving Hegel to Tertullian. It might be objected that this procedure runs the risk of anachronism, of reading back into Tertullian (and Augustine) a Hegelian logic, or a conceptual grammar, that does not belong to them or to their time. I propose, in fact, simply to take that risk. From my point of view, the anachronism *is the point*, because it points up those moments when tradition, where it gives itself, does not coincide with itself.<sup>60</sup> For me, Auerbach’s “Figura” is one of those moments.

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<sup>59</sup> On the notion of the life and afterlife of a text (and, by extension, a textual tradition), see Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 254; *Gesammelte Schriften* IV,1 (Suhrkamp 1972), 10.

<sup>60</sup> I discuss the methodological implications of such anachronism below (§5).

#### §4 Auerbach and Hegel

Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) was a German philologist of Romance literatures, comparativist, historian, and literary critic. He was born in Berlin, fought in World War I, studied at the University of Greifswald, and eventually landed a position at the University of Marburg. Auerbach described himself as a “Prussian and of the Jewish faith,”<sup>61</sup> though he was by all accounts a secular and assimilated Jew. His groundbreaking study of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (translated in 1961 as *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*), was published in Germany in 1929 to general acclaim.<sup>62</sup> In 1935, due to the rise of National Socialism in Germany, Auerbach was forced to flee from Marburg to Istanbul, where he remained in exile until 1947. During his time in Istanbul, he composed his masterpiece, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, published in German in 1946 (the English translation, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, appeared in 1953). After the war, Auerbach emigrated to the United States, landing eventually at Yale University, where he remained until his death in 1957.

Like many scholars, I was introduced to the history and practice of figural interpretation via Auerbach’s 1938 study of the semantic development and dispersion of the Latin word *figura*. Unfortunately, the significance of “Figura”—and, for that matter, of *figura*—in Auerbach’s thought has been widely misconstrued in multiple discourses. One of the aims of

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<sup>61</sup> Auerbach, cited in Porter, “Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology,” 115.

<sup>62</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001 [1929]); Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: NYRB, 2001 [1961]); cited hereafter as D, with the German original page ranges in square brackets where relevant.

this work is to rectify those mistakes and misunderstandings. Since the success of my argument depends on developing a proper understanding of the significance conferred by Auerbach upon the relation between figural interpretation and Christian theologies and philosophies of history, I linger with “Figura” and *figura* for two chapters, before turning to modern philosophical material, especially Hegel, in earnest. Chapter 2 (§§7-12) is devoted to an exegesis of the famous “Figura” essay; I address the later developments in *Mimesis* and some of the specific problems that attend Auerbach’s reception in Chapter 3 (§§13-19).

To briefly sum up those efforts, let us say that *figura* has been widely understood as the master trope of Auerbach’s historicist literary criticism, and thus as something of a skeleton key to history. I share with James I. Porter the contrary view: while *figura* is indeed an essential and priceless feature of Auerbach’s thought, it is neither master trope nor skeleton key; *figura* is rather the name for a pivotal moment—albeit a lengthy moment—in the development and self-expression of the historical consciousness of the West. Let us be clear about one thing: Auerbach never and nowhere argues that *figura*, or figural interpretation, or “figural causation” is a universally valid method or concept for understanding Western history.<sup>63</sup> He does, on the other hand, frequently argue (and this is where many of his inheritors seem to have gotten confused) that *figura* is a specifically and uniquely Christian concept that *lays claim* to just such a universal point of view on the history of the West. Auerbach’s position on the merits of this claim is sometimes ambiguous, and shifts throughout his career, but, if one is willing to read him carefully and honestly, it is not possible to conclude that he subscribes to the claim—nor to the concepts of time and history

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<sup>63</sup> Contra Hayden White, “Auerbach’s Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism,” in Seth Lerer (ed.) *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology: The Legacy of Erich Auerbach* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 124-141.



implied there—as such.

With these precautions in hand, let us briefly consider the significance of “Figura” for Auerbach’s work as a whole, and for our understanding of the relation between figural interpretation and the logic of supersession—as well as what, exactly, Hegel has to do with it.

Auerbach signals the pivotal importance of the “Figura” essay in the essay itself. Near the end of that text, Auerbach casts a backward glance to his work on Dante, published nearly a decade prior, in which he had discussed the way that the earthly, historical character of the various persons represented in the *Divine Comedy* are “held fast in all [their] intensity and so identified with their ultimate fate” (SE 110). He then offers the following commentary:

When I wrote this [i.e. the 1929 book on Dante], I lacked the details of the historical foundation of my claim, which is a claim that can already be found in Hegel and on which I based my interpretation of the *Divine Comedy*. It is more hinted at than directly recognized in the introductory chapters of that book. I now believe that I have found this foundation. It is precisely the figural interpretation of reality that dominated the worldview of the European Middle Ages, even as it also was engaged in an ongoing battle with purely spiritualistic and Neoplatonic tendencies. The idea was that earthly life was thoroughly real, with a reality of the kind that the Word entered into as flesh.<sup>64</sup> (SE 110)

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<sup>64</sup> This passage (including the extended portion quoted in in this footnote) condenses all, or nearly all, of the stakes of the argument of the present work. Auerbach continues: “But even in all of its reality, this life is only an *umbra* and *figura* of the actual, future, final, and authentic truth that, both unveiling and preserving the figure, contains true reality. In this way, every earthly event is to be considered as neither a final reality and an end unto itself, nor as one event in a series, whereby new events always emerge as the result of earlier events or of a combination of events. Rather, the earthly event is to be viewed, first, as standing in an immediate vertical relation to the divine order in which it is contained and which will itself, at some future point, be a reality that occurs. The earthly event is

Fifteen years later, in his “Epilegomena to *Mimesis*,” Auerbach reiterates that typology (i.e. figural interpretation) “is the real vital element of Bible poetry and hymns, or, even more, of almost the whole Christian literature of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, as also of Christian art, from the sarcophagi down to the end of the Middle Ages—and sometimes beyond” (M 569). In the same text of 1953, in reply to several critics of *Mimesis* who decried it as ‘*Undeutsch*,’ owing to the conspicuous absence of German literature from its otherwise panoptic survey of Western literature, Auerbach writes that

*Mimesis* attempts to comprehend Europe, but it is a German book not only on account of its language. Anyone who is a little familiar with the structure of the humanities in various countries sees that at once. It arose from the themes and methods of German history and philology; it would have been conceivable in no other tradition than in that of German romanticism and Hegel. (M 571)

There are at least two threads that run through Auerbach’s thought. From his earliest works in the twenties, through his exile in Istanbul of the thirties and forties, all the way to his final works in the fifties, Auerbach struggled to condense and refine his understanding of Western history and literature under the rubric of realism (*Realismus*), especially in relation to the historical emergence of figural interpretation in late antiquity, and he did so with frequent (albeit not constant) reference to Hegel. *Figura* and Hegel are two red threads in the tapestry of Auerbach’s *oeuvre*. The present work is dedicated, in part, to discerning their fate.<sup>65</sup>

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thus a historically real prophecy, or *figura*, of a part of a divine reality that will occur in the future and that will at that point be perfected in all its immediacy. Yet this reality is not only in the future. Rather, it is always present in the sight of God and in the Beyond. The revealed and true reality is always and eternally present there, beyond time” (SE 110).

<sup>65</sup> I am not the first to thematize the links between Auerbach and Hegel. See, e.g., Avihu Zakai,

G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) was born in Stuttgart, in the German duchy of Württemberg, a Protestant enclave in the rapidly decaying Holy Roman Empire.<sup>66</sup> In 1784, he was sent to the *Gymnasium Illustre* (i.e., secondary school) in Württemberg, where he was exposed to the ideas of the Enlightenment, including those of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In 1788, he enrolled as a seminarian at Tübingen University, apparently with the intent of becoming a theologian. At Tübingen, Hegel befriended Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854). Hölderlin, for his part, would go on to become one of the greatest German poets; Schelling would go on to become (along with Hegel) a leading figure in the philosophical movement known as German Idealism.<sup>67</sup> The trio were engrossed by the infamous *Pantheismusstreit*, which had swept through the German intellectual scene, and—though Hegel was initially less enthused—began to study Kant. They bonded over their shared distaste for the sad, stifling intellectual atmosphere of the Tübingen seminary. Pinkard reports that, in 1789, they cheered the French Revolution together, with the hope that the revolution would make its way to Germany.<sup>68</sup> Hegel passed the required religious examination in 1793, but when he left Tübingen, he did not leave as a theologian.

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“Constructing and Representing Reality: Hegel and the Making of Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*,” *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 106-133; Matthias Bormuth, “Meaning in History—A Comparison Between the Works of Karl Löwith and Erich Auerbach,” *Religions* 3 (2012): 151-162; Luiz Costa-Lima, “Auerbach and Literary History,” in Seth Lerer, ed., *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 50- 60. Nonetheless, to my knowledge there is no lengthy study devoted to the pair, much less to their importance for conceiving and understanding the logic of supersession.

<sup>66</sup> I rely here on Pinkard’s excellent biography. See Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>67</sup> Hegel and Schelling would, many years later, become competitors for philosophical influence. Schelling apparently became convinced that Hegel’s success was due to the fact that Hegel had stolen and bastardized his ideas. See Pinkard, *Hegel*, 610-111.

<sup>68</sup> Pinkard, *Hegel*, 23.

Hegel's career, in the waning years of the eighteenth century, led him to first to Berne and then to Frankfurt (both times as a *Hofmeister*, or private tutor). In 1801, and at Schelling's invitation, he departed to Jena, where he began his career as an academic. He left Jena and stopped over in Bamberg in 1807, before accepting a rectorship at the *Gymnasium* in Nuremberg in 1808. After Nuremberg, he held the position of university professor in Heidelberg for two years (1816-1817), before making his final move to Berlin in 1818, where he remained—writing and lecturing on a stunning range of philosophical topics—until his death in 1831. Hegel published only four books during his lifetime: *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*) in 1807, the first edition of *Die Wissenschaft der Logik* (*The Science of Logic*) over the course of 1812-1816, the first edition of the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (*Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*) in 1817, and *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*) in 1820. In the two centuries since his death, numerous lectures, essays, and drafts have been assembled and published in many languages, meaning that the thousands of pages that Hegel himself delivered to the public are now augmented by many, many thousands more. In the past decade alone, several of Hegel's most important texts have appeared again in new editions and translations. It is as if Hegel cannot but be reborn every generation or so, both in his own words and in the prodigious secondary literatures that play midwife to his various renaissances.

Frederick Beiser remarks that the 'puzzling Hegel renaissance' in the late twentieth century (specifically, in Anglophone philosophy) was due, in part, to political and social upheaval of the 1960s, and to the growth of interest in Marxism that accompanied those

movements. It became necessary to study Hegel in order to understand Marx.<sup>69</sup> Beiser notes, wryly, that interest in Hegel has outlived the Marxist impulse that gave rise to it in the first place.<sup>70</sup> He then points to Charles Taylor's 1975 *Hegel*—"the apex of the Anglophone Hegel revival"—which treated its subject systematically, highlighting the metaphysical core of Hegel's thought: the concept of self-positing spirit.<sup>71</sup> Yet the success of Taylor's book makes the puzzle of the Hegel renaissance more puzzling still. For Anglophone philosophy—on both sides of the 'pond'—has tended, in the twentieth century, to eschew metaphysics (to say nothing of the theological and religious apparatus in which that metaphysics obtains) in favor of positivist theories of language and social being. Thus, there arose several non-metaphysical approaches to Hegel's thought in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>72</sup> Yet, again, the puzzle remains puzzling, since such non-metaphysical approaches run the risk of

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<sup>69</sup> Frederick C. Beiser, "Introduction: The Puzzling Hegel Renaissance," in Frederick C. Beiser (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>70</sup> One could also chart the decoupling of Hegel and Marxism in terms of the decline of the influence of Kojève's lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Gallimard, 1947). On the other hand, Hegel never really disappeared from certain quarters of Marxist theory, such as the Frankfurt School and their inheritors.

<sup>71</sup> Beiser, "Introduction," 2. And see Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 76-124, and *passim*.

<sup>72</sup> Beiser, "Introduction," 4. Beiser enumerates three basic trajectories of the non-metaphysical approach. First, Klaus Hartmann claims that Hegel's philosophy aims to develop a system of categories with which to interpret the world; all talk of, say, the essence of God, in Hegel is metaphor; see Klaus Hartmann, "Hegel: A Non-Metaphysical View," in Alasdair MacIntyre, ed., *Hegel* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 101-124. Second, Robert B. Pippin situates Hegel in the Kantian tradition, which seeks to articulate the necessary conditions for possible experience (i.e. self-consciousness); see Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Finally, Robert B. Brandom claims that the central idea of Hegel's thought is an attempt to discover and develop the notion of mutual recognition as the fundamental normative dimension of human life; see Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002); and, more recently, Robert B. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2019).

reading Hegel in terms decidedly other than his own.<sup>73</sup> Beiser remarks elsewhere that the debate over metaphysical and non-metaphysical readings of Hegel retreads, in many ways, the ‘original’ debate over the interpretation of Hegel’s thought in the nineteenth century, when left-wing Hegelians defended Hegel as a closeted atheist, with only nominal ties to Christianity, and right-wing Hegelians defended Hegel as an enterprising defender of a rational Christian faith—specifically, Lutheranism.<sup>74</sup>

That said, I should make clear straightaway that the Hegel taken up in this dissertation is a distinctively theological Hegel, though this is not because I wish to enter the debate between the metaphysical and non-metaphysical parties to the reception of Hegel’s thought (much less to resolve it). It seems to me that those who emphasize the religious and theological dimensions in Hegel are correct that one cannot comprehend Hegel’s system without taking into account the privileged place occupied by religion in his mature thought. On the other hand, it seems equally true that one cannot comprehend Hegel’s system without

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<sup>73</sup> Beiser: “Yet, despite their success, these interpretations have not been able to suppress a nagging doubt: Are we interested in Hegel only because we have made him reflect *our* interests? Do we find him acceptable now only because we have re-created him in our image? If that is so, it leaves us with an even more troubling question: Is the Hegel revival perhaps a mistake? Are we interested in Hegel only because we have a false image of him?” (*The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth Century Philosophy*, 5)?

<sup>74</sup> Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 124-125. Hegel’s Lutheranism is the subject of countless studies. Compare Lawrence S. Stepelvich, “Hegel and the Lutheran Eucharist,” *Heythrop Journal*, XXVIII (1986): 262-274, for an account of Hegel’s declarations of Lutheran faith. Stepelvich concludes, as I do, that Hegel intended that his system supersede Lutheranism. Nevertheless—and this is in a way the entire point of my inquiry here—the meaning of such a supersession of Lutheranism needs to be disentangled from rubrics of ‘replacement’ and exclusion. As we’ll see below, in Chapter 5, Hegel is perhaps most Christian precisely where he seems to be the least Christian, as having superseded Christianity. On Hegel’s debts to Luther, see also James E. Yerkes, *The Christology of Hegel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983). See also Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: from Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969), 268, where Barth wonders why Hegel did not become for Protestantism what St. Thomas Aquinas was for Roman Catholicism.

taking into account the fact that, for Hegel, religion, and religions—indeed, even the Christian religion—are ultimately comprehended (or: overcome, fulfilled, completed, consummated) by the speculative truth of the absolute Idea. The question I wish to raise is the following: to what extent Hegel’s claims regarding the rational comprehension of religion can themselves be comprehended under the specific rubric of supersession?<sup>75</sup> To my knowledge, the existing literature has yet to properly investigate the role played by the logic of supersession as it appears in Hegel, especially the import of his ambivalent, but nevertheless decisive, inheritance of the problems posed by figural interpretation in the Latin tradition.<sup>76</sup> I undertake this study, in part, because I am convinced that a careful reading of

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<sup>75</sup> I am by no means the first to thematize this question, though to my knowledge there exists no study devoted to developing the link between figural and interpretation and the logic of supersession—and, specifically, the importance of reading Auerbach with and against Hegel—in all its details. See, e.g., W. Ezekiel Goggin, “Transcendental Frustration: A Critical Re-Evaluation of the Hegelian Legacy for Philosophy of Religion,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 382-399. “Christianity paints a picture of the relation of the finite and infinite, for Hegel. Philosophy takes this picture seriously, supposedly on its own terms, in order to explain what it means in purely logical terms. Philosophy thus comprehends religion. The supersessionist dynamic of Christianity’s relationship to Judaism thus becomes the model of Hegel’s view of the relationship of philosophy to religion and, by extension, the basic sense of historical time as actualization and fulfillment—the form of Spirit’s self-mediation and recuperation of its past “shapes” in various, less adequately reflexive forms” (ibid., 384).

<sup>76</sup> There have been several initial forays in this direction. Goggin has noted the relation between figural interpretation and supersession in relation to Hegel’s speculative rendering of the Christian theological concept of *kenosis*: “Hegel’s interpretation of Christian kenosis as dialectical negativity constitutes the application of figural interpretation to itself; the supersessionist impulse is the theological adumbration of the teleological construction of spiritual forms in Hegelian history” (Goggin, “Transcendental Frustration,” 393). See also W. Ezekiel Goggin, “Hegel’s Sacrificial Imagination” (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2019), for an attempt to formulate a ‘non-figural’ (and thus, presumably, non-supersessionist) reading of Hegel, by way of Georges Bataille and Jacques Derrida. Also worthy of note are Angelica Nuzzo, *Memory, History, and Justice in Hegel* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012) and Paolo Diego Bubbio, *God and the Self in Hegel: Beyond Subjectivism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017). Nuzzo (p.25) appears to have been the first to explicitly suggest the importance of Auerbach’s “Figura” when thinking about the link between figural interpretation and the logic supersession in Hegel. Even more interesting is her speculation, in the same passage, that Luther’s translation of Tertullian’s *figura* as *gestallt* [sic] might prove to be a decisive interpretative key for understanding the “structural difference between *Gestalt* and *Moment*” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I take up these questions in more detail in Chapter 5.

Hegel can aid our understanding of Auerbach, and that a careful reading of Auerbach (who, though influenced by Hegel, is no Hegelian) can aid our understanding of the logic of supersession.

Admittedly, the term ‘supersession’ says much the same that is said by the constellation of terms cited just above (viz. comprehension, overcoming, fulfillment...). The aim of this work is to show that an investigation of supersession can shed light on that constellation by illuminating what is unsaid in them, namely their logic or conceptual grammar. In this regard, a word on method is in order.

#### §5 On Method

In recent decades, discussions of theory and method in the academic study of religion have been dominated by the motif of genealogy.<sup>77</sup> The word is typically used by scholars of religion to describe a critical mode of inquiry concerning the history and structure of religions, and religious phenomena broadly construed (including, as in the work of Talal Asad and his students, categories such as ‘the secular’ and ‘secularism’). The aim of such genealogies is to demonstrate the contingency of historical events, discourses, disputes, revolutions, reactions, behaviors, beliefs, unbeliefs, religions, states, sexualities, etc. In short, genealogy eschews meta-narratives and universals in order to show how structures of power

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<sup>77</sup> The literature is vast, but for several examples that represent different trajectories in the genealogical mode, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Adam Kotsko, *The Prince of This World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); and, recently, and in an explicitly Christian theological register, John Milbank, “Genealogies of Truth: Theology, Philosophy, History,” *Modern Theology* (special issue, 2023), URL: <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1111/moth.12830>.



are organized locally and contingently.<sup>78</sup>

The proximate source of the genealogical motif is the work of Michel Foucault. However, as is evident from Foucault's methodological essay on the subject, the true point of 'origin' for the genealogical mode of critique is Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>79</sup> Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" is often taken to mark a turning point in his thought, in which he shifts from archaeology (a search for origins) to genealogy (a search for lines of descent and conditions of genesis). Indeed, Foucault avers that genealogy "opposes itself to the search for 'origins,'" which one can certainly read as a self-conscious repudiation of archaeology.<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless, it is not clear that the shift in Foucault's terminology corresponds to a genuine shift in his method, so much as it signals a more

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<sup>78</sup> See, e.g., Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," trans. Robert Hurley, in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1985, Volume Two: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, (New York: The New Press, 1998), 374: "Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of oblivion; its task is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things which continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being lies not at the root of that we know and what we are but the exteriority of accidents."

<sup>79</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kauffman and RJ Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke, Erste Abtheilung, Band VII: Jenseits von Gut und Böse, Zur Genealogie der Moral* (Alfred Kröner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1921).

<sup>80</sup> Foucault writes: "Genealogy does not oppose itself to history as the lofty and profound gaze of the philosopher might compare to the molelike perspective of the scholar; on the contrary, it rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleological. It opposes itself to the search for 'origins'" (Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 370). And just a few pages later: "The genealogist needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin, somewhat in the manner of the pious philosopher who needs a doctor to exorcise the shadow of his soul. He must be able to recognize the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats—the basis of all beginnings, atavisms, and heredities" (ibid., 373).

precise articulation of Foucault's distrust (which is increasingly Nietzschean, yet detectable in his earliest writings) of the very notion of an 'origin,' the search for which can only proceed by way of a regression to meta-histories and myths. That is to say, archaeology was never, for Foucault, a matter of 'origins' in the usual, and recently much-maligned, sense of the word. It was rather a transcendental inquiry into the conditions of possibility of specific forms of knowledge. The difference between archaeology and genealogy is not a question of a radical shift from one method to another, but of a clarification of Foucault's debt to Kant.<sup>81</sup>

In his methodological discussion of philosophical archaeology, Sean Capener notes that what interests Foucault

is not a demonstration of the bare fact that an 'episteme,' or discourse formation is contingent; rather what interests him from an archaeological perspective is the question of what necessitates break, rupture, and discontinuity. For Foucault, then, the question to which archaeology is offered as an answer is in many respects the same one opened by Kant: in response to what demand—according to what necessity—does an idea take its specific form?<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Perhaps the 'least bad' way to understand Foucault's relation to Kant is to characterize his thought in terms of what Deleuze calls "transcendental empiricism." At first glance, the term is somewhat baffling, due to its deliberate and apparently oxymoronic joining of registers that Kant insists are necessarily, and radically, distinct. Yet the transcendental empiricist, in Deleuze's telling, remains minimally Kantian in that such an empiricist inquires into the conditions of possibility of experience, but specifies that these conditions be the conditions of possibility of *real* experience, rather than, as in Kant, 'any possible experience.' See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), especially Chapter 3, "The Image of Thought," pp. 129-167; and see Deleuze's comments about a "neo-Kantianism unique to Foucault," in Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 60-61.

<sup>82</sup> Sean Capener, "The Time That Belongs to God: The Christian Prohibition on Usury in the 12th-13th Centuries and the Making of the Subject of Debt" (PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2021), 26. And see Immanuel Kant, "'What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in

For Kant, philosophical archaeology (*philosophische Archäologie*) is not a matter of explaining the historical contingency of the passage from one idea to another, since such an explanation could only proceed empirically and by comparison, but is rather a matter of “unearthing a relation to something, some *archē*—the *a priori*—that necessitates the different forms taken by thought at each ‘stage’ in the history of philosophy.”<sup>83</sup> As is obvious from Foucault’s use of the apparently oxymoronic term ‘historical *a priori*,’ he must, from the outset, depart from Kant’s philosophical protocol, which rigorously divides the *a priori* from empirical data such as historical events or discourses, and thus eschews any inquiry into the progress that might be discovered in the passage from one discourse to the other. For Kant, archaeology construed as a “philosophical history of philosophy” is possible only in the rational register of metaphysics; it is limited by the *a priori* form of human reason.<sup>84</sup>

Foucault, for his part, extends the ambit of archaeological inquiry to virtually every precinct of human knowledge and experience. Vis-à-vis Kant, this is certainly an overreach, but the

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Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?,” in Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy After 1781*, eds. Henry Allison and Peter Heath (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For a related approach, see Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25: “The secular, I argue, is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor simply a break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred). I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life. To appreciate this *it is not enough to show that what appears to be necessary is really contingent*—that in certain respects ‘the secular’ overlaps with ‘the religious.’ *It is a matter of showing how contingencies relate to changes in the grammar of concepts*—that is, how changes in concepts articulate changes in practices” (my emphases). Asad credits Wittgenstein for the notion of a ‘grammar of concepts,’ or ‘conceptual grammar.’ I return to the notion of a conceptual grammar below.

<sup>83</sup> Kant, “What Real Progress,” 417; cf. Capener, “The Time That Belongs to God,” 25.

<sup>84</sup> Kant, “What Real Progress,” 353: “a philosophical history of philosophy is itself possible, not historically or empirically, but rationally, i.e. *a priori*. For although it establishes facts of reason, it does not borrow them from historical narrative but draws them from the nature of human reason, as philosophical archaeology.”

motive is the same: the search for an *archē*, or that which ‘commands’ or ‘rules’ a given historico-empirical discourse. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, for instance, is not a quest for the original zero-point of human knowledge, nor even for an account of the historical progress of that knowledge; it is rather an investigation of the specific conditions of possibility (the *archē*, or the ‘historical *a priori*’) of knowledge in a given historical epoch.<sup>85</sup>

The shift from archaeology to genealogy should be understood as a development of archaeology, not its repudiation. Doubtless, Foucault the genealogist is further from Kant than was Foucault the archaeologist. But the word ‘further’ indicates less a measure of distance than the intensive magnitude of a methodological specification, of a shift in the manner of description. In this regard, Foucault’s reading of Nietzsche is instructive.

Foucault notes that Nietzsche frequently equivocates regarding the term ‘origin.’ The word *Ursprung*, which designates the beginning of something, is deployed by Nietzsche at times neutrally and at other times as an object of contempt. *Ursprung* appears, in various texts, amid a constellation of related terms: *Herkunft* (descent, stock, extraction), *Abkunft* (descent), *Geburt* (birth), *Anfang* (beginning), and *Entstehung* (emergence), all of which can be readily rendered as ‘origin.’<sup>86</sup> What Foucault finds so decisive about *On the Genealogy of*

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<sup>85</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan-Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002): “Genesis, continuity, totalization: these are the great themes of the history of ideas, and that by which it is attached to a certain, now traditional, form of historical analysis. ... But archaeological description is precisely such an abandonment of the history of ideas, a systematic rejection of its postulates and procedures, an attempt to practice a quite different history of what men have said” (154); “[Archaeology] does not try to repeat what has been said by reaching it in its very identity. It does not claim to efface itself in the ambiguous modesty of a reading that would bring back, in all its purity, the distant, precarious, almost effaced light of the origin. It is nothing more than a rewriting: that is, in the preserved form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written. *It is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object*” (156, my emphasis).

<sup>86</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 370-371.

*Morals* is the fact that Nietzsche explicitly abandons the search for origins (in this case, the *Ursprung* of evil, which he reports he had, as a child, attributed to God) in favor of what Foucault characterizes as an investigation of the lines of descent (*Herkunft*) and genetic conditions of emergence (*Entstehung*) of morality in human thought.<sup>87</sup> In Foucault's reading of Nietzsche, the search for origins is flawed because

it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities; because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. This search is directed to 'that which was already there,' the 'very same' of an image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature, and it necessitates the removal of every mask to ultimately disclose an original identity.<sup>88</sup>

By contrast, for the genealogist there are only masks behind the masks, and—as Deleuze once put it—still more masks behind those masks.<sup>89</sup> Foucault continues:

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<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 17; *Werke VII*, 290: "Fortunately I learned from an early age to separate theological prejudice from moral prejudice and ceased to look for the origins of evil *behind* the world [*und suchte nicht mehr den Ursprung des Bösen hinter der Welt*]. A certain amount of historical and philological schooling, together with an inborn fastidiousness of taste in respect to psychological questions in general, soon transformed my problem into another one: under what conditions [*unter welchen Bedingungen*] did man devise these value judgments good and evil? *and what value do they themselves possess?*" Emphasis in original.

<sup>88</sup> Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 371.

<sup>89</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 106: "Behind the masks, therefore, are further masks, and even the most hidden is still a hiding place, and so on to infinity. The only illusion is that of unmasking something or someone." Cf. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 386: "[This genealogical] use of history is the systematic dissociation of our identity. For this rather weak identity, which we attempt to support and to unify under a mask, is in itself only a parody: it is plural; countless souls dispute its possession; numerous systems intersect and dominate one another." Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): "Everything profound loves masks; the most profound things go so far as to hate images and likenesses...Every profound spirit needs a mask..." (38-39); "Another mask! A second mask!"

However, if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret but the secret that they have no essence, or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms. [...] What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.<sup>90</sup>

It is tempting to conclude that the genealogical method renders irrelevant any and all talk of the *archē*, of the origin. How else are we to read Foucault’s impassioned portrait of the genealogist, according to which “the genealogist needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin [*pour conjurer la chimère de l’origine*], somewhat in the manner of the pious philosopher who needs a doctor to exorcise the shadow of his soul”?<sup>91</sup>

In his methodological essay on philosophical archaeology, Giorgio Agamben remarks that while genealogy, as theorized by Foucault, does indeed involve a radical revolt against the idea of a self-identical, or essential, origin to which the historian can regress, this does not mean that the genealogist is uninterested in beginnings.<sup>92</sup> Referring to the Foucault passage cited just above, Agamben notes that

the French term *conjurere*—translated here as dispel [*scongiurare*]—encompasses two

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(*ibid.*, 169); and the passage that inspired Deleuze, “Every philosophy *conceals* a philosophy too: every opinion is also a hiding place, every word is also a mask” (*ibid.*, 173).

<sup>90</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 371-372.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 373. For Foucault’s French text, see Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire,” in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971), 150.

<sup>92</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca D’Isanto with Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 83.

opposite meanings: ‘to evoke’ and ‘to expel.’ Or perhaps these two meanings are not opposites, for dispelling something—a specter, a demon, a danger—first requires conjuring it.<sup>93</sup>

There is something irreducibly *constructive* about genealogy and archaeology. One must conjure or construct an *archē* before, for instance, refuting or affirming it. Nothing is simply and unambiguously given as an origin, principle, rule, or command. That said, some precautions are necessary.

First, to conjure or construct an *archē* is not to summon it out of thin air, but to attune oneself to the expressions (or, as Auerbach says, the symptoms) of a text and its historical context. Such an attunement—call it the archaeological mood—discloses the archaeologist’s ambition: not to solve the problem of a writer (or to absolve the writer), but to seek the problem as such. Doubtless, one could avail oneself of the language of *reconstruction*, and thereby dodge a good deal of methodological quibbling, but an *archē* cannot be reconstructed in the same way as can, say, the details of an argument. This is because archaeology is pre-eminently concerned with the demands to which a text or its author is responding, and with the rule or principle (the *archē*) that makes the problem legible and, thus, makes a response possible. Simply by virtue of having responded in the presence of the archaeologist (who has the text ready to hand), the author testifies to the force of the problem that motivates him. The point is not to adopt the mindset of an ancient author (say, Tertullian) in order to lay claim to his ideas. It is rather a matter of ‘regressing’ to the problem itself, whose objectivity

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<sup>93</sup> Agamben, *The Signature of all Things*, 83. For Agamben’s Italian text, see Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura rerum: Sul metodo* (Bollati Boringhieri, 2008), 85.

allows its contours to be established, its anxieties surfaced, its demands heard.<sup>94</sup>

Secondly, and for the same reasons, it should be emphasized that such a work of archaeological construction need not lend itself to projects of *ressourcement*. Ancient or medieval problems (or, for that matter, modern ones) cannot be “renewed at the asking,”<sup>95</sup> and one seeks in vain for ancient solutions to modern problems, since—quite apart from the bare fact that the problems have changed—the solutions of antiquity were themselves problems. As Slavoj Žižek likes to put it, “the secrets of the ancient Egyptians were also secrets for the Egyptians themselves.”<sup>96</sup> Finally, genealogical critique aims neither always nor necessarily to purify or purge the bad blood it finds in the circulatory systems of history.<sup>97</sup> Sometimes it is enough to show that blood has been spilt. In the case of this

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<sup>94</sup> Capener, “The Time That Belongs to God,” 32: “The power of philosophical archaeology as a mode of investigation depends precisely on the persistence and iterability—which is not to say the transhistorical stability—of *problems*. Philosophical archaeology does not trace an idea back to its origin; instead, it reveals the essentially hallucinatory character of an *archē* or origin by giving voice to the problematic that the idea invokes, and that it tends to *retroject* into the position of an origin.” See also Chapter 4 of *Difference and Repetition* (68-221) for Deleuze’s argument regarding the objectivity of problems, including his invocation (ibid., 201) of Heidegger’s analyses of the problematical character of thinking and questioning. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. J.S. Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 211-212; and Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York and London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 159 and *passim*.

<sup>95</sup> Jacob Taubes, *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Toward a Critique of Historical Reason*, eds. Charlotte Elisheva Fontobert and Amir Engel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 176.

<sup>96</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2006), 234. Žižek credits Hegel for this idea. The likely source is G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume 1*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975): “But the Egyptian symbols, as we saw at the very beginning, contain implicitly much, explicitly nothing. There are works undertaken with the attempt to make them clear to themselves, yet they do not get beyond the struggle after what is absolutely evident. In this sense we regard the Egyptian works of art as containing riddles, the right solution of which is in part unattained not only by us, but generally by those who posed these riddles to themselves” (360).

<sup>97</sup> See Joseph Blankholm, “Genealogy’s Bad Blood,” *Political Theology Network*, Symposium: Genealogy in the Present, April 23, 2020, URL: <https://politicaltheology.com/genealogys-bad-blood/> (accessed 8/29/23).



dissertation, my intent is neither to recover, nor to recommend, a lost or forgotten form of Christianity that could be thought or practiced apart from the logic of supersession, nor to offer a ‘constructive’ proposal for how Christianity could, today or tomorrow, be liberated from that logic.<sup>98</sup> I only want to give an account of the problem itself (viz. the tensions and contradictions that attend the constitution of Christianity), and to show that the ostensible solution (viz. the logic of supersession) remains an intractable—but not, in the end, unthinkable—problem.

It is worth noting that Agamben’s gesture in the passage above, where the equivocation and contradiction of the word *conjurer* is emphasized, is what we might call a signature of his philosophical method. Its most celebrated instance is, of course, the Latin *sacer*, which means both ‘sacred’ and ‘damned.’<sup>99</sup> In *Creation and Anarchy*, Agamben signals the importance of such equivocal, even contradictory words: “I believe that this twofold movement of semantic dissemination and reunification is consubstantial with our languages and that only by means of this contradictory gesture can a word realize its meaning.”<sup>100</sup> There

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<sup>98</sup> That is not to say that a ‘non-supersessionist Christianity’ is impossible, only that one should be careful what one wishes for. See my discussion of Marcionism (§7), as well as my criticisms (§3) of the attempt by post-liberal theologians to articulate a Christian faith that would not be supersessionist. In my view, the post-liberal theological project is laudable inasmuch as it recognizes the very real dangers (e.g. antisemitic violence) of the logic of supersession, but ultimately ends in failure, since it seeks to exit supersession by way of the very thing that makes supersession what it is: narrativity and figuration. One does not solve a problem by redoubling it, unless the goal is to settle for an ethical gesture, resulting in something like ‘supersession with a human face.’

<sup>99</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>100</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 51-52. Agamben strikes a very Hegelian note here; cf. GW 21.94-95: “The two definitions of ‘to sublata’ can be cited as two dictionary *meanings* of the word. But it must strike one as remarkable that a language has come to use one and the same word for two opposite meanings. For speculative thought it is gratifying to find words that have in themselves a speculative meaning.”

are other such terms. An oath (Greek: *horkos*) is a solemn promise, but also an obscenity or a curse.<sup>101</sup> The Latin *officium* is a duty, but also an action or a ‘bringing-into-effect.’<sup>102</sup> It happens that the equivocal term under consideration in *Creation and Anarchy* is none other than *archē*. “The Greek *archē*,” writes Agamben, “has two meanings: it means both ‘origin, principle,’ and ‘command, order.’ Thus the verb *archō* means ‘to begin, to be prior to something,’ but also means ‘to command, to be the leader.’”<sup>103</sup> In this case, the two meanings are not so dissimilar, but it is this very affinity (between ordinality and orders, origin and command) that attracts Agamben’s attention. The coincidence of the origin and the command are fundamental to the Western theological tradition, as is evidenced by the *incipit* of the early rabbinical Greek translation of the book of Genesis (in which God begins, *en archē*, by commanding) and the self-consciously mimetic *en archē* of the prologue to the Gospel of John. It is possible that the affinity that we perceive—more or less naturally—between origin and command is not, after all, a testament to an originary self-identity, but rather the result of the lasting hegemony of an *archē*, according to which, in the history of the West, to begin is to command.

Agamben’s insistence on the concept of origin is apparently orthogonal to Foucault’s denunciations—under the banner of genealogy—of the same. In fact, Agamben seems at times to contradict himself, confusing genealogy with archaeology, as when he defines archaeology as “that practice which in any historical investigation has not to do with origins

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<sup>101</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>102</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>103</sup> Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 51.

but with the moment of a phenomenon's arising."<sup>104</sup> As we've just seen, this is exactly the way that Foucault defines genealogy. I believe that the confusion can be avoided by adopting the approach I've laid out above, according to which genealogy—far from opposing itself to archaeology—is a methodological specification and intensification of philosophical archaeology. Genealogy is even, in some sense, at the service of archaeology, and in this sense, one need not wonder at the prudence of preserving, even privileging, the term *archē* as a term of art.

Genealogy can thus be defined as the attempt to (1) describe the genesis of *an archē*, i.e., to seek the (genetic) conditions of possibility of the (archaic) conditions of thought and discourse; and (2) to catalogue the discontinuous and contingent transmission of *archai* in 'actual,' 'effective history.'<sup>105</sup> This, however, does not mean that genealogy is the search for the *archē* of *archē*, the origin of origin. Such a hopeless formulation would only lead us down the lonely road of an infinite regress, and would culminate in the sort of 'essentialism' that is, rightly, and virtually everywhere, denounced by scholars and philosophers of religion. We should rather say that the genetic conditions of an *archē* are themselves anarchic. This does not mean that they are indeterminable. On the contrary, they are essentially determinable, essentially problematic: they demand investigation and interpretation. To this demand corresponds a certain will to interpretation (*ein bestimmter Interpretationswille*),

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<sup>104</sup> Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 89. Elsewhere, Agamben defines archaeology in terms much more amenable to the Foucauldian paradigm I've been trying to articulate: "One can define philosophical archaeology as the attempt to bring to light the various historical *a priori*s that condition the history of humanity and define its epochs." See Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 112.

<sup>105</sup> Nietzsche's term, in the preface to *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, is *wirklichen Historie*. See Nietzsche, *Werke VII*, 295.

governed by a logic or an *a priori*—viz. an *archē*.<sup>106</sup> Finally, in keeping with Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s shared refusal of teleological explanation, these conditions do not, in principle, resemble that which is conditioned.<sup>107</sup> Absent a ‘will to interpretation,’ the Black Death does not resemble the *Ordinance of Laborers*; the barricades of Paris do not resemble the *Déclaration des droits de l’Homme et du citoyen*; the Old Testament does not—one should insist on this—resemble the New.

A few terminological clarifications are in order. I have assembled in the foregoing a number of terms under the rubric of philosophical archaeology, namely, ‘logic (of supersession),’ ‘conceptual grammar,’ ‘will to interpretation,’ ‘historical *a priori*,’ ‘*archē*.’ It

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<sup>106</sup> The expression, “a certain will to interpretation [*ein bestimmter Interpretationswille*],” is Auerbach’s (SE 79-80 [65]). Unfortunately, Newman’s translation systematically effaces the term ‘will [*Wille*]’ in the compound word, and thus the Nietzschean (and, *avant la lettre*, Foucauldian) overtones of Auerbach’s diction. Newman renders the expression (here I take two examples in near proximity to one another) as “a *commitment to a certain kind of interpretation*” (SE 79-80), or “the *desire to engage in this interpretation*” (SE 80). The latter instance is also notable for the fact that Auerbach is signaling his impending inquiry into the emergence or arising (*Entstehung*) of the *Interpretationswille* in question, namely, figural interpretation. Newman’s occlusion of *Wille* can, perhaps, be defended on the grounds that the term ‘will’ might lend itself to confusion by leading the reader to conclude that the interpretative framework in question (i.e. *figura*) is a matter of an individual will, centered in a willing subject, who decides willy-nilly to pursue one hermeneutical mode or another. But if *Interpretationswille* is read according to the weight of its Nietzschean ballast, such confusion is avoided, since the *subject* who knows and interprets is precisely what—in Foucault’s words—is “sacrificed” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History, 387) by the genealogist’s subtle knife: “knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting” (ibid., 380). Manheim’s earlier English translation of “Figura” also occludes will/*Wille* in its rendering of *Interpretationswille*. Cf. Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” trans. Ralph Manheim, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 29, 30. I note in passing that Porter rightly restores will/*Wille* to the passage in his analysis of Auerbach, though he seems to attribute—wrongly, in my view—to the *Wille* in question a great deal more autonomy than is warranted. See Porter, “Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach’s Theory of Figura,” 90, 103.

<sup>107</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 376: *Entstehung* designates *emergence*, the moment of arising. It stands as the principle and the singular law of an apparition. As it is wrong to search for descent in an uninterrupted continuity, we should avoid accounting for emergence by appeal to its final term; the eye was not always intended for contemplation, and punishment has had other purposes than setting an example.” See also Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 222-261; and Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 12-22.

is worth pausing to clarify their usage in the work that follows. On the one hand, each of these terms resounds in a semantic register of its own. ‘Logic’ sounds in the key of cognition and thought (but also, if we put any faith in etymology, in speech and language); ‘will to interpretation’ in a chord that touches both subjectivity and hermeneutics; ‘historical *a priori*’ has both a Kantian and a post-structuralist pitch; ‘*archē*’ sounds simply archaic, even Greek. Depending on the context, I may avail myself of one or the other terms to express myself, and on some occasions may resort to hendiadys, or the correlative *or*. Auerbach, for instance, never speaks of an *archē* in the technical sense developed above, but he does refer to an *Interpretationswille*, and my diction will often reflect that terminological difference, while nevertheless insisting that something like an archaeology is at work in texts like “Figura” and *Mimesis*. (Auerbach is, after all, interested in the origin [*Entstehung*] of figural interpretation.) For, on the other hand, I wish to let all of these terms resonate together. In fact, they need no special attunement, since each signals already to the others from its position in the semantic ensemble. For example, the term ‘will to interpretation’ is already Nietzschean in spirit, and, as Agamben points out, Nietzsche’s critique of the will was prosecuted on the grounds that the will was simply a mask for the sovereignty and self-certainty of command.<sup>108</sup> Nonetheless, a concluding reflection on the meaning of ‘conceptual grammar’ will help to set the mood.

By ‘conceptual grammar,’ I understand that according to which one thinks, without thereby thinking the grammar itself, just as one speaks one’s language without thereby speaking the grammar that structures that language. One cannot say a grammar as such, since a grammar is never what is said, but is that according to which what is said is said. It can

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<sup>108</sup> Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 65.

therefore be said that a grammar is the unsaid *in* what is said, so long as it is specified that the unsaid is not ‘in’ what is said (i.e., the statement) in the form of another, possible statement, but is *in* the statement as the immanent condition of the sayability of the statement.<sup>109</sup> A grammar can certainly be described in language, but to describe a grammar is not to say it. While a grammar cannot be said, it can nonetheless be heard, and described on the basis of what is heard.<sup>110</sup> This can be demonstrated by an example taken from the everyday experience of speaking and hearing. A grammar is invisible and unheard for the native speaker of a given language, yet even a speaker who has received no formal education in the grammar of their natural language can hear the grammar when its rule—its *archē*—is suspended, breaks down, or is transgressed. Not unlike Heidegger’s hammer, a grammar ‘appears’ or ‘presences’ precisely in those ungrammatical moments when it is absent from the ordinary course of speech.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, one’s grammar is heard, often for the first time, when learning the grammar of another language. An Anglophone who acquires French or German gets more than a new vocabulary and a new grammar: the old, familiar English grammar is also given anew.

In the same way, one’s conceptual grammar cannot, strictly speaking, be thought as such, but can nevertheless be ‘heard,’ or recognized. To the unsaid of a linguistic grammar corresponds the unthought of a conceptual grammar. The unthought is not another thought

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<sup>109</sup> Capener, “The Time That Belongs to God,” 31-32.

<sup>110</sup> Capener, “The Time That Belongs to God,” 28: “Archaeology is a procedure by which something unsaid—the conceptual grammar that governs a particular discursive formation—can be brought to light through its effects on what is said, and on the statements it governs.”

<sup>111</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York and London: Harper Perennial, 1962), 95-107.

that could, in principle, be articulated or expressed, but is that which remains ever unthought *in* thought.<sup>112</sup> It is thus not a question of discovering a causal, determining relation between a conceptual grammar (or logic) and the thought expressed under its ‘command,’ but of glimpsing the visible, legible, and thinkable effects of that command—that *archē*—in the expressions of the thought: its obeisances, resistances, slips, syllogisms, sophistries, and truths; all of which testify, if only partially, sometimes perjuringly, to the conditioned character of their appearances and disappearances.

Genealogy and archaeology are complementary, not contradictory, modes of a single method—and it is this method that I adopt herein. My method is *genealogical* in the sense that I seek to show that, while the problem (the constitution of Christianity) was ostensibly resolved in antiquity (with the so-called parting of the ways), it nonetheless persists in Western history (in the pyres of heretics, the pogroms against Jews, the smokestacks of the Shoah) as a burning question; and that this question is structured such that it appears, or emerges, in discourse under determinate genetic conditions (in the figural interpretation of scripture and, *ipso facto*, in the Christian construal of the meaning of history). My method is *archaeological* in the sense that I seek to articulate the logic or conceptual grammar (the *archē*) that governs the very possibility of saying the problem (the constitution of

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<sup>112</sup> On the unthought, see Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 76, 100 (but note that Heidegger seems to assimilate the unthought to something like an origin, viz. the originary unity of Being and Thinking, which is constitutively ‘forgotten’ by metaphysics and must therefore be ceaselessly thought anew); Deleuze, (*Difference and Repetition*, 151-153), who takes up Heidegger’s term, but in defense of transcendental empiricism and the necessary ‘stupidity’ of the thinker; Daniel Colucciello Barber, “World-Making and Grammatical Impasse,” *Qui Parle*, Vol. 25, Nos. 1&2 (Fall/Winter 2016), pp. 179-206, esp. pp. 196-200 for the notion of the unthought, and pp. 191-93 for the discussion of grammar and its impasses; Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183-201. On Wilderson’s development of the idea of a conceptual grammar in relation to the ‘position of the unthought,’ in the discursive context of Black and cinema studies, see Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structures of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 1-32.

Christianity) and of saying the solution (supersession) to the problem.

The logic of supersession is that according to which Christianity says or constitutes itself in history; figural interpretation is the discourse in which the logic of supersession is most clearly and radically expressed. My argument can thus be stated in the form of a simple proposition: *figura* is an *archē* of Christianity. It is not the only one.

### §6 They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love

As I noted above, the way that the logic of supersession plays itself out in the Christian tradition, especially in the Latin theo-hermeneutics of figural interpretation, often leads to a paradoxical, and perverse, philosemitism and philo-Judaism. A paradigmatic instance of an injunction to Christians to practice a certain ‘love’ for the Jews is found in the work of St. Augustine, whose extremely influential doctrine of *caritas* (love, or charity) should rightly qualify as another *archē*—or conceptual grammar—of the Christian tradition. In Augustine’s doctrine of love is condensed one of the problems that this study aims to articulate and examine: namely, how we should, and how we can, recognize Christianity. The Christ famously commanded his disciples to love one another, telling them that it is by way of their love that they would be known as his disciples (John 13:34). Not only their love for one another, but their love for their neighbors and for their enemies rank among the most distinctive marks of Christian ethics and religious identity. As they know each other, just so will they have been known. That is to say, we recognize Christianity by its loves; we know that Christians are Christians by their loves. We know them by their use of one another, by their use of worldly things, by their use of their neighbors and their enemies, and by their use—their love—of scripture.



In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine addresses the problems that arise in determining the true meaning of scripture, from which, Augustine declares, the principal truths of God's self-revelation in the Christ proceed. He divides his analysis into two parts: a discussion, in Book I, of things (*rerum*) and a discussion, in Books II-III, of signs (*signorum*).<sup>113</sup> A sign considered in itself is that which refers to, or signifies, something else; a thing considered in itself is that which cannot be employed as a sign and is just what it is (OCD 1.2). In scripture, there are some things that are both things and signs: the ram sacrificed by Abraham is a thing, but it is also a sign of something else (grace, or the Christ). As we'll see in great detail in the chapters that follow, a *figura* is such a thing-sign. Joshua son of Nun is a really existing thing (in this case, a person), but he is also a sign of a thing (or person) to come, namely, Joshua of Nazareth. Augustine develops his concept of *caritas* in order to instruct his audience in the art of interpretation—and of living—generally. In Book III of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine defines *caritas*, in distinction to *cupiditas* (lust, or sinful desire) as follows:

I mean by charity that affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of oneself and one's neighbor in subordination to God; by lust I mean that affection of the mind which aims at enjoying one's self and one's neighbor, and other corporeal things, without reference to God. (OCD 3.10)

He adds that love and lust, charity and cupidity, stand in relation to one another as in an inverse ratio: "In proportion as the dominion of lust is pulled down, in the same proportion is

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<sup>113</sup> The first three books of *De doctrina Christiana libri quatuor* were published in 397; the fourth book and the final passages appended to Book III, were added to the work in 426.

that of charity built up” (OCD 3.10).

In Book I, Augustine sets forth an interpretative and existential framework for organizing one’s loves. This framework is structured by a fundamental distinction (OCD 1.3) regarding the modes in which one can love a thing, be that thing a person, a book, a city, or even a world. On the one hand, some things are meant to be enjoyed. An object of our enjoyment (*frui*) is a thing that, in our love of it, brings us happiness; what we enjoy is an end in itself. On the other hand, some things are meant to be used. An object of use (*uti*) is a thing that, through our use of it, assists and supports us in our search for things to enjoy; what we use is a means to the end of enjoyment. If our loves are rightly ordered, if we enjoy what is enjoyable and use what is useful, then we will be happy. If our loves are disordered, we mistake useful things for enjoyable things and are thus led away from our happiness.<sup>114</sup>

Augustine compares (OCD 1.4) the disorder of our loves to being lost and lonely in a strange country. If we wish to return home, we might make use of boats and rivers to return to our happiness. Yet, if we are captivated by the skilled construction of the vessel, or charmed by the foreign landscapes rolling by, we might be tempted to delay our return, linger a while among the beautiful peoples and sights and sounds of exile. We might never reach home, because what was meant to be used (the boat made of smooth and smoothly joined cedar, the running waters sheering the riverbank) has become what is enjoyed, has become the mistaken object of our love. Augustine takes this analogy quite seriously, even literally, for it is exactly the situation of mortals who sojourn on the earth in estrangement from their

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<sup>114</sup> For a careful reading of Augustine’s doctrine of love, see Thomas A. Carlson, *With the World At Heart: Studies in the Secular Today* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), esp. 56-93. See also Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of St. Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), with which Carlson’s book is in close, but critical, dialogue.

true home in God. For Christians, mortal life is a matter of passing through the world, using it but not enjoying it (*utendum est hoc mundo, non fruendum*), so that—by means of what is visible and material in worldly existence—the invisible, spiritual, and eternal things of God may be discerned and, eventually, grasped and enjoyed in full. A Christian must never let their love tarry with the world, else they lose their true life, which is found, and founded, in the love of God alone.

The true object of enjoyment (OCD 1.22) is God, for God is what is eternal, unchanging, and absolute. All else is useful, so long as it is used as a temporal or material means toward the true end: the true enjoyment of the true God. Augustine notes that this holds true even of ourselves, for inasmuch as human beings can be objects of love, they, too, are things that can be used or enjoyed. Here, Augustine touches upon an old theological problem in the Christian tradition, for Christians are commanded to love one another, even to love their neighbors, even their enemies. A question arises: should a person be loved for her own sake, or for the sake of something else? Augustine replies categorically: a human being must necessarily be loved for the sake of something else; a human being is to be used as a means to the enjoyment of God, but never enjoyed for their own sake. Nor should one enjoy oneself. If one's love of oneself or love of one's neighbor or love of one's enemies is to be rightly ordered, it must necessarily take the form of urging them, too, to love that alone which is deserving of love, namely, God. In loving so, the Christian makes herself an object of God's love, of God's use.

For God (OCD 1.31), who needs nothing from us, cannot enjoy us but only use us. It is certain—as is attested, Augustine thinks, everywhere in scripture—that God loves us, and if God cannot enjoy us then God's love must necessarily take the form of our use. That said,

God does not (OCD 1.32) love in the human way of loving; God's use of us is different than our use of the objects of our loves, since our love of our objects is, if rightly ordered, oriented toward the enjoyment of God. Rather, God's use of us is self-referential; it flows from and returns to God's own goodness (*Deus vero ad suam bonitatem usum nostrum refert*). God gains nothing from loving us, but we gain everything, for it is because God is good that we exist in the first place, and it is only in existing truly—that is, in loving God—that we are good (*Quia enim bonus est, sumus; et in quantum sumus, boni sumus*). As to the problem of the love of one's others, Augustine remarks that (OCD 1.33) when we take joy in our friends or our lovers, so long as our loves are rightly ordered, it is God that is enjoyed rather than the other. Indeed (OCD 1.35), the true fulfillment and the true end of what is taught in scripture is the love of God and neighbor, the one before the other and the other in view of the one. All the world, all history, all time, all things and all signs, all friends and all enemies, all lovers and all loves, are rightly loved as a means to undertake and understand the pilgrimage home to God. "The whole temporal dispensation for our salvation," writes Augustine,

was framed by the providence of God that we might know this truth and be able to act upon it; and we ought to use that dispensation, not with such love and delight as if it were a good [thing] to rest in, but with a transient feeling rather, such as we have towards the road, or carriages, or other things that are merely means. (OCD 1.35)

In Book III of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine sets out to explain how Christians should interpret scripture when the signs that express its truth prove to be ambiguous. He refers to the "wretched slavery [*servitus miserabilis*]" of those who take the figurative (or allegorical) dicta of scripture in a brute, literal sense (OCD 3.5). Here, we have something of a limit-case of the investigation of *figura* and the figural interpretation that will follow in

Chapter 2. The term *figura* appears frequently in this passage, always referring to the figurative (or ‘secondary’) dimension of the meaning of the text, never to *figurae* in the sense of historically real prophecies. Augustine warns his audience that, when confronted by ambiguities of metaphors or similes in scripture, the principal danger is the temptation to take the figurative expression literally (*Nam in principio cavendum est ne figuratam locutionem ad litteram accipias*). He cites St. Paul’s antinomian dictum, “The letter kills, but the spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6), as a heuristic for the interpretation of the obscurities of scripture. He gives the example of one who hears of the Sabbath and understands by this nothing but the seventh day of every calendar week. In later chapters, Augustine’s anxiety, about the dangers of taking figurative expressions literally, leads him to offer explicit advice on how to figuratively interpret phrases that seems to attribute wrath or wickedness to God, or to God’s saints (OCD 3.11-13).

A few chapters hence, Augustine furnishes a basic rule for determining whether or not a scriptural phrase is literal or figurative: if the literal sense of a passage of scripture cannot be referred to “purity of life” or “soundness of doctrine,” then it should be read figuratively (OCD 3.10).<sup>115</sup> In the same chapter, Augustine goes on to discuss the analogous danger posed by the temptation to take what scripture means literally in a figurative sense. Here, he has in view the problem of relativistic readings of scripture and law. Since people of a particular time, culture, and place are given to understanding sin solely with reference to their own customs (e.g., worshipping Jupiter), they tend to interpret scriptural injunctions against those customs as merely figurative. Augustine is vehemently opposed to such relativism, and

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<sup>115</sup> As we’ll see below (§§9-11), this is why I argue that, while the literal-figural reading is to be privileged wherever possible, Augustine is willing to retreat to allegory whenever necessary.

for the same reason as was just given in response to literalist misreadings of scripture: purity of life and soundness of doctrine are at stake. Both this purity and this soundness are captured in the concept of charity or love (*caritas*): “Now Scripture enjoins nothing except charity, and condemns nothing except lust, and in that way fashions the life of men [*Non autem praecipit Scriptura nisi caritatem, nec culpatur nisi cupiditatem, et eo modo informat mores hominum*]” (OCD 3.10).

Moreover, as Augustine goes on to say, scripture also asserts the truth of the universal Christian faith in time and history, encourages charity, and banishes cupidity:

Now Scripture asserts nothing but the catholic faith, in regard to things past, future, and present. It is a narrative of the past, a prophecy of the future, and a description of the present. But all these things tend to nourish and strengthen charity, and to overcome and root out lust [*Non autem asserit nisi catholicam fidem rebus praeteritis et futuris et praesentibus. Praeteritorum narratio est, futurorum praenuntiatio, praesentium demonstratio; sed omnia haec ad eandem caritatem nutriendam atque corroborandam, et cupiditatem vincendam atque exstinguendam valent*]. (OCD 3.10)

While Augustine clearly has in mind the injunctions of the Christ to love, the declaration of the Johannine epistles that God is love, and the Pauline concept of love as the fulfillment of the law—in short, the ethical and religious substance of the New Testament—his reference to scripture also, and necessarily, includes the prophecies and narratives of the Old Testament. That is to say, he has in mind, too, the history of the Jews.

When Augustine describes the wretched slavery of the literalist mode of interpretation of scripture, he remarks that this slavery consists specifically in the temptation “to take signs for things [*signa pro rebus accipere*]” (OCD 3.5). This is a most useful clarification, as it helps

us to see that what Augustine is enjoining his audience to avoid is mistaking signs for things, and things for signs. I remarked, above, that there is a third category that sits alongside things and signs, which we might think of as thing-signs. *Figura*, or historically real prophecy, is just such a thing-sign; it is a really existing thing that signifies its lack and demands its fulfillment. As a thing-sign, a figure is a useful sign; it can be loved, so long as it is properly understood as a signifying thing, rather than as a mere sign or a mere thing. In this regard, it is significant that, when Augustine turns to compare the spiritual slavery of the Jews (*Iudaeorum servitute*) to the spiritual slavery of the gentiles (or pagans), he specifies that the gentiles were enslaved “uselessly [*inutilibus*]” (OCD 3.7). This implies that there is some utility or usefulness in the slavery of the spiritual understanding of the Jews.

Indeed, Augustine says that the slavery of the Jews “differed widely from what it was in the case of the other nations” (OCD 3.6), not because the Jews had been liberated from their temporal finitude and sin, but because their slavery was constituted in such a way that, in their temporal existence and experience, the one, true God was ever present in their minds and spirits. Although they misunderstood them, the Jews possessed “useful signs [*signis utilibus*]”—the scriptures themselves. Incredibly, Augustine claims that, when it came to interpreting and understanding their own history and scriptures, the Jews were *not literal enough* in their reading; they were given to taking things for signs (i.e., laws, rites, commands), rather than opening themselves to the perception of their own prophetic calling as historically real figures of the Christ:

although they paid attention to the signs of spiritual realities in place of the realities themselves, not knowing to what the signs referred [*et quamquam signa rerum spiritualium pro ipsis rebus observarent, nescientes quo referrentur*], still they had this

conviction rooted in their minds, that in subjecting themselves to such bondage they were doing the pleasure of the one invisible God of all. (OCD 3.6)<sup>116</sup>

What liberated the first Christians from their Jewish (thus useful) slavery involved an education to reality, “raising them to the realities of which these [i.e., the *signis utilibus*, the scriptures] were signs” (OCD 3.8). Augustine again compares the situation of the converted Jews to that of their pagan counterparts; the latter were enslaved to “useless signs [*signis inutilibus*],” or idols, and their freedom consisted in being liberated from their signs through an education in spirituality (“that they might exercise their minds in the spiritual understanding [*sed exercitaturae potius animum in eorum intellegentia spiritali*]” [OCD 3.8]). Between—or beyond—the excesses of pagan literalism and the excess of Jewish spirituality stands the Christian dispensation, in which it is understood that the letter and the spirit are not opposed to one another, but that the one is fulfilled in and through the other, and that the spiritual understanding of the literal arrives as a grace, which is the one, true excess.

Augustine, citing Paul, compares the Jews to children under the tutelage of a school teacher (OCD 3.6). The spiritual education of the Jews had given some among them a certain advantage—a leg up in their education to reality—as is evidenced by the fact that it was among the Jews that the Christ appeared, and that it was the Jewish converts in Jerusalem who readily sold their possessions and established the Kingdom of God in the form of a primitive communism (Augustine notes that no such renunciation was recorded among the gentile churches). Yet, some of the schoolchildren remained, and remain, obstinate, “clinging

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<sup>116</sup> On Augustine’s account, this explains why the early Jewish Christians were so overcome by the spirit (and by their love for one another; see below, §29) that they sold all of their possessions and consecrated themselves wholly to God, and why the majority of Jews remain so obstinate in their rejection of the gospel of the Christ.



to their signs as if they were realities” (OCD 3.6). Those Jews who remain Jews lack what their education to reality—what the Latin Christian tradition calls ‘figural interpretation—could prove to them, namely, the understanding that their own scriptures are themselves the proof of the truth of the gospel. Augustine says as much in *The City of God*. Of the ‘living witnesses’ that make up Jewish diaspora, he writes that,

by their own Scriptures, they bear witness for us that we have not invented the prophecies concerning Christ. Indeed, many of the Jews, reflecting upon those prophecies both before His passion and, especially, after his resurrection, have themselves believed in Him; and it is of these Jews that it was foretold, ‘For though Thy people Israel be as the sand of the sea, yet a remnant of them shall return’ [Isaiah 10:20]. The rest of them, however, were made blind; and of them it was foretold, ‘Let their table become a snare for them: and that which should have been for their welfare, let it become a trap. Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake’ [Psalm 69:22]. Thus, *when the Jews do not believe in our Scriptures, their own Scriptures are fulfilled in them*, while they read them with darkened eyes. (CG 18.46, my emphasis).<sup>117</sup>

Not in spite of their blindness, but rather because of it, the Jews bear witness to their own supersession. The spiritual slavery of the Jews is not a hindrance to Christians; it is, rather, pre-eminently, even paradigmatically, useful to Christians. The Jews are to be used by Christians, which is to say that they are to be loved, as one loves the road signs that point

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<sup>117</sup> Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); cited hereafter as CG. All references to CG cite the book and chapter (e.g., CG 18.46). For the Latin original, see Augustine, *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos libri viginti duo*, URL: <https://www.augustinus.it/latino/cdd/index2.htm>.

one's way home. Supersession is love. It is how Christians recognize themselves—how they are recognized—as Christians.

It might be objected that my references to Christianity, here and throughout this work, are too sweeping, univocal, and lacking nuance—in a word, that this study is blind to the variety and contingency of the Christian tradition. As a student of religion, I am well acquainted with the frustrating task of finding a real, concrete referent for a term such as 'Christianity.' Such an object = X is slippery. For good reason it hides itself, denies itself, multiplies itself, such that, especially in an academic field such as religious studies, one often hears the retort: Yes, but *which* Christianity are you speaking of? While I recognize and celebrate the variety, plurality, contrariety, and dissension that characterize the history of Christianity—or rather, of Christianities—I am also convinced of the probity of Jacques Derrida's methodological caution regarding this impulse to pluralize, an impulse that is certainly scholarly, but not always salutary. "To pluralize," writes Derrida, "is always to provide oneself with an emergency exit, up until the moment when it's the plural that kills you."<sup>118</sup>

This study seeks therefore to chart a course between the wily plural and the empty singular, and for that reason I should make clear that I am concerned specifically with the Latin Christian tradition. Nonetheless, as I've outlined above (§5), my aim is to perform what we might call an archaeology of the history of Christianity. *Figura* and *caritas* are, perhaps, two of the *archai* that govern the intelligibility and the possibilities of the Latin tradition. I should reiterate that I make no claims about anything resembling an essence, or self-identical origin, of Christianity. It is not a matter of reducing every possible version of Christianity to

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<sup>118</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, Michael Nass (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 25.

an original or essential set of beliefs, texts, doctrines, or practices, so as to either denounce, affirm, or dismiss them. It is rather a matter of asking after the conditions of intelligibility of what Barber calls “actually existing Christianity.”<sup>119</sup> In my view, one must attend to the way that early Christians—especially, but not only, the Latin Fathers—dealt with the problem of Christianity’s constitution as a distinctive religious identity. On the one hand, the early Christians had to decide on how to reckon with the heretics in their midst; on the other hand, they had to figure out what do with their erstwhile co-religionists, the Jews. As we’ll see in Chapter 2, the weapon of choice—to wit, historically real prophecy, *figura*—was the same on both fronts.

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<sup>119</sup> Barber, *On Diaspora*, 120.

## Chapter 2: Figural Interpretation

*The idea was that earthly life was thoroughly real, with a reality of the kind that the Word entered into as flesh.*

— Erich Auerbach

### §7 The Trouble with Marcion

Supersession is an historical concept. The descriptor ‘historical’ signifies not only that supersession is a concept that has an historical origin and context; more profoundly, to say that supersession is an historical concept is to say that it articulates or describes history itself. Because the Christian tradition regards history through the hermeneutical lens of prophecy, history assumes a promissory structure. As we’ll see below, beginning with St. Paul and continuing with Tertullian and St. Augustine in the Latin West, history is conceived either as a single great promise that will be consummated in the eschaton, or else as an impalpable mesh of temporal promises and fulfillments, each of which is guaranteed its unity and verity by the eternity of the mind of God. In either case, history appears not as a linear chain of causes and effects (history as episodic succession), nor as the mere recording of that chain of causality (historiography, the ‘writing of history’), but rather as a totality whose structure is prophetic and promissory, graced by Providence, thus demanding a human response of some sort, and commanding that that response take the form of a task, or a mission, whose structure should mirror the structure of the promise itself. Supersession is something that happened historically, but it is also something that happens, that must be maintained, repeated, and defended.

In this chapter, I argue that we should understand supersession not in theological terms of replacement (i.e., a new covenant simply replaces the old), nor in terms of a simple historicism, nor in terms of a vulgar functionalism. We should rather understand supersession as the logic or conceptual grammar of the Christian understanding of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (and, in the long run, of prophecy in general). Such fulfillment of prophecy does not imply replacement (which, in turn, implies exclusion); it rather insists upon the *inclusion* of that which is fulfilled, and thus demands that we theorize supersession in terms of emplacement, configuration, and even ‘sublation.’ Likewise, history understood as the fulfillment of prophecy cannot be reduced, by a historicist catalogue, to a matter of contingency; nor, if we wish to understand its internal tensions and antagonisms, can it be reduced to its so-called social functions.

In the Christian tradition, prophecy is not a mere matching-game in which the hermeneut attempts to draw a line from one column (promise) to another (fulfillment). The fulfillment of prophecy is, on the contrary, a mystery, or, as the Latin tradition renders the word, a *sacramentum*. The sacramental task of the hermeneut is everywhere a matter of discerning the outworking of that mystery in, or as, history. As we’ll see below, it was in the polemical works of Tertullian of Carthage that the Christian tradition set sail on its world-historical task of conceptualizing history as a process—or a repeatedly enacted memory of the event—of supersession. This is not to say that Tertullian invented supersession, nor that he was the first to think history in terms of its eschatological consummation, let alone in terms of prophecy. The theological framework for the logic of supersession is present already, if ambiguously and obscurely, in the letters of Saint Paul and the early, Greek-speaking, Church Fathers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Paul’s famous Adam-Christ typology in his epistle to the church at Rome,

What makes Tertullian so special, warranting our special attention, is the way that he rigorously and relentlessly links the mystery to history, without reducing the one to the other or the other to the one.

This chapter is therefore devoted to an analysis of Tertullian's method of figural interpretation (*Figuraldeutung*), as it is theorized by Erich Auerbach in his 1938 essay "Figura." Auerbach shows that figural interpretation, as practiced by Tertullian and his Latin inheritors (especially Augustine) is not only a decisive episode in the semantic development of the Latin term *figura*, but also gives rise to a distinctively Christian concept of history as prophetic fulfillment. My contribution is to suggest that while Auerbach makes no technical use of the term 'supersession,' his analysis of figural interpretation furnishes us with a description of a decisive moment in the history of Christianity, in which the logic of supersession is crystallized, and in which the concept of history as a really existing, providential totality is cemented as a fundamental datum of Western historical consciousness.

It happens that Auerbach only briefly touches upon a major character in the development and deployment of the logic of supersession: the second-century arch-heretic Marcion of Sinope. It is true that one of Auerbach's central sources is none other than Tertullian's *Adversus Marcionem*, but Marcion himself is not treated by Auerbach in any detail. There is, however, an oblique reference to Marcion in Auerbach's text. It comes in the context of a discussion of the aftermath of Paul's use of Hebrew Scripture in his messianic project. In the course of its early development, the Christian tradition had to decide what to do with those writings (the 'Old Testament'), how to reckon with them and relate them to the revelation of

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Romans 5:12-14.

God in the Christ.<sup>2</sup> Auerbach notes that a movement of resistance to the Pauline interpretation arose in the early centuries of the Christian faith, including some who “wanted either to eliminate the Old Testament entirely or interpret it in a strictly abstract and allegorical way” (SE 95). These two factions (emblemized, respectively, by Marcion and Origen of Alexandria) were, though for different reasons, the great hermeneutical enemies of Tertullian, who poured his considerable prowess in things theological and rhetorical into combatting them. Had Tertullian failed,

Christianity would have lost its connection to providential world history, this-worldly concreteness, and also, in all likelihood, some of its immense and universally persuasive power. It was in this struggle with those who despised the Old Testament and wanted to drain it of its meaning that the method of historically real prophecy again proved itself and successfully secured its own validity precisely in terms of the way Christianity understood the promise of Christ. (SE 95)

So, the stakes were—perhaps they still are—quite high. It is a question of the unity of the history of the West, and of the historical consciousness in which that unity is expressed.

The unity of the history of the West, be it real or merely purported, is one of the central concerns of this dissertation, to say nothing of the import of this unity for what Sean Gaston calls the “long tradition of equating the concept of the world with the idea of Europe.”<sup>3</sup> As I

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<sup>2</sup> For a classic account of this early Christian problematic, see Jaroslav Pelican, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 11-27.

<sup>3</sup> Sean Gaston, *The Concept of World from Kant to Derrida* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2013), 44.

have signaled above, I argue in the following that this unity is achieved—or is posited as achieved—by means of a mode of interpretation pioneered by the fathers of the Latin Church, especially in the works of Tertullian and Augustine. I argue, moreover, that in Auerbach’s reading of Tertullian’s radical approach to the interpretation of scripture, we can glimpse the origins of a *logic of supersession* that played a significant role in the emergence and development of the historical consciousness of the Latin West, to say nothing of its globalized and globalizing heirs in Europe and North America. That this logic of supersession persists into the nineteenth century in the thought of G.W.F. Hegel, and perhaps beyond Hegel, will be shown in the chapters that follow. For now, it is a matter of demonstrating that the logic of supersession is crystallized in a specific moment of crisis for the early Latin church. This moment of crisis was chiefly characterized by two features: (1) the Marcionite heresy, and the consequent exigency of forming and closing a biblical canon; (2) the question of what to do with the Jews and their scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

The encounter between Marcion and Tertullian was not, properly speaking, an encounter. Marcion of Sinope was born in 85 CE and died in 160 CE. Tertullian of Carthage was born the year Marcion died, and lived to 220 CE. Tertullian was, nonetheless, one of Marcion’s most vociferous and vitriolic critics, rivaled only by Justin Martyr (100 - 165 CE) and Irenaeus of Lyons (130 - 202 CE). Due to the fact that Marcion’s works, deemed heretical,

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<sup>4</sup> The Marcionite problem was apparently resolved in antiquity: Marcion’s church is no more. However, accusations of Marcionism and crypto-Marcionism still frequently crop up in what, today, passes for heresiological literature,. See, e.g., Cyril O’Regan’s recent attempt to locate a ‘modern Marcionism’ in the early work of Martin Heidegger: Cyril O’Regan, “Heidegger, Apocalyptic Philosophy, and the Specter of Marcionism,” in *Church Life Journal*, 1/31/2023. URL: <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/heidegger-apocalyptic-philosophy-and-the-return-of-marcionism/>. And, as the example of twentieth century German theology shows, Marcionism persists as something like a ‘road not taken’ for Christians: both Harnack and the early Barth dip their toes in the Marcionite stream, though for different reasons and with different results.



were systematically destroyed by the partisans of orthodoxy, Tertullian's polemics against Marcion, set down in five books under the title *Adversus Marcionem*, are the most extensive record of Marcionism as it was.<sup>5</sup> Thus, one must exercise caution when accounting for the details of Marcion's theological legacy, since we have little to no recourse to his own thoughts, and Tertullian's presentation of Marcionism is very likely a distortion.<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I am interested principally in Book III of *Adversus Marcionem*, where Tertullian

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<sup>5</sup> Tertullian's is certainly one of the most precious of the heresiological accounts of Marcion, but it is not the earliest. Marcion's name appears in the 'orthodox' literature for the first time in chapters 26 of Justin Martyr's *Apology*, where he is lumped in with Simon Magus and other magicians, and in chapter 58 of the same work, where Justin reports on Marcion's dualist theology. The polemics against Marcion during the second and third centuries are so numerous that it would be impossible to catalogue them all here. Among them, Irenaeus of Lyon's *Against Heresies* stands out as a sort of model of heresiological literature; see Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies (The Early Church Fathers)*, trans. Robert M. Grant (London and New York: Routledge, 1997). The scholarship on Marcion has long been dominated by the work of Adolf von Harnack, whose *Marcion: Das Evangelium Vom Fremden Gott* (Leipzig, 1921) [translated as *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1990)] famously depicted Marcion as a Lutheran reformer *avant la lettre*, attempted to reconstruct Marcion's works, and even called for a neo-Marcionite Christian faith with the courage to follow Marcion's example and eject the Old Testament from the Christian canon. Harnack's portrait of Marcion was controversial from the start, but nonetheless exercised a powerful influence on virtually all Anglophone scholarship on Marcion. The mid-century studies of Marcion by Wilson and Blackman, for instance, are little more than glosses of Harnack. See Robert Smith Wilson, *Marcion: A Study of a Second-Century Heretic* (London: James Clark and Company, Ltd., 1933); and E.C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London, SPCK, 1948). Yet, along with several renewed attempts to more faithfully reconstruct Marcion's works, there has been a spate of recent studies of Marcion that have attempted to dilute Harnack's influence on the scholarly consensus. Chief among those recent works are Sebastian Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion* (Mohr-Siebeck, 2010) and Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Lieu makes this point very forcefully in the opening pages of her book. The hope of accessing a historical Marcion is misguided, since the only Marcion we 'have' is found in the words of his sworn enemies: "What is evident in all this is that the Marcion who is met on the pages of his various opponents is a Marcion constructed by the rhetoric of each author" (*Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, 9). This seems a fair assessment to me, and is even a good problem to have, since what I am interested in is not Marcion himself but Tertullian's Marcion. On the other hand, one might wonder—as does Markus Vinzent in his review of Lieu—why Lieu, in Part I of her book, would go to such lengths to show that the historical Marcion is inaccessible, only to attempt that very sort of historical reconstruction in the latter half of her book. See Markus Vinzent, "Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture, by Judith M. Lieu (Review)," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (April 2017): 345-348.

endeavors to prove, against Marcion, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ (the messiah) prophesied by the Old Testament.

The dispute between Marcion and Tertullian is enlightening because, for all their differences, they agree profoundly on one very important thing: the events and persons recorded in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures) are truly, concretely, and historically real. Both Marcion and Tertullian insist upon a literal reading of the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> Neither is willing to cede ground to allegorical readings of the Old Testament; neither wants to allow its literal truth to be eroded by ‘spiritual’ interpretations (SE 80).<sup>8</sup> Yet each draws a very different conclusion from the literality of the history of the Jews.

Marcion, for his part, jettisons the Old Testament in its entirety from his list of authoritative scriptures. For Marcion, the narratives presented in the Old Testament are

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<sup>7</sup> This is one of the few facts about Marcion about which there seems to be unanimous consensus. We will see below that Marcion’s literalism was a constant source of consternation for his critic Tertullian, and modern scholarship on Marcion has not contradicted it. Harnack, for example, states unequivocally that Marcion insisted that the law and the prophets should be interpreted literally (*Marcion*, 45) and that Marcion was a fierce critic of any exegetical recourse to allegory (Harnack, *Marcion*, 46). The difficulties with understanding Marcion’s literalism arise when the question of the fate of the Old Testament is raised. Harnack famously described Marcion’s attitude to the Old Testament in terms of abandon: the Old Testament is literally true, but is of no import for Christians (Harnack, *Marcion*, 21-23). Moll, for his part, accepts that Marcion was a literalist, but criticizes Harnack on this very point. According to Moll, Marcion constructed his entire religious system as a repudiation of the Old Testament, that the Old Testament is, in fact, the point of departure for Marcion rather than a (soteriologically useless) historical record: “Marcion did not understand the Old Testament in the light of the New, he interpreted the New Testament in the light of the Old” (Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion*, 82). In any case, what is important for the investigation of figural interpretation being undertaken here is that biblical and historical literalism is something that Marcion and Tertullian share.

<sup>8</sup> This is a point made repeatedly by Auerbach, who has in mind the allegorical mode of reading scripture, also known as ‘spiritual exegesis,’ that predominated in Alexandria in antiquity; Philo and Origen are the named exemplars of this hermeneutical stance. I address the Tertullian-Origen differend below (§10).

literally and historically real, but are, in fact, totally irrelevant to the gospel of Jesus the Christ.<sup>9</sup> Marcion's Christ is the emissary of a radically transcendent, alien God, sent to Earth on a mission of salvation as an act of total, unconditioned grace. The God of the Jews, according to Marcion, is the capricious creator of the world, a demiurgic legislator whose Law means slavery, from whom the Christ has been sent to free us.<sup>10</sup> The Old Testament is, for Marcion, a document that tells us where we are, and that we are lost, but tells us absolutely nothing about our rescue.

Compare Tertullian. He is convinced not only that the Old Testament must remain in the canon, but that it is, in fact, essential to the Christian faith. For Tertullian, the narratives presented in the Old Testament are literally and historically real, and every jot and tittle of the Old Testament prophesies and prefigures the revelation of Christ in the New Testament, all of which is also literally and historically true.<sup>11</sup> It would take us too far afield to get into the weeds of Tertullian's trinitarian Christology here; what is important is that he vehemently denies Marcion's claim that the God of the Jews is not the father of Jesus Christ. For Tertullian, Christ is indubitably the Son of God the Father, who is the very God depicted in

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<sup>9</sup> This is a subtle point that, in my view, is missed by James I. Porter in his otherwise cogent analysis of Auerbach's theory of figural interpretation. Porter claims that Marcion is "the most extreme case" of the tendency to dissolve the Old Testament's claims on reality (Porter, "Old Testament Realism," 193). In fact, Marcion believes the Old Testament is really and literally historical. What Marcion denies is that the Old Testament has any *soteriological* significance for Christians.

<sup>10</sup> See Harnack, *Marcion*, 62-63. The framing I have adopted here is Harnackian, who in interpreting Marcion tends to overemphasize the theological distinction—which is itself Lutheran—between Law and grace. There are reasons to doubt that Marcion was especially concerned with such fine theological distinctions (see Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion*, 3-4), but it is indubitable that Marcion believed that there were two Gods and that the God of Jesus Christ was entirely distinct from the God who created the world; this forms the basis of Marcion's religious system.

<sup>11</sup> We'll see below (§§9-10) that while Tertullian sometimes allows for allegorical readings, he does so only in service of pointing out the more profound figural-literal reading.

the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Old Testament is, for Tertullian, a document that tells us where we are, that we are lost, and—if one has ears to hear—how to recognize our rescuer.

What does this dispute have to do with supersession? And what does it tell us about the stakes of supersession? In “Figura,” Auerbach shows that the Latin term *figura* (which translates St. Paul’s Greek term, *typos*) achieves a new and decisive connotation in Tertullian. In Tertullian’s technical usage, *figura* means “historically real prophecy.” Tertullian’s hermeneutical strategy involves reading a person or event in the Old Testament as a prophecy, a figure, of a historically real person or event in the New Testament. Here we should stress that Tertullian’s ‘figural interpretation’ is distinct from what we typically think of as ‘figurative’ or non-literal, allegorical interpretation. A *figura* is a real, historical person or event that, nonetheless, signifies something apart from itself.

Tertullian’s procedure is remarkable because the second term (the person or event in the New Testament) is the fulfillment of the first term (the person or event in the Old Testament). This relationship is often expressed in the scholarly literature as the relation of type (figure) to antitype (fulfillment). Importantly, the fulfillment of a figure is also the annulment of the same; annulment and fulfillment form something of a chiasmus. The fulfillment only reveals the nullity of the figure, since the figure itself ‘knows itself’ precisely as annulled or cancelled—that is, as prophecy. The figure existed: the Paschal lamb really was slaughtered. The lamb was, and thus is, historically real. Yet, it is, at the same time, ever already Christ the Lamb of God.

This is why it is not quite right to understand supersession as ‘replacement’ theology, for,

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that Tertullian was the first Christian theologian to use the word ‘trinity’ (*trinitas*). See Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*, Chapter 2ff. URL: [https://www.tertullian.org/works/adversus\\_praxean.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/works/adversus_praxean.htm)

in superseding Jewish history, existence, and experience, Christians do not replace Jews as God's chosen people, nor do they exclude Jews from the history of salvation.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, the Jews must be included in the history of salvation in order for the history of salvation to be what it is, and for Christians to be who they are. *The problem of supersession is not a problem of exclusion but of inclusion.*<sup>14</sup> Christianity is the fulfillment *and* the annulment of Judaism, Jewish history, Jewish experience, and Jewish existence. Strictly speaking, fulfillment *is* annulment; annulment *is* fulfillment. From the supersessionist point of view, the Jews are the absolutely essential but fundamentally negative condition not only of the true religion, but also of the reality of history as such. As we'll see below (§§24-25), for Christians influenced by St. Augustine's distinction between sacred and secular history, the only history that matters is the history of the Jews.

Here it is worth noting that, strictly speaking, Marcion's Christ neither fulfills nor even properly annuls the law, nor the history of the Jews, but rather simply and straightforwardly replaces the law, and the history of that law, with something new. Yet, even here the rubric of 'replacement' is not quite right, for Marcion's gospel is *new* in the radical sense. It is not new in relation to the old; it is rather the absolutely singular novelty, the total *novum*, advent

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<sup>13</sup> On the varieties of replacement theology, see Michael J. Vlach, "Various Forms of Replacement Theology," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 57-69. See also my discussion of the critique of replacement theology above (§3).

<sup>14</sup> I note in passing that one should distinguish between the *fact* of salvation (in which the Jews, according to Christian orthodoxy, depending on how one reads Paul's epistle to the Romans, have only an ambiguous share) and the *history* of salvation (in which the Jews, according to orthodoxy, are absolutely essential). As we saw above (§3), the emphasis placed on 'replacement' and 'exclusion' in discussion of the problem of supersession is often a way of avoiding the most serious, and most subtle, ramifications of supersession. Ironically, the very thing that Christian critics of supersession believe can absolve Christian theology of its supersessionist tendencies (i.e., narrative figuration, especially as theorized by Hans Frei) is precisely what the present study shows is the very heart of the logic of supersession: *figura*.

in the pure sense. A decisive passage from Jacob Taubes's lectures on the letter to the Romans concerns this inconceivable novelty proclaimed by Marcion. Taubes says:

...the thread that links creation and redemption is a very thin one. A very, very thin one. And it can snap. And that is Marcion. There the thread has snapped. He reads—and he knows how to read!—the father of Jesus Christ is *not* the creator of heaven and earth.<sup>15</sup>

Again, compare Tertullian, who is compelled to marshal every last whit of the power of figural interpretation to stitch together creation and redemption, as if Ariadne herself had lent him her thread. *Figura* is that very thread, supersession the needle. Ultimately, God himself is the seamster. What we witness in Tertullian is something like the birth of history properly so-called. His insistence that the events and persons of the 'Old' and 'New' Testaments are historically real in equal measure suggests not only that history has a structure, but that this structure expresses a unity. That is to say, history appears, perhaps for the first time, as a totality. The theological name for the economy of this totality is Providence, which proceeds according to a necessity ordained by God's omniscience and omnipotence, and which leaves nothing out. Ditto supersession, which is naught but the shape that Providence takes in time.

We have but scratched the surface of the ruthlessness with which Tertullian prosecuted his case for the historical truth of Christianity. Let us turn now to Auerbach's seminal essay, "Figura," to see what we can make of the idea of historically real prophecy found there (§8). We'll then address a knotty problem of the relation between allegorical and figural modes of

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<sup>15</sup> Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dan Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, 60).

interpretation (§9), and to certain complications suggested by Auerbach's breezy dismissal of the allegorical method of Tertullian's contemporary, Origen of Alexandria (§10). We'll then take up the question of the verticality and eternity of historically real prophecy, especially the contributions of St. Augustine (§11), and conclude with a redescription of the stakes of the interpretation of scripture for the Christian-cum-Western concept of history as a providential totality and the singular and decisive importance of the logic of supersession in that concept (§12).

### §8 Historically Real Prophecy

Auerbach begins "Figura" by tracing the development of the Latin word *figura* from its earliest usage, in Terence in the second century BCE, as a word to describe the physical shape or face of a person, to its deployment as a rhetorical category in Quintilian in the first century CE (SE 65-78). Both of these usages of *figura* survive today in English, as when we speak of a person's 'figure,' as well as when we speak 'figuratively,' i.e., when we use rhetorical tropes, 'figures of speech,' or speak of something in a non-literal register.

Auerbach notes that, along the way, poets from Lucretius to Ovid deployed the word *figura* to capture the sensuous depths of the "playful association between original [*Urbild*] and copy [*Abbild*]" (SE 69). This capacity of *figura* to capture and mediate originals and copies will be important for our understanding of figural interpretation in the Latin Fathers, namely Tertullian of Carthage and St. Augustine of Hippo.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The specific innovation of Tertullian, whom I am about to discuss in some detail, consists in his assertion of the historical reality and literality of a given pair of persons or events as they are depicted in scripture. While Tertullian believes that they are historically real in equal measure, these pairs of events-persons are nonetheless declined into a hierarchy of copy and original. This is so *not in spite of* the fact that what will come to be seen as the copy (i.e. Judaism) is the historical antecedent of the original (i.e. Christianity), but precisely *because of* this fact. The original is not that which lies

Auerbach endeavors to show that the Latin term *figura*—which translates St. Paul’s *typos*—achieves a new and decisive connotation in Tertullian. In short, *figura* means “historically real prophecy.” I repeat that it is very important that we keep in mind the fact that Tertullian’s practice of ‘figural interpretation’ is distinct from what we typically think of as ‘figurative’ or non-literal, allegorical interpretation. In order to avoid confusion, I will, throughout the entirety of this work, rigorously and consistently distinguish between the literal and non-literal senses of the word *figura* by availing myself of the distinction, in the English language, between ‘figural’ and ‘figurative.’ The terms ‘figurative’ and ‘figuratively’ refer to every species of allegorical, symbolic or non-literal meaning—the figurative dimension in its widest sense. The terms ‘figural’ and ‘figurally’ are reserved to designate the mode of interpretation and meaning inaugurated by Tertullian and articulated by Auerbach. Thus, one can say without contradiction that Tertullian opposes his *figural* reading of scripture to the *figurative* reading of the same.

In any case, what is absolutely essential is that, for Tertullian, *figura* is a real, literal, and historical person or event that, nonetheless, signifies something apart from itself: it points up, so to speak, its own negativity. What is decisive is that this negativity (as well as what this negativity indexes) is *historically real*.

“*Figura*,” Auerbach writes, “is something real and historical that represents and proclaims in advance something else that is also real and historical” (SE 79). According to Auerbach, the aim of figural interpretation was

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behind, in the proximate or remote past, but rather something that follows and fulfills that which signals and predicts it. Hence the decisive category of the “future original,” which Auerbach detects in patristic reflections on historically real prophecy and in the practice of figural interpretation (SE 100).



to read the people and events of the Old Testament as ‘figures’ or historically real prophecies of New Testament eschatology. We must note here that in doing so Tertullian specifically refuses to use figural interpretation to invalidate the literal and historical authority of the Old Testament. He is in fact decidedly disinclined to endorse the possibility of spiritualist encroachment. In no way does he want to understand the Old Testament merely allegorically. Rather, he believes that it was literally and really true. Even in those places where figural prophecy does occur, both the figure itself and what it prophesies are historically real in equal measure. The prophetic figure is a material historical fact and is fulfilled by material historical facts. (SE 80)

Auerbach takes the terms ‘figure’ and ‘fulfillment’ as terms designating the two poles of a single act of interpretation; this interpretative act is designed and deployed to foreclose the possibility of allowing the history reported by scripture to be dissolved into allegory, i.e., into a non-literal, symbolic, moral, or merely spiritual meaning.

Consider the example with which Auerbach opens his discussion of Tertullian (SE 78-79). In *Adversus Marcionem* III.16, Tertullian claims that the Old Testament figure Hoshea son of Nun, receives his new name (i.e., Joshua; see Num. 13:16) from Moses in order to prefigure, or prophesy, a Joshua yet to come, namely Joshua—or Jesus—of Nazareth (the two share the Hebrew name *Yehoshua*). Joshua is thus a figure of the Christian concept of grace. Unlike the law, here figured by Moses, Joshua can, and does, lead the people of Israel into the promised land. As a figure of grace, Joshua son of Nun is also, and already, a figure of Joshua the Christ, who is the fulfillment of Joshua son of Nun. Let us linger on this passage from *Adversus Marcionem*, as it illustrates the way that *figura*, while clearly

denoting a historically real prophecy, retains its erstwhile semantic freight of ‘likeness’ or ‘copy.’

Of Joshua son of Nun, Tertullian says (III.16): “We first observe that this was a figure of him who was to be [*Hanc prius dicimus figuram futurorum fuisse*].”<sup>17</sup> The ‘him’ (assumed in the Latin syntax) in question is, of course, Jesus the Christ, who was to bring the *secundum populum* (the second people, namely, Christians) out of the forsaken world (*saeculi desertis*) into the promised land (i.e. the *vitae aeternae possessionem*; the inheritance of eternal life), just as Joshua led Israel into Canaan. Here, the man himself, Joshua, is the figure of the man Jesus. Tertullian then evokes the Pauline concept of a spiritual circumcision (see, e.g., Rom. 2:28; Col. 2:11) referring to the knife of flint with which the circumcision ritual was performed. Tertullian writes that Christians will inherit eternal life “after we have been circumcised with the knife of flint, that is the precepts of the Christ—for the [flint] rock was Christ [*Petra enim Christus*].” The ritual knife, too, is a figure. Finally, Tertullian asserts that even the name in question (in the Tanakh, *Yehoshua*; in the Septuagint, *Iēsous*) is a figure: “therefore that man who was being set aside for the similitudes of this mystery [*sacramenti imagines*] was also first established in the likeness [*figura*] of our Lord’s name” (AM 218).

We can glean several things from this passage. I have isolated three figures and their corresponding fulfillments: the man Joshua and the man Jesus; the ritual knife and the precepts (or teachings) of the Christ; and the correspondence—or better, the identity—of the names Joshua and Jesus. The first two figures and their fulfillments are concrete persons or objects. In the first case, we have two men who, Tertullian insists, are really existing

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<sup>17</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 218. Cited hereafter as AM.

historical people; the first (Joshua) is fulfilled in the second (Jesus). In the second case, we have a real, historical object, the ritual knife, whose fulfillment is found in the (equally historical and real) person and teachings of Jesus the Christ. We can thus see that figural interpretation can—and frequently does—move promiscuously between ontological registers: an historical object figures an historical person, and does so without lapsing into the non-literality of allegory. The flint knife that plucked the foreskin does not symbolize the Pauline circumcision of the heart, since, in the act of circumcision it is precisely flesh that is prised from flesh. It rather prophecies spiritual circumcision as an historical event, condensed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and fulfilled in Christian conversion. The third case, the one to which Tertullian's argument in III.16 is building, is all the more interesting due to the fact that what is there in question is a name. A name is no trifling thing, to say nothing of the very name of very God. Let us linger a little longer on this.

It is in the figural reading of the name Joshua-Jesus that we can see clearly the way that Tertullian's innovative usage of *figura* pushes the word to its limits, charting a new hermeneutical horizon while maintaining the semantic breadth and depth of its classical usage. As I mentioned above, in ancient Roman authors the word *figura* enjoyed a wide and varied usage. In its earliest appearance, in Terence (195 - 159 BCE), *figura* meant 'three-dimensional shape,' such as that of a face or a body (SE 65). In Varro (116 - 27 BCE), it meant 'shape' more broadly, as in the aural 'shape' of words, or the imprint of a seal (SE 66-68). In Lucretius (99 - 55 BCE), *figura* acquires still more significations, the most important of which is the connotation of likeness or similitude. That is to say, *figura* comes to signify a relation. We should specify the form of this relation.

Auerbach reports that Lucretius exploits *figura* in order to describe the resemblance of

children to their parents. Here, *figura* plays on the meaning of ‘visage,’ but also on the distinction between original and copy; this is the context of the passage, the one concerning the original and the copy, that I cited briefly above. Lucretius

discusses children who are *utriusque figurae* [images of each both], of the father and the mother and who often mirror back to us *proavorum figuras* [the images of earlier ancestors], and so on. [...] Here we see that the playful association between original [*Urbild*] and copy [*Abbild*] can be captured successfully only in the Latin *figura*.

*Forma* and *imago* are rooted too firmly in the one or the other register of meaning.

*Figura* gives a greater impression of something available to the senses. It is also more dynamic than *forma* and preserves the identity of the original more exactly than *imago*. (SE 69, all brackets are the translator’s)

We can see such a play of resemblances at work in Tertullian’s discussion of the name Joshua-Jesus. Joshua son of Nun is designated by Tertullian as a (real, historical) man who was set apart as an *imago sacramenti* of Joshua the Christ, and this ‘setting apart’ is signaled and established by the likeness (*figura*) of God’s name. It is tempting to understand *figura* as a middle term that guarantees the transit of meaning between an image or a copy (*imago*) and a concrete form (*forma*), but things are a bit more complicated than that. While it necessarily retains the semantic capacity for the play of resemblances (Auerbach observes that “the reciprocal relationship of the two events can be recognized in their accord with or similarity to one another” [SE 79]), *figura* does not designate an external relation between two terms. *Figura* does not stand ‘between’ a copy and an original, nor ‘between’ a prophecy and its fulfillment, because *figura* is itself one of the two terms at play: it signals their unity and their difference all at once. *Figura* internalizes the original-copy distinction, and is for this

reason—partially, at any rate—that it can point to a ‘future original,’ which is not any event whatever, but *its own* fulfillment. (I specify that this is only partially the reason because, as we’ll see below, historically real prophecy also requires a ‘vertical dimension.’) *Figura* is an original for itself (it is real and historical), but a copy in itself (i.e., it is real and historical in relation to its fulfillment, which is also real and historical).

This gives us a sense of the potency of the antique usage of *figura*, which could indicate, variously, the shape of a thing or a face, the sensuous quality of a thing, person or speech, the formal character of a word or a name, the similitude of a thing to another—and could often work at multiple registers and even across registers. To these semantic capacities, Tertullian adds the decisive connotation of historically real prophecy. It is easy to see why. *Figura* ‘says’ both itself and its lack; it signals a demand not merely for a fulfillment—this or that fulfillment—but for *its* fulfillment.

This becomes clearer if we consider *figura* in relation to two other terms utilized by Tertullian: *umbra* (shadow) and *veritas* (truth). *Figura* is situated on the *umbra* ‘side’ of the *umbra-veritas* polarity, such that the fulfillment of a prophecy is designated as *veritas* and the figure as *umbra* (e.g., *Adversus Marcionem* V.19; see AM 634). Christ is the *veritas* of Moses, who is the figural *umbra* of Christ; grace (or love) is the truth of the Law, which is the figural shadow or prophetic image of God’s lovingkindness, which appears as grace. Even though *figura* is *umbra*, a shadow or an intimation of something to come, it is historically real. Moses adumbrates Christ; Christ illuminates Moses. In his polemic against Marcion, Tertullian gives reasons for the ‘shadowy’ or ‘clouded’ character of scripture. Here, in *Adversus Marcionem* III.18, the context is the verity of the prophecies concerning the death of Christ. Tertullian explains that

there were most cogent reasons why this mystery [*sacramentum*] could not escape being prophesied by types and figures [*figurari*]. The more incredible it was, the more offensive it would become if it were prophesied in plain terms [*si nude praedicaretur*]: and the more marvelous it was, the more it needed to be covered in obscurity [*tanto magis obumbrandum*; NB, the Latin root of *obumbrandum* is *umbra*, ‘shadow’ or ‘shade’], so that difficulty of understanding might make request for the grace of God. (AM 224)

Here, too, we can catch a glimpse of Tertullian’s rhetorical strategy. Let us consider it more closely.

Figural interpretation is, on the one hand, a mode of reading that simply takes the text in its plain, literal sense: what you see is what you get, as in *Adversus Marcionem* III.23, where Tertullian observes that the saving mark described by the prophet Ezekiel (the Hebrew *tāv*) corresponds to the Greek letter *tau*, which in turn corresponds to the Latin ‘T,’ has the “appearance of the cross [*species crucis*]” (AM 240). It is simply a matter of drawing the correspondences—of ‘seeing’ the *species* (the image or the visual form) of the figure. On the other hand, as we’ve just seen, figural interpretation is not something that comes easily or naturally to the reader. One’s capacity for cutting through the obscurity and density of the texts—which are stuffed to the gills with intricate networks and recondite palimpsests of resemblances, correspondences, similitudes—requires, in fact, the grace of God.<sup>18</sup> Here

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<sup>18</sup> It’s notable that Luther makes a similar move in *De servo arbitrio*. Against Erasmus, who is on the lookout for ‘figures of speech’ in the scriptures, Luther insists on reading the text in its plain, literal sense. But, of course, accessing this plain, literal sense, is not so easy or natural: it requires, like everything does, the grace of God. See Martin Luther, “The Bondage of the Will” in Erasmus and Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, trans. Ernst F. Winter (New York: Continuum, 2002).

Tertullian is making a very simple point about revelation, namely, that the truth of the events recorded in the Jewish scriptures is revealed in—and only in—the Christian gospel. Hence the blindness imputed to the Jews regarding the *figurae* that swarm in their scriptures, and the blindness of Marcion and his ilk the regarding the same.<sup>19</sup> But there is another lesson to be learned from Tertullian’s comments on the great necessity of the figures, namely, the proper place of the *spiritual* in Tertullian’s otherwise relentlessly realist-literalist procedure of figural interpretation. In figural interpretation, “the only spiritual moment is the moment of understanding, the *intellectus spiritalis*, which recognizes the figure in its fulfillment” (SE 83).

Moreover, the *intellectus spiritalis* is in some sense internal to *figura*. Auerbach notes that, in addition to the semantic oppositions already treated (e.g. *umbra* and *veritas*), *figura* plays a decisive theologico-semantic role in the distinction between, on the one hand, *historia* or *littera*, and on the other hand, *veritas*.

Finally, we should note that in addition to the opposition between figure, on the one hand, and fulfillment and truth, on the other, another opposition emerges, namely between *figura* and *historia*. *Historia*, or also *littera*, is the literal meaning or the event to which it refers; *figura* is the same meaning or event, but seen from the perspective of the future fulfillment hidden within it, and this fulfillment is *veritas*, or truth. (SE 91)

In this case, Auerbach observes that *figura* appears as a proper “middle term [*mittlerer*

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<sup>19</sup> That the argument of *Adversus Marcionem* III.18 is also found in Tertullian’s *Against the Jews* is telling. See Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 10, URL: [https://www.tertullian.org/works/adversus\\_judaeos.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/works/adversus_judaeos.htm).

*Terminus]*” between *historia-littera* and *veritas*, but he specifies (1) that *figura* and *historia* were often used interchangeably, and (2) that *figura* can play the role of a middle term inasmuch as it means “approximately the same thing as *spiritus* or *intellectus spiritualis*” (SE 91-92 [73]). We should try to make things more precise regarding this middle term.

*Figura* is a way of seeing *historia* (an event) from the perspective of its fulfillment (another event). *Figura* is therefore not a third term that, coming from outside, as it were, intervenes into the binary pair of history and truth. *Figura* simply is history, seen with the eyes of faith. It is not a true middle term that assures the passage of history to truth, but the knowledge—the *intellectus spiritualis*—of the prophetic and promissory nature of history. For, in figural hermeneutics, history is neither a record of events, nor even the sequence of events that might be recorded as a history. History is, on the contrary, a single, great Promise, whose sundry happenings are stitched together—and stitched truly, as truth—by prophecy and providence. To say that *figura* is *intellectus spiritualis* is to say that the figure knows more than it knows, or rather knows more than it knows it knows. It signals its lack and so demands its fulfillment, but does so, so to speak, behind the back of the figure itself. When she lets down from her window the scarlet rope (a figure of the blood of Christ, *sanguinis Christi signum*), Rahab does not know that she is a figure of the Church (SE 115). Nor does Joshua son of Nun know that he is a figure of Joshua the Christ. Yet the knowledge—in the umbral concealment of its prophetic form—is there nevertheless. We will discuss the nature of this hidden knowledge below, when we take up Augustine’s development and defense of historically real prophecy and the literal interpretation of scripture in light of his doctrine of God’s omniscience. For now, we should continue by deepening our analysis of Tertullian’s painstaking negotiations between allegorical and figural modes of reading.



### §9 Allegoria and Figura

Let us return to the Moses-Christ example. We must remember that, for Tertullian, Moses is by no means a mere symbol, nor even a simple exponent, of God's will. When, during the battle with Amalek, he prays for victory with his arms outstretched in the form of the Christ's cross, Moses is a figure of the Christ, for the form of the cross (*crucis ... habitus*) is requisite for Joshua's victory over the enemy. So, too, is the bronze serpent, hung by Moses in apparent contradiction of his own iconoclastic interdiction, a figure of the Christ: it is mounted "on a pole in the attitude of one hanging [*pendentis habitus*]," and is intended to be "gazed upon for healing" (AM 226).<sup>20</sup> "Moses," writes Auerbach,

is no less real and in the world because he is an *umbra* or *figura* of Christ, and Christ, who is the fulfillment, is not an abstract idea, but is rather concrete and in history.

The historically real figures are to be interpreted spiritually (*spiritaliter interpretetari*), but this interpretation points to a bodily and thus a historical

fulfillment—for at this moment, the truth has become history or the flesh. (SE 83)

In both cases, a historical relay is set up between the figure (Moses's cruciform prayer; the hanging serpent) and the fulfillment of the figure in the cross of the Christ.

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<sup>20</sup> Both of these examples are already found, and described in much the same language, in Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chs. 90-91. For the battle with Amalek, see Exod. 17:10-13; for the bronze serpent, see Num. 21:4-9. On the latent presence of Marcion in Justin's *Dialogue*, see Andrew Hayes, *Justin against Marcion: Defining the Christian Philosophy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), esp. 89-162. I should add that these examples demonstrate very ably the extent to which figural interpretation can combine a maximum of literalist rigor with a maximal flexibility: Moses does not always and inevitably, as we saw above, serve as a figure of the Law; he, too, can figure the Christ. Even an idol (!), the bronze serpent, is a figure of the Christ.

We could adduce many other examples of Tertullian's relentless mission to protect the reality and literality of the Old Testament by means of figural interpretation. *Adversus Marcionem*, especially Book III, brims with them. Ditto *De resurrectione carnis*, Tertullian's polemic against the various species of the Docetic heresy, which claimed—like Marcion—that the Christ was not properly incarnate, but was rather a spirit who took on the appearance of a carnal human being.<sup>21</sup> Tertullian is thus compelled to argue at length that the Christ had a literal, real, concrete body, and was a historical human being, else the emerging Christological and trinitarian doctrines fall into ruin.<sup>22</sup> I have limited myself to examples drawn mostly from *Adversus Marcionem* because of the paramount danger of the Marcionite heresy for the early Church. Tertullian's strategy, as we have seen, is to show that the

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<sup>21</sup> See Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*, Chapter 20ff, URL: [https://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans\\_res/evans\\_res\\_04english.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_res/evans_res_04english.htm). See also *Adversus Marcionem*, V.20, for Tertullian's rebuttal of the Docetic position with regard to the interpretation of Philippians 2:6-8.

<sup>22</sup> Auerbach (SE 80-81) takes particular delight in Tertullian's invocation, in *Adversus Marcionem* IV.40, of Jer. 11:19 to prove the figural link between the prophet's words and Christ's words in the Eucharist scene: "He made it into his body, saying 'this is my body,' that is, the figure of my body [*id est figura corporis mei*].' Now there could have been no figure [*figura*], unless it had been a veritable body; for an empty thing, which a phantasm is, would have been incapable of figure [*figuram capere non posset*]. Or else, if you suppose he formed bread into a body for himself because he felt the lack of a veritable body, then it was bread he ought to have delivered up for us. It would well suit Marcion's vacuity, that bread should be crucified. Yet why does he call his body bread, and not rather a pumpkin, which Marcion had instead of a heart? For he did not understand how ancient was this figure of the body of Christ [*Non intellegens veteran fuisse istam figuram corporis Christi*], who himself speaks by Jeremiah, 'They have devised a device against me, saying, Come and let us cast wood upon his bread,' meaning, the cross upon his body. So Christ, who throws light upon ancient things [*illuminator antiquitatum*], had made it quite clear that what on that earlier occasion he meant by bread, when here he calls bread his own body." Tertullian then goes on to discuss the other part of the host, the wine, which appears in Isaiah 63:1 as an ancient *figura* of blood. He concludes IV.41 with a chiasmic description typical of figural interpretation: "So now he also consecrated his blood in wine, as he had of old used wine as a figure for blood [*Ita et nunc sanguinem suum in vino consecravit, qui tunc vinum in sanguine figuravit*]" (AM 492-495). See also the chiasm in *De Resurrectione carnis*, Ch.20: "*res in litteris tenentur, litterae in rebus leguntur.*" The relation of reciprocity between the two terms—the figure and its fulfillment—is real, and thus must be read literally.

resemblance between a prophetic figure of the Old Testament—e.g. Isaac carrying his own wood, or Joseph persecuted by his brothers—and its fulfillment in the New Testament is not a matter of coincidence but the very shape of the truth of the Gospel. Thus the narratives of all four canonical gospels, in which Jesus is said to have carried his own cross (viz. his own wood), fulfills the *figura* of Isaac; and the widespread, antisemitic belief among Christians of antiquity that the Jews were to blame for the Christ’s death, fulfills the *figura* of Joseph and his brothers.<sup>23</sup>

We should pause here and note that the word *figura* does not always and inevitably signify a literal and historical reality. Even in Tertullian’s discourse, there are times when *figura* is deployed to mean something like ‘trope’ or ‘allegory’—the figurative or the non-literal in general. It is therefore of crucial importance to discern whether or not his various usages of *figura* signify something literal or non-literal.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, Auerbach’s reading of Tertullian seems to be confirmed. If there is ever a question of deciding between a literal and a non-literal reading of scripture, Tertullian always opts for the literal, figural, reading; when he admits that both readings are valid, he always takes care to subordinate the allegorical to the figural meaning. Thus, in the passages on figural meaning in *De resurrectione carnis*, Tertullian writes that “it was not in a figure [*non figurate*] that the

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<sup>23</sup> For Tertullian’s discussion of Isaac and Joseph, see AM 224.. For Jesus carrying his cross, see Matt. 27:31-33; Mark 15:20-22; Luke 23:26-32; and John 19:16-18.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, one of the difficulties of parsing Tertullian concerns his equivocal use of the term, especially when one is working with translations. We saw above that the English rendering of the passage concerning the name Joshua has ‘likeness’ for *figura*. This is well and good inasmuch as it allows us to consider the way that *figura* is bound up with a play of resemblance and similitude—the imaginary register, as it were—but it is worth noting that an English reader is likely to quickly pass over the word ‘likeness’ without recognizing that a rigorous and tenacious figural—that is, literal—interpretation is underway.

Virgin conceived in the womb.”<sup>25</sup> Here *figura* refers to a trope or a figure of speech, which is precisely the interpretation that Tertullian wishes to avoid. The context of the passage (*De resurrectione carnis* 20) makes this perfectly clear. Tertullian’s criticism is directed at those who claim that the prophets preached solely in terms of pictures and figures of speech. Against these symbolical or allegorical readings, Tertullian argues that not all things are pictures and figures of speech, but that there are truths in prophecies as well. Tertullian goes on to say that if the claims of the prophets were merely images meant to illustrate or depict a truth, then the pictures themselves would have been illegible, since the truths to which they correspond had not yet been announced. There are not merely shadows (*umbrae*) but bodies (*corpore*) there, especially the body of the virgin and the Christ-child to which she gave birth. It is as if Tertullian’s opponents had demanded: *Habeus corpus!* To which we can imagine Tertullian replying: *Ecce homo*.

We find another telling example of Tertullian’s subtle negotiation between *allegoria* and *figura* in *Adversus Marcionem* III.14, where Tertullian is concerned to rebut Marcion’s argument that the true Christ cannot have been prophesied in the Old Testament, where he is frequently depicted as a warrior armed with a sword. On the Marcionite reading, the fact that Jesus appeared as a teacher and a stranger, rather than as a warlord, signifies that the Christ prophesied by Isaiah, and by the Psalmist, is a *Jewish* Christ (i.e., a political leader, a messiah) who has no relation to the true Christ of the Gospel, as witnessed in the New Testament. Tertullian replies by citing the scriptural source the two of them tendentiously share, namely, St. Paul, who writes to the Ephesians of the sword of the spirit, understood as

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<sup>25</sup> Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*, Chapter 20ff, URL: [https://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans\\_res/evans\\_res\\_04english.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_res/evans_res_04english.htm)

the word of God (AM 212). Here, because he admits a minimally allegorical reading of St. Paul's invocation of the warrior-messiah, Tertullian walks a tightrope, but he does not lose his nerve. "If this is your Christ," he taunts Marcion, "then he too is a warrior." For, on the other hand, if Paul's authentic Christ is not a warrior and carries a merely allegorical sword, then we should understand the sword as a figure of the words of the Christ (who is himself the Word of God). Ditto the soaring sharp arrows that pierce the heart of the king's enemies in Psalm 45:5, which Tertullian glosses as the words and precepts of the Christ that "pierce and transfix every man's conscience" (AM 212). *This* is the sense in which the "Creator's Christ" (i.e. the Christ prophesied) is to be understood as a warrior. Tertullian then twists the knife: "You [i.e. Marcion] have been taught [or told, in the sense that Tertullian has just demonstrated something to him] how his armor is allegorical: admit then that his spoils are figural [*Agnosce et spolia figurata, cuius et arma allegorica didicisti*]" (AM 214, trans. modified).<sup>26</sup> That is to say, the spoils of the Christ's 'war' (namely, Christian converts, Christendom itself) are real and historical, and these spoils—the fulfillments—allow us to see the allegory for what it is: a *figura*, a historically real prophecy.

Here again, the moment of understanding is spiritual, since it requires a hermeneutical vision guaranteed by grace, but the meaning (i.e. the referent) is everywhere literal and real. We see, too, that Tertullian is willing to admit that there are allegories in scripture, but that they must not remain merely allegorical. They can be neither explained away as spiritual lessons (as happens, Auerbach avers, in the allegorical approach of Philo or Origen), nor

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<sup>26</sup> Tertullian then sums up his argument with a forceful defense of figural interpretation: "As then our Lord speaks, and the apostle writes, figuratively of these matters [*figurate itaque*], we do then with good confidence make use of those interpretations of his, instances of which even our adversaries acknowledge: and so the Christ who has come will be Isaiah's Christ, for the very reason that he was not a warrior, because he is not described by Isaiah as such" (AM 214).

adduced as evidence of the failure of prophecy (as in Marcion). *Figura* is a species of allegory, but, in Tertullian's hermeneutics, the allegorical sword always cuts with a figural edge—a paradoxical edge that binds what it cuts. The interpretation of scripture is for Tertullian always a matter of maintaining the historical linkage between the Old and New Testaments, and Christianity's claim to be the true religion is secured not in spite of but *by means of* this linkage. As we'll see in more detail below (in Chapters 3-4), figural interpretation would give rise not only to a concept of world history that, as Auerbach puts it, “would remain the sole legitimate view of history for nearly a millennium,” but would also become one of the cornerstones of the understanding of historical reality in the Latin tradition (SE 96). While allegory remained an important mode of reading (as evidenced by the resilience of doctrines regarding the multiple levels of meaning in scriptural reasoning), Auerbach declares that figural interpretation ultimately triumphed over its allegorical antagonist in the West (SE 84-85).

#### §10 Origen

Auerbach has been accused of overemphasizing the *figura-allegoria* distinction, at the particular expense of Origen of Alexandria, who is cast in Auerbach's text as an allegorizing antagonist to the realist Tertullian. In his 1953 reply to critics of *Mimesis*, Auerbach admits that what he is dealing with is, indeed, a species of typological allegory. He nonetheless maintains, and this is indeed what is crucial, that what is really at stake is the distinction between literality and non-literality, or reality and abstraction.<sup>27</sup> Yet, already in “Figura,”

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<sup>27</sup> See M 568-569: “What Curtius understands by typological allegoresis, about which I am supposed to have refrained from informing myself, is unfathomable; typological allegoresis is, after all, the subject of my investigations. Whether one calls it so or calls it figural explication is irrelevant. My original terminology came into being naturally through the fact that I proceeded from a semantic

Auerbach remarks that *figura* was not the only word that designated historically real prophecy. *Allegoria* and *typus*—both Greek loan words—are frequently used by Latin patristic authors to the same end, but in the case of *allegoria*, the word suggests “any deeper meaning and not just real prophecy” (SE 92), and while the usage of *figura* frequently exceeds the narrower semantic range of historically real prophecy, no other words were capable of gathering all the elements of the concept of historically real prophecy, “including the sense of creativity and shaping, of change in an unchanging essence, and of the play between copy and original” (SE 93).<sup>28</sup> But what of the sharp distinction drawn by Auerbach between *allegoria* and *figura*, and between their exemplars: Origen and Tertullian? Is this distinction justified?

Auerbach may have overstated his case regarding the subordination—even the absence—of typology in Origen. This was one of the central charges levied by one of Auerbach’s fiercest critics, Ernst Robert Curtius. Auerbach reports, somewhat wryly, that Curtius accuses him of failing to properly survey the scholarly literature on typology, especially with regard to Origen. Yet, as Auerbach is keen to point out, the ostensibly jilted works enumerated by Curtius all appeared long after the publication of “Figura,” and the works specializing in typology in Origen—by Jean Daniélou and Rudolf Karl Bultmann—were printed four years after *Mimesis*.<sup>29</sup> In spite of those intervening studies (to which should be added Henri de

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history of the word *figura*. [...] But the terminology does not matter, so long as one distinguishes clearly between abstract/allegorical and real/prophetic methods of explication.”

<sup>28</sup> On the history of biblical exegesis in the medieval era, see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978).

<sup>29</sup> Auerbach is likely referring to Jean Daniélou, *Origène* (Paris, La Table Ronde, 1948) [*Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955)]; Rudolf Karl Bultmann, “Ursprung und Sinn der Typologie als hermeneutischer Method,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* (1950), pp. 205ff.

Lubac's 1950 *Histoire et esprit*), Auerbach maintains his position regarding the special status of figural interpretation vis-à-vis the allegorical method (M 567).<sup>30</sup> In a telling footnote, he remarks that in the more recent, specialized works, there is a strong tendency to ascribe a decisive role for typology in Origen's hermeneutics, whereas he had relegated the Alexandrian to the ranks of the 'abstract-allegorical interpreters.' He then admits that this development "is a decisive problem for the conception of typology," but reiterates his conviction that his view of the matter remains correct and needs no alteration (M 568, n.17). What should we make of this? It is tempting to chalk up Auerbach's rather equivocal response to sheer stubbornness. After all, if the 'Origenists' have made a compelling case that Origen is, indeed, a typological thinker, not one given over to mere abstraction and moralizing, shouldn't Auerbach throw in the towel?<sup>31</sup>

At the risk of reading too much into Auerbach's reply to his critics, it seems important to note that Auerbach does not say that the recuperation of typology in Origen is a problem for *figural* interpretation, only that it is a problem for the theory of *typology*. On the one hand, as I've noted just above, Auerbach admits that *figura* is a species of typological allegoresis. He adds that, "whether one calls it [typology] or calls it figural explication is irrelevant. My original terminology came into being naturally through the fact that I proceeded from a semantic history of the word *figura*" (M 568). What I would like to suggest is that here, too, Auerbach equivocates, ceding just a bit too much to his critics. The terminological distinction is, in fact, exceedingly relevant—even decisive. For with *figura*, one can say—and in

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<sup>30</sup> See Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et esprit: L'intelligence de l'écriture d'après Origène*, (Éditions Montaigne, 1950) [*History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen*, trans. Anne England Nash and Juvenal Merriel (Ignatius Press, 2007)].

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Daniélou, *Origen*, 139-173.



Tertullian it does say—something that one cannot say with *typos*. This is the basic thesis of the “Figura” essay: in the context of the Christian interpretation of scripture and the construction of a realist image of a prophetic and providential salvation history, the special semantic power of *figura*—which includes the freight it gained in its classical usage—outstrips all its competitors. The fact that Origen allows for, and even encourages, at least as a hermeneutical starting point, a typological approach to reading scripture does not trouble Auerbach’s theory so much as it confirms (1) that prophecy is the bread and butter of Christian theologies and philosophies of history, (2) that the question of supersession is by no means limited to the hermeneutics of the Latin West, and (3) that there is something special—even singular—about the destiny of *figura* considered as the expression of a historically real prophecy.<sup>32</sup>

Auerbach has put his finger on a subtle, but decisive, distinction between allegory

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<sup>32</sup> Regarding (2), Daniélou’s commentary on this point in Origen is telling. Daniélou writes: “And so we come to the very heart of the mystery of the Christian interpretation of history, the meeting-point of symbolism and drama, of progress and the Cross. As Christians see it, history is symbolical. It is not a succession of heterogeneous events. It constitutes a plan, every stage of which is at once an advance on its predecessor and a continuation of it. Only so does history cease to be dominated by brute fact and become an intelligible process and a possible object for contemplation from the religious point of view. [...] But there can be no progress in history without the destruction of what went before. In so far as the old order has an individual existence of its own it must be destroyed, if the new order is ever to come into being. Judaism had to be destroyed before the Church could come into being [...] The Jews’ hostility to Christ also takes on its full significance when it is considered in this light: it expresses the refusal of the figure to accept destruction. Origen puts it in exceptionally forceful terms. ‘The figure,’ he says, ‘wants to go on existing, and so it tries to prevent the truth from appearing.’ It thus becomes perfectly clear what the enmity the Jews felt towards Christ really meant: it was the visible embodiment of the refusal of the figure to accept its own dissolution [...] Refusal to accept the abolition of the Law has been the Jewish attitude ever since and it always will be, just as it is and always will be the attitude of those who cling to the literal sense of the Old Testament. They too hold on to a figure which can no longer serve its original purpose. Thus, refusal to accept the spiritual sense is equivalent to a refusal of history, is an anachronism” (Daniélou, *Origen*, 150-152). Daniélou’s preference for Origen seems to lead him to speak of the destruction of the figures, when what is really at stake is their *preservation*. Or, we might say that the mode of their ‘destruction’ is, in fact, the fact of their fulfillment; the figures are annulled-fulfilled. One might even say that they are ‘sublated.’

broadly construed and the specific mode of allegory that he names figural interpretation. The distinction is, roughly, as follows: for Origen, the types of the Old Testament are prophecies of heavenly—that is, spiritual—realities, not, as in Tertullian, of historically real persons and events. The figure (or, for Origen, the *typos*) points away or turns away (the etymology of *trope* is ‘to turn’) from itself. For Origen, history is fundamentally spiritual, and one misses the truth of history if one remains at the level of ‘merely external’ events.<sup>33</sup> This means that Auerbach’s defense of *figura* as ‘historically real prophecy’ does, indeed, pick out something unique about Tertullian and the concept of history bequeathed to the West by the Latin tradition, according to which the spiritual truth is neither ‘below’ nor ‘beyond’ its material, fleshly appearance. What is really at stake is the unity of the spiritual and the material. Yet, as we’ll see below (in Chapter 3), this unity is subject to several profound tensions and ambiguities, especially regarding the attitude of the majority of Christian thinkers toward the fleshly and material reality of the world. In any case, what Auerbach glimpses in Tertullian’s

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<sup>33</sup> See Daniélou, *Origen*, 163: “He seems to have been opposed to that school of exegesis which we said depended on St. Matthew, the one that looked on the external events of the Old Testament as figures of equally external (notice that I do not say historical) events in the New, the school of Hippolytus in particular. The method is rarely found applied in his works, and in one passage on the symbolism of the paschal lamb he distinctly takes up his stand against it. He seems to have had in mind the interpretation given by Hippolytus in his paschal homily. Hippolytus regarded the preparation of the lamb as a detailed prophecy of the events recorded in the historical account of the Passion—the four days that elapsed before the lamb was sacrificed represented the time Christ was kept in confinement by Caiphas before he was taken to Calvary; the fact that the lamb was sacrificed in the evening meant that Christ would suffer in the evening. Origen’s answer is that ‘it would be wrong to think that one historical event is a figure of another or one corporeal thing a figure of another corporeal thing. No; the corporeal is a figure of the spiritual, the historical of the intelligible.’ [here Daniélou is citing Origen’s *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 10.18] It would be a grievous misinterpretation to take this as a condemnation of the kind of exegesis that regarded the Old Testament as a figure of the historical Christ in the sense in which we now understand the word historical. What Origen is directly aiming at is the kind of exegesis that saw the Old Testament as a figure of the anecdotal side (which is what *istoria* means in Greek) of Christ’s life and not of the theological side. But in the sense in which we now use the word historical, the theological side is just as historical as the other.”

usage of *figura* is the continuation (but also the radicalization) of a hermeneutical and theological (but also literary and philosophical) tradition according to which the spiritual is immanent in the material, the high in the low, the profound in the superficial, the extraordinary in the ordinary, and—as a certain Hegel might say—the internal in the external. The *figura*, as construed by Auerbach, points away from itself not by picturing whatever it is that is ‘away’ (i.e., some heavenly reality or spiritual truth) but simply by virtue of its pointing. The *figura* is, indeed, a trope, but it is a special and unique class of tropes that turn to what they promise, and salvation history turns around them. Let us consider this distinction in more detail and judge its consequences.

Auerbach does not develop his reading of Origen at any great length.<sup>34</sup> We can be reasonably certain that his construal of Origen as a ‘mere’ allegorizer is derived from Origen’s remarks on the interpretation of scripture in Book IV of *On First Principles*. At first glance, there does not seem to be much that really distinguishes Origen from Tertullian. Origen affirms that the Old Testament contains prophecies in the guise of types or figures, and that the scriptures contain literal accounts of true history (*historiae ueritatem*) (4.3.4).<sup>35</sup> In an earlier passage of the same work, Origen affirms, too, that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are one and the same, adducing the

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<sup>34</sup> In the only passage where he treats Origen’s work directly, Auerbach admits that Origen’s hermeneutics are not as starkly abstract and allegorical as Philo of Alexandria (SE 84). Nonetheless, as we’ll see below, Auerbach detects in Origen a tendency toward “spiriting away” (as Manheim renders *verflüchtigen*; see Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, 36) the historical character of the scriptural accounts. Tertullian, by contrast, is determined never to lose his grip on the “concrete historicity [*Innernesschichtlichkeit*] of scripture, which was—Auerbach avers—”deeply meaningful in its own right” (SE 84 [69]).

<sup>35</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, Vols. 1-2, ed. and trans. John Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 528/529.

consistency of the gospels in their claims about the fulfillment of prophecy,<sup>36</sup> and anticipates St. Augustine's hermeneutical method of *caritas*, insisting that one must not understand scriptural descriptions of God's wrath literally, but must seek the spiritual meaning of 'wrath,' so as to "think in a manner worthy for understanding God."<sup>37</sup> Origen cites Hebrews 8:5, which refers to the Law as a shadow (*umbra*) that functioned as an earthly pedagogue, whose ordinances were intended to educate the faithful to prepare them for the Christ's more perfect ordinances.<sup>38</sup> Much like Tertullian, Origen is critical of the way that both the Jews and the heretics (Marcion among them) read and interpret the scriptures (4.2.1).<sup>39</sup> Yet, it is here, in the difference between Origen's and Tertullian's respective objections to the scriptural interpretations of their common enemies, that we can glimpse the subtle but decisive difference between allegorical and figural modes of reading. Doubtless, one can attribute the difference between Tertullian's and Origen's hermeneutical stances to their respective philosophical predilections: Tertullian the Stoicizing 'materialist', Origen the Platonizing 'idealist.' Yet, as we'll see shortly, there is something else at stake in their disagreement, namely, the meaning of history.

As Daniélou points out, Origen's method of spiritual exegesis was embroiled in one of the most pressing political-theological problems of his day. The problem is a familiar one, namely, the significance of the Old Testament.

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<sup>36</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 180/181.

<sup>37</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 188/189. See my discussion of Augustine's concept of *caritas* above (§6).

<sup>38</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 452/453.

<sup>39</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 484-489.

Christians found themselves at issue with the Jews on the one hand, who still held to the literal meaning and kept the Law of Moses, and the gnostics on the other, who rejected the Old Testament on the ground that it was the work of the Demiurge and a part of his creation that had not turned out properly. The two theories were on common ground in that they both took the Old Testament in the literal sense only. [...] The [Christian] idea gradually emerged that the difference between the Testaments was that the one was imperfect and the other perfect: it implied that the New Testament was an advance on the Old and not the absolute antithesis of it. [...] The Old Testament had at one time had a function to fulfill, but that function was to prefigure and prepare for the New. Once the New Testament was in force, the Old Testament lapsed as far as its literal meaning was concerned but kept its value as a figure.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, Origen criticizes the Jews and the heretics alike for their *literal* reading of scripture. The former were keen to keep it and to keep to it, the latter were disposed to dispose of it.

One should certainly regard with skepticism Daniélou's sweeping claims regarding the exegetical prerogatives and practices of Jews and gnostics in the ancient world. Philo of Alexandria, for instance would hardly qualify as a Jewish 'literalist.' It is false, too, that Jews of that era were uniformly given to literalism. Moreover, accusations of such literalism, be they levied by Daniélou or Origen himself, are readily understood as a twentieth- and third-century instances of the Pauline polemic against the 'letter' in favor of the 'spirit.' The figure—i.e., the trope—of the Jew as a slave to the letter is *de rigueur* for that species of

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<sup>40</sup> Daniélou, *Origen*, 140-141. Daniélou notes in a later passage that Origen's spiritual exegesis was also compelled to confront a third party: the literalist, 'Judaizing party in the Church' (143).

Christian fusillade. Likewise Daniélou's breezy depiction of gnostic exegesis reflects the comparatively sorry state of scholarship on so-called gnosticism in the 1950s, when the discoveries at Qumran had yet to revolutionize the field.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, Daniélou's comments about Origen's struggle with the gnostics seems to have less to do with gnosticism broadly construed than with the threat posed by Marcion, who—in spite of Harnack's 1921 study that sharply distinguished Marcion from 'generic' gnosticism—still commonly appeared at mid-century as a taxon in the gnostic family tree. Nonetheless, there is something bracing about the way that Daniélou sets up the stakes of Origen's allegorical radicalism. Origen's position on the interpretation of scripture was clarified in response to the Jewish and Marcionite errors: the Old Testament “had once served a definite purpose but had now been superseded.”<sup>42</sup>

In response to the Marcionite incursions, which affirmed the literality of the Old Testament in order to deny its soteriological significance, Origen formulated a three-fold hierarchy of the meaning of scripture. This hierarchy of meaning maps onto the three-fold unity (body, soul, and spirit) of the human being.<sup>43</sup> The *body* of scripture is its literal sense (i.e., its “common and narrative sense”). The *soul* of scripture is its moral sense, according to which the church receives its moral and ethical edification. The *spirit* of scripture is its perfect sense, true and complete: the hidden wisdom of the revealed God. Origen is by no means opposed to the literal, narrational sense of the body of scripture; he recognizes and

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<sup>41</sup> On the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, see the translators' introduction to *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, trans. Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr. and Edward Cook (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 3-35.

<sup>42</sup> Daniélou, *Origen*, 143.

<sup>43</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 496/497.

celebrates its undeniable utility for teaching and preaching (4.2.6). Yet, if the literal sense should prove impossible to affirm, the Christian should descend to the deeper, or ascend to the higher (in any case, truer), levels of meaning (4.2.4).<sup>44</sup> Such instances are not uncommon, though they typically derive from exegetical difficulties associated with scriptural descriptions of God's mutability, God's anger, or—a special bugbear of Origen's—God's corporeality.

Origen's brief remarks (4.3.1) on the interpretation of the Garden narrative in Genesis are dispositive. No intelligent person, he avers, would find the account of the creation narrative plausible in all its details. The first, second, and third days of creation are described by scripture as passing (he notes wryly that scripture even mentions “evening and morning”) in the absence of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Worse still, the first day is said to have passed without even a sky to traverse. He then refers to Genesis 2:

And who is found so foolish as to suppose that *God*, as a human gardener, planted trees in *paradise, in Eden towards the east*, and planted *a tree of life* in it, that is, a visible and palpable tree of wood, so that anyone eating of this tree with bodily teeth would gain life, and again eating of another tree would lay hold of the knowledge of *good and evil*? And again when God is said to *walk in paradise in the afternoon* and Adam to *hide himself behind a tree*, no one, I reckon, really doubts that these things are related by Scripture figuratively [*figurali tropo*], so that certain mystical truths are

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<sup>44</sup> Daniélou notes that Origen often favors a strategy of admitting that portions of the New Testament cannot be read literally but must be understood morally or spiritually. See Daniélou, *Origen*, 142.

indicated through them.<sup>45</sup>

Origen adduces these scriptural examples to illustrate his claim that scripture contains obstacles and stumbling blocks (“*inpossibilia quaedam et inconuenientia*”) in its historical narratives (4.2.9). These obstacles are meant to compel a moment of spiritual reflection in the reader, in which the ‘ordinary sense’ of the narrative is suspended, revealing another, narrower path leading away from the banal and merely external historical account toward the immensity of divine knowledge (*ingressum immensam diuinae scientiae*). If the historical narratives of scripture were to proceed continuously, without interruption, the reader would skip like a stone over the surface of the deep waters of wisdom. Origen, for his part, is pre-eminently concerned with what lies beneath. He also remarks (4.2.5) that there are passages in the scriptures where the ‘body’ is missing; in such cases, only the moral and the spiritual meanings are available. Yet, they are for this very reason *available*. The path to spiritual understanding leads not around or about the aporia but through it.

It is worth pausing to consider an issue related to the translation history of Origen’s text. I’ve been drawing from John Behr’s 2018 English translation of *De Principiis*, which is the text of Rufinus’s Latin translation, dating to 397 CE, of Origen’s original Greek *Peri Archon*, which was written in the late 220s CE. Most of *Peri Archon* is lost, but certain fragments, including crucial passages from Book IV, survived in an anthology of Origen’s texts.<sup>46</sup> Behr’s edition includes both the Latin and, where available, the Greek. The passage on the

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<sup>45</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 518/519. Emphases in original; they signal a quotation from scripture in Origen’s text.

<sup>46</sup> See David Bentley Hart, “*On First Principles* by Origen” [review], *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020): 103-107.



interpretation of Genesis that I've cited just above (4.3.1) is one such instance where both the Latin and the Greek are extant. One of the sentences in that passage warrants comparison. The Latin reads "*equidem nullum arbitror dubitare quod figurali tropo haec ab scriptura proferantur, quo per haec quaedam mystica indicentur.*" As we saw above, Behr renders the Latin as follows: "no one, I reckon, really doubts that these things are related by Scripture figuratively, so that certain mystical truths are indicated through them." Behr renders the Greek in English as follows: "I do not think that anyone doubts that these figuratively indicate, through apparent narratives and through things that did not happen bodily, certain mysteries."<sup>47</sup>

What is interesting about the divergences in the Latin and the Greek is that the body (*somatikos*, is an adjective rendered straightforwardly as 'bodily') appears to have disappeared in Rufinus's Latin and in Behr's rendering of Rufinus. This is significant. As we've seen above, Origen's discourse is determined by the fact that the metaphor of the body—as the ordinary, literal, merely external level of meaning in scripture—is insufficient for a true understanding of its hidden mysteries.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, we've seen that Origen is given to pointing out passages in scripture where the body is missing, leaving only the moral and spiritual meanings to be deciphered. In this passage, Rufinus appears to enact at the lexical

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<sup>47</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 518-521.

<sup>48</sup> For example, in 4.2.8: "Thus, while it was the intention of the Holy Spirit to enlighten those holy souls, who had devoted themselves to the service of the truth, about these and similar matters, there was, in second place, this aim, namely—for the sake of those who either could not or would not give themselves up to this labor and toil so that they might deserve to be taught and come to know things of such value—to wrap up and conceal, as we have said before, in ordinary language, under the cover of some history and narrative of visible things, hidden mysteries [*quo haec tanta ac talia edoceri uel agnoscere merentur, sicut superius diximus, inuolueret et occultaret sermonibus usitatis sub praetexto historiae cuiusdam et narrationis rerum uisibilium arcana mysteria*]." (Origen, *On First Principles*, 512/513)

level what Origen hopes to accomplish rhetorically: to show that the body is not really there, that it is only a semblance, a collection of merely “apparent narratives [*dokoúsēs istorias*].” So, the body disappears inasmuch as it is mere appearance; Rufinus does not write *corpore*, not even in order to stage its negation. And yet, not all is as it seems, for when Rufinus translates Origen’s *tropikos* he writes—here is the rub—*figurali tropo*, ‘figurative trope.’ A seeming pleonasm (after all, what other sort of trope is there?). Yet it is perhaps a fitting expression of Origen’s insistence on the power and pre-eminence of spiritual exegesis: the ascension—by way of non-literality, viz., *allegoria*—from the anecdotal, external, and material types to the hidden mysteries of heaven.

When Behr translates *figurali tropo* as “figuratively,” he does not err—not exactly—but he does convert the nominal *tropo* and the adjectival *figurali* into an adverb. This is closer, grammatically speaking, to Origen’s Greek than it is to Rufinus’s Latin and it has the two-fold effect of concealing the fact (1) that Rufinus has nominalized *tropikos* with his *tropo* and (2) added the pleonastic *figurali*. Why Rufinus should have selected *figuralis* (a late Latin adjectival form of *figura*) is no mystery: it very ably expresses non-literality, the tropic; it suggests semblance, mere appearance, imagery. We can thus reasonably surmise that *figurali* is not simply pleonastic but is the word Rufinus chooses to capture another key term that has gone missing in the transit from Greek to Latin: *dokoúsēs istorias* (‘apparent narratives,’ or ‘apparent histories’), which does not appear in translation in this passage of *De Principiis*. Rufinus does not write *apparent*, *imaginarium*, or *speciem*. Instead, he writes *figuralis*. For Origen, there is no body, no literality, in this passage of scripture; there are only tropes, figures of speech.

On the other hand, perhaps Rufinus’s *figurali tropo* is not a pleonasm at all, but rather a

symptom of the semantic potentiality of *figura*. For while, when one says '*figura*,' one does not mean 'body' as such, one does mean (as Auerbach demonstrates in the first section of "Figura") sensuousness, materiality, shape and three-dimensionality; in short, *figura* allows one to say what one means: the form of the body, the figure.<sup>49</sup> It is as if the body—recall that Origen's *somatikos* is spirited away in Rufinus—is, in the Latin, trying to return to the place *figura* holds for it. Into the bargain, the sense of *figura* as 'historically real prophecy,' which was crystallized in Tertullian, was available to Rufinus in a way it was not to Origen. The literalism suggested by *figuralis* threatens to overcome semantically the lexical non-literalism of the noun *tropo*. But this is only speculative. In spite of Rufinus's reputation as a rather licentious translator, it is clear that he is a loyal 'Origenian.' The literalism of *figuralis* is relegated (thus neutralized) to the status of a modifying adjective for the thing itself, namely, the *tropo*, which—and this is the whole point—is not a thing.

Origen is not, here, doing typology; on the contrary, he is demonstrating the limitations of typology. Where he does engage in typology, he makes clear that what is at stake for our understanding of scripture is not a body as such but the tropic power of a body to signify something other than a body.<sup>50</sup> So, we can see that Auerbach has grasped something

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<sup>49</sup> SE 65-78. Cf. SE 92: "*Allegoria* is not always to be used as synonymous with *figura*, as it does not include the meaning of 'shape' or 'form;' one could not write, *Adam est allegoria Christi*."

<sup>50</sup> In *On First Principles* 4.3.4, Origen defends himself against charges that he claims scripture is entirely unhistorical: "All these things have been mentioned by us that we might show that the aim of the Holy Spirit, who deigned to bestow upon us the divine Scriptures, is not that we would be able to be edified by the letter alone or by it in every case—which we know to be frequently impossible and not itself sufficient; that is, not only irrational things but even impossible ones are occasionally described by it—but that we might understand that certain things were interwoven in this visible narrative [*uisibili historiae*] which, when considered and understood in their inner meaning, provide a law beneficial to human beings and worth of God. But that no one should suspect us of saying that, because we suspect some of the scriptural history [*historiam scripturae*] did not happen, we think that none of it happened, or that, because we have said that some of the precepts of the Law cannot be observed according to the letter in those cases in which either reason or the possibility of the case does not permit this, then none of them stand according to the letter, or that those things which were

genuinely distinctive in his reading of Tertullian: a *figura* is not a mere semblance that points to something extra-historical—or to the spiritual truth of history—but is rather a literally and historically real prophecy.<sup>51</sup> It is worth reiterating that Origen does not have the lexical means with which to express this idea: one cannot say with *typos* what one can say with *figura*. Thus, even if Daniélou, et al. are correct in their assertion that Origen is a typological reader of scripture, his typological understanding of history is nonetheless subject to a fundamental limit imposed by the semantic boundaries of *typos*. One historically real body or person or event or object cannot prophecy another; a given type is the type of a spiritual, not a bodily, truth. The body (the literal reading) tells us nothing in itself or about itself, or about any other body. At best, it points to its truth, which Origen describes as “mysteries” or—in Rufinus’s Latin—“mystical truths” (*mystica*).<sup>52</sup>

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written of the Saviour are not even to be thought of as having been accomplished perceptibly [*sensibiliter impleta*], or that his precepts ought not to be obeyed according to the letter—it must be answered therefore, that we are clearly resolved that the truth of history [*historiae ueritatem*] can and ought to be preserved in the majority of cases” (528/529).

<sup>51</sup> As Gellrich puts it, “*Figura* sounds like allegory, but it acts differently. Existing ‘in time’ as an event in history, it is also another subsequent event, and this middle position is what constitutes it ‘within the stream of historical life.’ The historicity of a figure, in the final analysis, does not consist in an identity with a previous or subsequent model, but in the uncertainty of the form, its role in the ‘stream’ of time between origin and fulfillment.” See Jesse M. Gellrich, “Figura, Allegory, and the Question of History,” in Seth Lerer, ed., *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 119.

<sup>52</sup> Origen repeatedly argues that the truth cannot be found in the ordinary or the anecdotal. E.g., in 4.2.8: “Thus, while it was the intention of the Holy Spirit to enlighten those holy souls, who had devoted themselves to the service of the truth, about these and similar matters, there was, in second place, this aim, namely—for the sake of those who either could not or would not give themselves up to this labor and toil so that they might deserve to be taught and come to know things of such value—to wrap up and conceal, as we have said before, in ordinary language, under the cover of some history and narrative of visible things, hidden mysteries” (513). The ordinary is but the historical and narrative ‘pretext’ (*praetexto*) in which is wrapped and concealed (*inuolueret et occultaret*) what is really true. We will see below (§16) that Auerbach locates the peculiar power of *figura* in its capacity to locate the truth (indeed, the ‘Beyond’) in the ordinary, material, and anecdotal reality of everyday life.

What this digression has made clear is that when it comes to the question of the literality and historical reality of the narratives recounted in scripture, one must make a basic decision on the meaning of the figures found therein. Are they literal (figural) or non-literal (allegorical)? Are they historically real prophecies or indices of heavenly realities? Even where Origen embraces the historical reality of types (e.g., in his reading of the battle of Jericho), their literality and historical reality is provisional: it points ever onward and upward to a mystical meaning that is not, strictly speaking, proper to the types themselves.<sup>53</sup> The figures-types are allegorical. In Tertullian, the figures are also provisional, but in a very different sense, for in their very incompleteness and imperfection they are, in fact and as facts, the signatures of their own ultimate meaning: they are promises. This brings us to the vertical.

### §11 The Vertical

We have seen how, in Tertullian's theological hermeneutics, one historical event or person is linked to another historical event or person. The principle of this linkage is condensed in the historically real prophecies (*figurae*) that are littered throughout the Old Testament, which, without losing any of their own historical reality, signal their fulfillment in the life and times of Jesus the Christ as reported in the New Testament. Since our aim is to discover, in the practice of figural interpretation, a conceptual grammar or logic of supersession, we need to determine the limits and structure of that mode of reading scripture, as well as the histories reported there. One such limit appears already in Tertullian, namely,

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<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of Origen's approach to the Jericho narrative, see Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Wulstan Hibberd (London: Burns & Oates, 1960), 276-286.

the fact that the figures and fulfillments that populate his polemics against the Jews, the allegorizers, and the Marcionites are mostly situated on a horizontal plane. Yet, if history is to be what it is, namely, the universal history of salvation, a vertical dimension is required.

This vertical dimension—God’s transcendence—is presupposed in Tertullian’s discourse. We get a glimpse of it in *De resurrectione carnis*, Chapter 20, where, again confronting spiritualizing interpretations of scripture, he insists that the figural reading of scripture is always to be preferred, in part because it is the simplest, most straightforward of all possible readings. (He even claims, in *Against Praxeus* 18.2, that scripture can interpret itself.)<sup>54</sup> To this end, he must admit that the prophetic form of discourse is occasionally allegorical—“sometimes and in some places.”<sup>55</sup> He then imagines a critic who replies that the resurrection (which is the matter at hand) might very well be one of those ‘sometimes and some places’ where the meaning is spiritual and allegorical, rather than bodily and literal. In the prolepsis that follows thereafter, Tertullian remarks on the clarity of prophecy (in seeming contradiction to his claims, in *Adversus Marcionem*, that prophecies are shrouded in mysterious *umbrae*) and wonders aloud:

If such open prophecy [*aperta prophetia*—i.e., clear, unlocked prophecy] has launched God's temporal and local and personal decrees and judgements against cities and nations and kings, how can his eternal and universal ordinances against the whole human race have fled from the light that is themselves? For the greater these are, the clearer they would need to be, so as to be believed to be the greater. And I suppose

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<sup>54</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 18.2.

<sup>55</sup> Tertullian, *De resurrectione carnis*, 20.

that to God one can ascribe neither envy nor guile nor cowardice nor the fear of displeasing, which are the usual reasons why the promulgation of great matters is wrapped up in subtleties.<sup>56</sup>

Here the truths proclaimed by prophecy are clear and crystalline, and their clarity is established in direct proportion to their importance as eternal truths.

At this point, it is tempting to accuse Tertullian of equivocation. Are figural prophecies clear and distinct, or clouded and obscure? David Dunn has remarked on the protean character of Tertullian's rhetorical postures, which can prove irksome to the reader who wishes to nail down Tertullian's point of view. Dunn avers that Tertullian simply uses the hermeneutical or rhetorical strategy that is best-suited to win the day, alternating between allegorical, typological, and spiritual interpretations as needed.<sup>57</sup> This seems true enough; I have already adduced several examples of Tertullian's shifting strategies above. Yet we should not lose sight of the fact that Tertullian consistently, even relentlessly, privileges the real, literal, and historical (in short, the figural) reading over those that resort to allegory, metaphor, and moralizing spiritual exegesis. Whatever one thinks of Tertullian's rhetorical vacillations, there is something elegant about his passionate and ruthless criticism of those who fail to see the truth of the historically real prophecies in scripture, be those prophecies clear or clouded.

We know, of course, why Tertullian's adversaries cannot seem to get the message. They lack the eyes of faith: the *intellectus spiritualis*. We saw above that the *intellectus spiritualis* is

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<sup>56</sup> Tertullian, *De resurrectione carnis*, 21.

<sup>57</sup> David Dunn, *Tertullian (The Early Church Fathers)* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 15.

the only properly spiritual moment of Tertullian's procedure. We are now in a position to understand why. It is the vertical dimension, a sort of divine vision afforded to the faithful—not to the Jews, nor to the heretics—that allows history to be viewed as a vast and glorious promise. Yet the vertical dimension (the eternity of the mind of God) remains more or less implicit in Tertullian's figural polemics. The exigencies of his situation required Tertullian to downplay the eternity of the *figurae*, so as to combat the tendency to spirit them away into the misty realms of metaphor and allegory. Tertullian's discourse is thus predominantly, though certainly not exclusively, 'horizontal.' It was left to another giant of Latin theology—namely, St. Augustine—to make explicit what remained implicit in Tertullian, and to face up to the consequent paradoxes that attend every attempt to think the originary vertex of history as not merely an image or a metaphor, but as an historically real person.

Augustine's "spirituality [*Geistigkeit*]," as Auerbach puts it, "was much too alive and situated in history for him to have been content with anything that was allegorical in a purely abstract way" (SE 85).<sup>58</sup> Auerbach notes briefly the instances of *figura* in Augustine that express its wider semantic payload. For example, Augustine's reading of 1 Cor. 7:31 in *The City of God* 20.14, where he reads *figura* for Paul's *schēma*: "*Figura ergo praeterit, non natura.*" Yet, as we should expect, it is to the instances of *figura* construed as historically real prophecy that Auerbach pays closest attention.<sup>59</sup> The upshot of Auerbach's survey of

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<sup>58</sup> We will consider objections to this thesis (e.g., Karl Löwith's claim that Augustine cares only for the 'secret' history of salvation running beneath or behind secular history) in more detail in Chapter 4 below (§§24-25).

<sup>59</sup> These instances are extremely numerous; Auerbach lists off a selection of them in quick, dense, succession: "Thus, Noah's Ark (*De civitate Dei* 15.27) is a *praefiguratio ecclesiae*; Moses is a *figura Christi* in several different ways (for example, *De civitate Dei* 10.6 or 18.11), the *sacerdotium* of Aaron (17.6) is an *umbra et figura aeterni sacerdotii*, Hagar the slave (16.11) is a *figura* of the Old Testament, the *terrena Jerusalem*, Sarah of the New Testament (17.3, *Expos. ad Galatas* 40), the *supernae Jerusalem, civitas Dei*; Jacob and Esau (*De civitate Dei* 16.42) *figuram praebuerunt*



Augustine's works is that, in Augustine, "the entire Old Testament, or at least the important figures and events, are *universally* interpreted in a figurative way [*werden einheitlich figural interpretiert*]" (SE 86, my italics). We should pause a moment here to reflect on the word *einheitlich* in Auerbach's claim. Auerbach's translator, Jane O. Newman, renders *einheitlich* as "universally," but the root *einheit* simply means 'unity,' and the connotation of *einheitlich* is closer to 'uniformly' or 'standardly.' This is important, because Augustine was not always so passionately dedicated to the literal-figural interpretation of the Old Testament.<sup>60</sup>

Giorgio Agamben has pointed out that in the early *De Genesi contra Manichaeos libri duo* (*Two Books Against the Manichaeans Concerning Genesis*, c.388 CE), Augustine was content to interpret the two trees of paradise allegorically, as figures of speech (here Augustine uses *figura* in its wider allegorical, i.e. figurative, sense) depicting the "happiness of man [*beatitudo hominis*]." <sup>61</sup> Things stand much differently decades later when he writes his *De Genesi ad litteram* (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*), where Augustine admits that he had failed to find the literal sense in his prior works, but "now the Lord has willed that, by looking deeper within and considering more closely these texts, I should also show that these facts had been written in a proper sense and not in an allegorical sense."<sup>62</sup> Agamben

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*duorum populorum in Christianis et Iudeis and the anointed kings of Judea (17.10) (Christi) figuram prophetica unctio gestabunt*" (SE 85-85).

<sup>60</sup> On Augustine's literalism, see Yoon Kyung Kim, *Augustine's Changing Interpretations of Genesis 1-3: From De Genesi Contra Manichaeos to De Genesi Ad Litteram* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2006); and Bronwen Neil, "Exploring the Limits of Literal Exegesis: Augustine's Reading of Gen 1:16," *Pacifica* 19 (Summer 2006): 144-155.

<sup>61</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, trans. Adam Kotsko (London, New York, and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2020), 45. See Augustine, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos libri duo*, 2.9.12. URL: [https://www.augustinus.it/latino/genesi\\_dcm/index2.htm](https://www.augustinus.it/latino/genesi_dcm/index2.htm): "*propterea his verbis etiam spiritales deliciae, quas habet beata vita, figurate explicantur.*"

<sup>62</sup> Augustine, qtd. in Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, 46. Agamben, seeking to

attributes the shift in Augustine's method to the exigency of the Pelagian heresy, which centered on the questions of human nature and original sin. Augustine's shift to a strategy of literal interpretation is meant to establish that paradise (viz. the Garden of Eden) is a real, literal locality on the earth, where the first parents once really and literally lived. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from that paradise was a literal, historical event that indexes their fall (also literal and historical) from grace into the mires of sin, and thus the definitive—though not final—corruption of their nature (i.e., of the human will).

This episode of Augustine's theological career is of interest to us because it bespeaks a crisis. Agamben remarks that Augustine's

disenchanted refusal of all allegorical reading of the biblical text is all the more significant insofar as it denies an exegetical tradition that, starting from Philo and Origen, had profoundly influenced Ambrose, whom Augustine considered his master and who had seen in paradise an allegory of the human soul and in the tree of life and image of wisdom. Against this tradition, Augustine invites us not to neglect what appears *ante oculos* (before our eyes).<sup>63</sup>

We should proceed with caution here, too, as Agamben's comments ("refusal of *all* [*ogni*] allegorical reading of the biblical text") might be misconstrued to mean that Augustine had levied a universal interdiction against allegory. This is, of course, not the case, as a cursory reading of the apex of Augustine's hermeneutical writings, *On Christian Doctrine*, shows

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distinguish between allegory and literality, uses 'figural' to mean the merely allegorical.

<sup>63</sup> Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, 46. I note in passing that Augustine's admonition to simply look at what is right in front of us plays on the antique sense of *figura*, a visible and sensible shape, as well as on the truth of prophecy, which can be seen clear as day by the eyes of faith.

quite clearly. Agamben is likely overstating his case. Augustine, according to his hermeneutical principle of *caritas*, regularly retreats to allegory in order to safeguard the goodness of God and the saints when interpreting scripture.<sup>64</sup> It is notable, of course, that in his fully-matured hermeneutics, Augustine considers allegory a strategy of retreat, rather than as a guiding principle or a point of departure. Moreover, Augustine recommends trusting the literal, sensuous meaning of scripture (what is *ante oculos*, before our eyes). Whatever spiritual and theological lessons are to be learned from Genesis, they must not outstrip the literal, “proper” (*proprie*) sense of the text, which is to be construed as historically real wherever possible.

What is clear, in any case, is that Augustine struggled fiercely not only to defend Christian doctrine, but also the Church that governs the sacramental life of Christians, from any and all attempts at subversion—be they Pelagian, Donatist, or otherwise—and that this crisis led him, in turn, to something of a break with the allegorical tradition of his own theological master, Ambrose. As we’ll see below, the meaning of history, as well as the decisive role of the Church in it, depends on the reality and literality of the prophetic content of the Old Testament. The question that confronts us, and that confronted Augustine, is: what is the ground or guarantor of that reality and literality? We’ll see, too, that theological

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<sup>64</sup> See OCD 3.10: “In the first place, then, we must show the way to find out whether a phrase is literal or figurative. And the way is certainly as follows: Whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set it down as figurative. Purity of life has reference to the love of God and one’s neighbor; soundness of doctrine to the knowledge of God and one’s neighbor. [...] Now Scripture enjoins nothing except charity [*caritatem*], and condemns nothing except lust [*cupiditatem*], and in that way fashions the lives of men. In the same way, if an erroneous opinion has taken possession of the mind, men think that whatever Scripture asserts contrary to this must be figurative. Now Scripture asserts nothing but the catholic faith, in regards to things past, future, and present. It is a narrative of the past, a prophecy of the future, and a description of the present. But all these tend to nourish and strengthen charity, and to overcome and root out lust.” And see my discussion of this passage above (§6).

innovations are often precipitated by a crisis of some or other magnitude, as was the case in Tertullian's desperate battle with the Marcionite heresy, which threatened to sever the link between creation and redemption.

This digression gives us a sense of why Auerbach's diction—*einheitlich*, rather than *allgemein*—is better suited to the description of Augustine's 'spirituality.' As was the case with Tertullian, a savvy hermeneut must inevitably make concessions to allegory, but the prophetic and promissory nature of scripture must always take precedence. The figural reading is preferred because, without the real, historical linkage between figure and fulfillment, prophecy itself dissolves, and so too does the historical mandate of the Church—its "task in history." We see this in Auerbach's gloss of Augustine's comments regarding the interpretation of the law and the sacraments. The sacraments, promised figurally by the observances of the Mosaic law, are embodied and revealed in their historical reality by the life and death of Christ, and Christians must therefore live according to the truth of the law revealed in and through Christ (SE 87). This truth is in the letter, promised by it, but irreducible to it. Here again, *figura* allows the interpreter to read, at once, both the figure itself and its lack, and thus to read the signal of a fulfillment to come. One can glean allegorical lessons from scripture, but the reality—the letter, and the truth in the letter—is paramount.

It is at this point in his analysis that Auerbach turns to a feature of Augustine's thought that distinguishes him in some respects from Tertullian. We saw above that Tertullian's discourse on figural interpretation is predominantly 'horizontal,' moving from A (the figure) to B (its fulfillment) in a more or less linear or planar fashion. Tertullian's figural method is also, and obviously, polar. Even if there are multiple figures that signal a single fulfillment

(e.g., Isaac's wood, as well as wood- and tree-figures in general, prefigure the cross), the procedure tends to take the figures individually—or at least one-by-one—and relate them to the other pole, namely, their fulfillment in the New Testament. Again, it is not surprising that Tertullian would limit himself to showing the figural link between the two sets of scriptures, since what was at stake was precisely their relation, which is to say, their integrity as a total archive of revelation. In Augustine, for whom the integrity of the dual canon was not in jeopardy, we glimpse a different problem, which we can refer to as the eschatological problem.

In short, the figures of the Old Testament did not prophesy only the earthly, sensuous, and bodily fulfillments of the New Testament; they also prophesied things celestial (*rerum celestium*) (CG 20.28). Yet these heavenly fulfillments are not—not in Augustine's time at any rate—complete. This is a paradox familiar to Christians: history is at once complete *and* incomplete; Christ has come and his salvific work is finished, *and* he is coming again to finish, not the work, but the 'last things.' The eschaton thus poses a problem for those who wish—as Augustine does—to prosecute the case for Christian belief, against Jews, Manichees, and pagans alike. If the case for the truth of Christian doctrine rests in large part upon the fulfillment of prophecy, then an account of those fulfillments that are still outstanding is required.

Auerbach describes Augustine's strategy, vis-a-vis the eschatological problem, as follows:

We thus see—as in several of the earlier writers, but more pronouncedly in Augustine—that the juxtaposition of two poles, figure and fulfillment, is sometimes replaced by a three-step process: first, the Law, or the history of the Jews as a

prophetic *figura* of the coming of Christ; then, the Incarnation, or the fulfillment of this *figura*, which is simultaneously a new promise of the end of the world and the Last Judgment; and, finally, the future advent of these events as the final fulfillment. (SE 87)

The scriptural warrant for such a reading is Paul's admonition (1 Cor. 10:1-13) to the Church at Corinth that they should avoid lapsing into the idolatry and sexual immorality of ancient Israel, upon whom God had periodically poured out his wrath. Paul lists off various punishments suffered by Israel (e.g., military defeat, a rash of deadly serpent bites), and writes—twice—that these events are to be understood as *typoi* (examples) for the sake of Christian believers: “Now these things occurred as examples [*typoi*] for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did (10:6);” “These things happened to them to serve as an example [*typoi*], and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the end of the ages have come (10:11).” Augustine cites these very passages in *Contra Faustinum* 4.2 to illustrate the three-fold structure of figural prophecy.<sup>65</sup> The New Testament is promised and prefigured in the Old Testament. The eschaton, for its part, is promised and prefigured not simply *in* the New Testament, but *by* the New Testament's fulfillment of the Old Testament. As expected, Augustine renders Paul's *typos* with *figura*.

Auerbach remarks that Augustine, like Paul, clearly believes the final fulfillment to be imminent. Yet whereas one gets the sense in reading Paul that the Old Testament is “transformed into a single great promise” (SE 94), in Augustine it is clear that there is more than one promise at play: in the Old Testament and in the Gospels. The reason for this

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<sup>65</sup> Augustine, *Contra Faustus*, 4.2. URL: [https://www.augustinus.it/latino/control\\_fausto/index2.htm](https://www.augustinus.it/latino/control_fausto/index2.htm)

difference is obvious: Paul did not possess a New Testament. Moreover, he assumed—as we read in the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians—that while the actuality of the Last Judgment (“the day of the Lord [*ho hēmera ho kyrios*]” [2:2]) had yet to arrive, the ‘last things,’ which were to be preceded by a Satanic rebellion, were indeed already actual, and in motion (“for the mystery of lawlessness is already at work [*gar ho mystērion anomia ēdē energeo*]” [2:7]). We can surmise that Augustine’s figural schema of the two promises is meant, at least in part, to do for Christendom what Paul had done for the Thessalonians: chide them for their impatience with the temporal delay of the Parousia, while at the same time comforting them with the knowledge, nurtured by faith and attested by scripture, that eternity not only awaits them, but has claimed them. As Martin Heidegger points out in his reading of Paul’s interventions in Thessaloniki, the anxiety or anguish experienced by the believers is not cause for doubt, but is the very proof of the truth of their faith—that is, of their calling.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, the two promises index time and eternity. Auerbach observes that the first, concealed in the shadows of the Old Testament, is temporal; it binds together the two canons into a single history. The second, found in the Gospels, is beyond time; it promises eternity and its truth is eternal. It is here that we can see the vertical dimension coming into view. While he maintains his hermeneutical commitment to the concrete reality of world historical time, Augustine’s intellectual debt to Neoplatonism leads him, unlike Tertullian, to endorse “a kind of idealism that removes the concrete event from time as *figura*—even though it also

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<sup>66</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 79. One might also say, in a less credulous key, that the anxiety of the believers is not the cause but the *symptom* of their calling. On symptoms, see below (§§18-19).

remains entirely real—and places it into the perspective of timeless eternity” (SE 88). It is tempting to say that, because of this ‘Platonizing’ move, Augustine here tends towards the sort of non-literality we have associated with Origen’s allegorical hermeneutics. Yet, as Auerbach emphasizes again and again, the reality of the figures is not compromised by their referral to eternity; on the contrary, their reality is confirmed and guaranteed by it, because, in eternity, their ‘future original,’ their fulfillment, acknowledges and counter-signals its heralding figures. Indeed, Auerbach concludes his section on the origin and function of figural interpretation with these words:

...this very future original, even if it is incomplete as event, is already perfectly fulfilled in God and has always been so as the result of His eternal Providence. The figures in which He cloaked it and the Incarnation in which He revealed its meaning are thus prophecies of something that exists for all time, but which remains veiled for human beings until the day when they can behold the Savior *revelata facie* (with his face revealed), both with their senses and their hearts. The figures are thus not only provisional. They are at the same time also the provisional form of something that is eternal and for all times. They signify the future not only as a matter of fact, but also as eternity and as that which has been timeless from the very start. They point to something that is to be interpreted, and which will of course be fulfilled in the concrete future, but also to something that is also already fulfilled in God’s Providence, where no temporal difference exists. This eternity is already figured in the figures, so to speak. They are thus simultaneously provisional fragments of reality



and part of a veiled reality for all time. (SE 100-101)<sup>67</sup>

A figure is an existing historical person or event, seen from the point of view of eternity. This raises the question of how one is to gain access to such a point of view, given that those charged with the task of interpretation, finite human beings, are constitutively barred from such a such vision. Yet, as we have seen above, it is precisely the fulfillment of historically real prophecy that furnishes the ‘key’ to unlocking the mystery of the figures. The figure ‘adumbrates,’ discloses partially, as if clouded; the fulfillment ‘illuminates,’ uncovers, and reveals. So, it should not surprise us that the fulfillment *par excellence*, that to which everything in the Old Testament points, should be the hermeneutical key that opens the eyes of faith. I refer, of course, to the Incarnation.

Auerbach remarks that the figural method exploited the simultaneously temporal and eternal truth of the Incarnation straightaway, as in *Adversus Marcionem* III.5, where Tertullian interprets the figure of Isaiah 50:6 as a prophecy of the flagellants of Christ’s passion (AM 178-180). The Incarnation is the vertex of history, the singular point where the horizontal patchwork of prophecy finds its guarantee in the verticality of the eternity of the mind of God. The content of that guarantee is none other than the God-man himself. That God had—or was—a body, enfleshed as a Second Adam (a decisive and nearly universal figural term of art among the patristic authors), means, for the figural tradition of the West, that history is a real and concrete process of divine revelation, one that has culminated in the

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. M 17: “The greater the separateness and horizontal disconnection of the stories and groups of stories in relation to one another, compared with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the stronger is their general vertical connection, which holds them all together and which is entirely lacking in Homer. Each of the great figures of the Old Testament, from Adam to the prophets, embodies a moment of this vertical connection.”

life of Joshua of Nazareth, whose victory over the powers and principalities of the Jericho-world is assured. For the Latin authors who propounded it, figural interpretation is inseparable from an idea of history as an outworking of God's self-revelation. What appears to the finite mind of the hermeneut as foreknowledge (i.e. the figure 'knows' more than it knows) is simply the temporal expression (God's 'economy') of salvation history, for what we call 'foreknowledge' is, in God, simply knowledge.<sup>68</sup>

We will return to Augustine—especially his monumental *City of God Against the Pagans*—at greater length in Chapter 4 below. For now, let us conclude by making explicit what figural interpretation has to do with this logic of supersession.

#### §12 How Do We Recognize Christianity?

In spite of the rhetoric of a new covenant, of the identification of Christians as the true Israel, and of the necessity of establishing a universal Christian identity over against the so-called particularism of Jewish identity, supersession is not well understood if it is understood in terms of 'replacement theology.' As we saw above, in the discussion of the Marcion-Tertullian dispute (§7), supersession is better understood as a way to *include* Jews in the history of salvation. Supersession does not cut away or exclude that which it supersedes, but knits that which is superseded into the fabric of history itself. So, it is true that supersession was the way that Christians of antiquity recognized themselves in relation to their

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<sup>68</sup> Auerbach: "Augustine's view of figures as timeless and belonging to all times is best captured in the following passage (which of course does not refer explicitly to figural interpretation) (*De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* 2.2.2.): [For what is foreknowledge if not knowledge of the future? What is the future to God who is above all time? If God's foreknowledge contains all these things, they are not future to him but present; therefore it can be called not foreknowledge, but knowledge" (SE 89). Cf. C 11.31.

antecedents and co-claimants to religious truth. In Tertullian, especially, Christianity is able to recognize itself—to become what it is—by reckoning with its Jewish antecedents, which, precisely because they come first, are counted second. Hence the paradox of the ‘future original.’ The origin is not ‘back there,’ regressing into the past, something to which one could return. The origin is rather ‘up there,’ in the mind of God, and ‘down here’ in the Christ event, and is thus—because the Christ has already come and is coming again—something which must be both remembered and anticipated. Yet supersession does something else, too, precisely because it is something else: it is the binding of the two books of history.

Supersession appears to be minimally necessary for the Christian tradition because, without the Jews (i.e., without the configuration and subordination of the Jews as mere figures or shadows of a Christian truth to come), Christians run the risk of losing a profoundly significant historical archive of evidence for the truth of their faith. They run the risk, too, of losing the witnesses (to wit, the Jews themselves) to the truth of that archive of salvation history. And they risk the loss of the principle of their self-recognition, since it would make no sense to identify the church as the true Israel if there were not another (provisionally true, but ultimately false) claimant to the title. We should understand, too, that the shape of the historical consciousness of the Latin West was profoundly determined by this logic of supersession. If the church served as a literary and ritual vehicle of historical consciousness during its various epochs, the logic of supersession is something like a prime mover of that historical engine (just as coal was, historically, the ‘prime mover’ of the steam engine).<sup>69</sup> This, in any case, is the story that the West tells itself about itself. In the chapters

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<sup>69</sup> On the steam engine and the notion of a prime mover, see Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2016),

that follow, we will find cause to question the legitimacy of this story.

It is likely that the basic structural elements of supersession were at work prior to the advent of figural interpretation, and certainly prior to Tertullian. The earliest Christian literature—the letters of Saint Paul, for instance—are obviously concerned with the differences between Jews, Jewish Christians, and Gentile Christians. Yet it is unclear, as is evidenced by the divisions in current scholarly debates on the ‘parting of the ways,’ that those differences amounted to true, substantive differences in the first decades of the Common Era.<sup>70</sup> That is to say, it is unlikely that Christians in the first century would have articulated their difference from their Jewish counterparts (some of whom may have even worshipped alongside them) in explicitly supersessionist terms—though we should not forget the supersessionist barb aimed at Trypho by Justin (“Not yours, but ours”). Even in the late first century and early second century, the ‘Church,’ such as it was, was by no means a unified institution, much less a truly catholic church. (Marcion’s church is but one example, albeit a limit-case, of the diversity of flavors of Christianity in that era.) Nonetheless, the germs of the idea of supersession were present from the very beginning, as can be deduced from the vigorous debates over the status of the Law, the problem of circumcision, and—of course—the question of prophecy.

By the time of Tertullian, the Christian canon of (dual) scriptures had more or less

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esp. 37-38.

<sup>70</sup> On the parting of the ways, see the various studies in James D.G. Dunn (ed.), *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999); for a criticism of the ‘parting of the ways’ discourse, see also Boyarin, *Borderlines*, and Daniel Boyarin, “Rethinking Jewish Christianity: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category (to which is appended a correction of my *Borderlines*),” in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 7-36.

coalesced into the form in which we inherit it today, due in part to the danger posed by Marcion's attempt to jettison the Hebrew Scriptures from Christian practice.<sup>71</sup> The formation and closure of the canon was, and remains, decisive for the history of Christianity, and for Western history writ large, for the duality of the canon demands an account of its unity (the very notion of a dual *canon* begs the question). What I have tried to show above is that Tertullian's steadfast, even obsessive, commitment to the historical reality of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, of both the figure and its fulfillment, gives rise to a concept of history that is not simply a matter of replacement, nor of a simple succession of events in time, but a totality articulated by a complex movement of inclusion-subordination, or conservation-negation, or fulfillment-annulment. It also gives rise to a set of profound tensions in the Christian tradition: between history and eschatology, materiality and spirituality, fact and truth, etc.

Figural interpretation distinguished itself from its counterparts because it "had a task in history" (SE 98). "It had by necessity," writes Auerbach, "become genuinely relevant, owing to the specific historical situation out of which it had emerged—namely, the *separation* of Christianity from Judaism" (SE 98, my italics). In an important essay on Auerbach's reading of Tertullian, James I. Porter notes that, for the word "separation," Auerbach's original German text has "*die Ablösung*," a term which "carries all the connotations of extricating, replacing, and superseding, just as it does a few pages earlier where Auerbach describes the effects of the Pauline figural interpretation of the Jewish Bible: 'the old Law is suspended and replaced [namely, superseded] (*ist aufgehoben und abgelöst*)' and to obey it is 'pointless,

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<sup>71</sup> See Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion*, 103-105.

even harmful.”<sup>72</sup> In figural interpretation, historical events or persons A and B are understood to be historically real in equal measure, but the figural method subordinates A (the figure) to its fulfillment in B, and, furthermore, subordinates this bi-polar relation, of A to B, to C (the mind of God) in the verticality of its totality.

The powerful ambiguity of *figura* is perhaps best captured by the future perfect tense: the Old Testament *will have been* the historical guarantee of the New Testament, for the guarantor of both Old and New Testaments is the single and same God of Abraham, of Joshua, and of Jesus. There is therefore an irreducible link—at once historical and eternal—between creation and redemption. Here is required not only an *intellectus spiritalis*, but also a “will to interpretation;” together they are capable of understanding and effecting the transit from the one (creation) to the other (redemption, or the ‘new’ creation).<sup>73</sup> As Daniel Colucciello Barber puts it: in Christianity, one’s identity is *achieved* rather than given.<sup>74</sup> One is not born a Christian; one becomes a Christian (or, as Tertullian himself put it: *Fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani*).<sup>75</sup> How?

The answer offered here is: by supersession.<sup>76</sup> To say that Christianity supersedes

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<sup>72</sup> Porter, “Disfigurations,” 94. The bracketed comment is Porter’s interpolation.

<sup>73</sup> For Auerbach’s comments on the ‘will to interpretation,’ see SE 79-80; and see below (§17) for a discussion of the will to interpretation in light of Auerbach’s understanding of the demand for interpretation imposed by the obscurity and realism of the Old Testament.

<sup>74</sup> Barber, *On Diaspora*, 96.

<sup>75</sup> “Christians are made, not born.” See Tertullian, *Apology*, Ch. 18. URL: [https://www.tertullian.org/articles/reeve\\_apology.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/articles/reeve_apology.htm)

<sup>76</sup> Here one could clearly thematize *conversion* rather than supersession. The two experiences (or strategies) are obviously closely linked. I have eschewed a discussion of conversion in order to focus more closely on Auerbach’s theory of *figura* and the hermeneutics of supersession that it articulates. For two important critiques of Christianity that take conversion as their theme see Barber, *On Diaspora*, and Daniel Colucciello Barber, “The Immanent Refusal of Conversion,” *Journal for*

Judaism because it occurs ‘after’ Judaism is not only to beg the question; it is also to repeat the Christian interpellation of Judaism as a ‘religion.’<sup>77</sup> For the figural paradigm, it is not simply a matter of asserting that Christianity *follows* Judaism in history (in any case, it doesn’t: what is called Judaism emerged alongside Christianity in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple), but that Christianity *fulfills* Judaism in history. The Jews—their existence, their history, their holy texts and rituals—must be positioned and configured so that they may be interpreted as *figurae* or *umbræ*. Yet the Jews are not thereby excluded from history. They are, on the contrary, radically included, inasmuch as the temporal-eternal vertex of history (the Christ) is himself of “the root of Jesse.”<sup>78</sup>

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*Cultural and Religious Theory* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 142-150.

<sup>77</sup> In *On Diaspora*, Barber describes the Christian relation to Judaism as a “massive act of interpellation”: Christianity’s others cannot be allowed to position themselves autonomously. They must be positioned by Christianity even as they refuse Christianity, for only in this way can a field be constituted in which Christianity is hegemonic. This is what is meant by saying that interpellation is at work: even as something departs from Christianity, it must be called, or named, as that which falls short of Christianity” (95). Similarly, Anidjar puts his finger on a curious paradox concerning Christianity’s historic claim to the status of the true religion: “Either Christianity is a religion and there are no others (because without Christianization and the globalization of Christianity, none of the so-called ‘world religions’ would have been identified as religions, nor would they have had to refer to themselves as such). Or, there are religions in the world—according to one definition or another—but Christianity is not one of them” (Gil Anidjar, “Of Globalatinology,” *Derrida Today* 6.1 (2013): 14). He goes on: “Christianization, the expansive fact of Christianity, is not a religion. It occurs instead with the naming or calling of a phenomenon ‘religious.’ With this naming or calling, Christianity itself could be said to be begin. Christianity would therefore be better understood as a process, as the very movement of Christianization, an expansion of language and of translation that takes places by the word ‘religion.’ [...] Here religion is revealed as one moment—and one moment only—of a wider Christianization, in the larger expansion of Christianity, which can already be discerned in the translation of diverse phenomena into ‘religion’ (16). And cf. Daniel Boyarin: “[w]hile Christianity finally configures Judaism as a different religion, Judaism itself, I suggest, at the end of the day refuses that call, so that seen from that perspective the difference between Christianity and Judaism is not so much a difference between two religions as a difference between a religion and an entity that refuses to be one” (Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 7-8).

<sup>78</sup> See Isaiah 11:1-10 for the messianic image of the Christ as the branch of the root of Jesse, who was father to King David. And see Matthew 1:1-17 for the genealogy of Jesus of Nazareth, a precious example of the capacity of Scripture to practice a sort of figural auto-interpretation. I return to the significance of the Matthean genealogy below (§24).

Supersession is, therefore, not the mere fact of having-come-after, but the sacramental act of reckoning with the Jews. Supersession conserves the Jews in their ‘proper’ place, so that Christianity can assume its own: the historical, true religion. This bring us back to the trouble with Marcion.

Marcion was an enemy of the first order because he insisted on rejecting the soteriological significance of the Old Testament while simultaneously affirming its historical reality. Marcion was no friend of the Jews, and the point of drawing attention to the Marcion-Tertullian encounter is certainly not to decide for Marcion against Tertullian.<sup>79</sup> Rather, the point is to isolate Tertullian’s decision to ‘save’ the historical existence of the Jews by evacuating that very existence of its own significance in favor of its capacity to prefigure the Christ event. Whether Marcion was anti-Semitic or anti-Judaic or both,<sup>80</sup> if we take seriously Auerbach’s reading of figural interpretation, and derive from that reading a logic of supersession, then Marcion’s ‘religion’ was not supersessionist—not quite. If supersession is characterized by emplacement and configuration, by fulfillment and annulment, by conservation and negation, by inclusion and subordination—in short, by figural interpretation—then it makes little sense to say that Marcion was a supersessionist thinker, for the link between creation and redemption, which supersession must maintain at all costs,

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<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, Moll has forwarded the provocative suggestion that Marcion was a better friend to the Jews than his orthodox critics were: “It is thus perhaps no coincidence that Marcion turned the whole affair upside down. In a manner of speaking, he gave the Old Testament back to the Jews, by denying the God attested in it to be the Father of Jesus Christ” (*The Arch-Heretic Marcion*, 157).

<sup>80</sup> On this distinction, see Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*, esp. 11-34 and 161-173. The basic criterion for the distinction is between personal enmity toward Jews (anti-Semitism) and ‘religious’ distaste for the practices and traditions of Judaism (anti-Judaism)—but it is not at all clear that the two can be so readily separated. Whatever the case may be with regard to Marcion, Tertullian can hardly avoid the same charge.



is completely severed in Marcion. By contrast, Tertullian's religion—which we recognize as Christianity—was and is the religion of supersession, and supersession will have been the mystery at the heart of the history Christianity made.

### Chapter 3: History and Universality

*The concept of God held by the Jews is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things.*

— Erich Auerbach

#### §13 Auerbach's Realism

In Chapter 2, we saw that Auerbach's theory of figural interpretation is not just an account of a particular, historically situated hermeneutics. It also furnishes us with a theory of the Christian theology of historical totality (history is ultimately salvation history) and demonstrates the pivotal role played by the logic of supersession in that historical totality (history is not the mere succession of events but their proper *order*). We saw, too, that Tertullian's innovative usage of the Latin *figura*, construed as historically real prophecy, distinguishes the Latin tradition, in particular, as a privileged literary and hermeneutical vehicle of historical consciousness, whose protagonist was the church catholic (and whose inheritor is Christian Europe, however secularized, and however ambiguous the inheritance). Auerbach's strict demarcation of a specifically figural mode of reading from the wide genus of allegorical reading was shown to be justified by the fact that the literality of the figures is not exhausted by their prophetic function. The figures signify both themselves and their fulfillment; they do not lose their reality by signifying something or someone else but rather—by virtue of their prophetic, signifying power—gain that very reality and remain in it verily for all time.

Auerbach's enthusiasm for the unique powers and creative potentialities of figural

interpretation is unmistakable. It is especially evident in his energetic readings of the figural dimension of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which, Auerbach avers, "is the text in which all medieval culture is contained and which is the culmination of this culture" (SE 105). Auerbach's zeal for the figural tradition has led many—indeed, all but a few—of his inheritors, critics, commentators, and translators to assume that Auerbach himself celebrated and even espoused the theology-cum-philosophy of history implied by figural interpretation. Among literary theorists, in whose discourses his work has had the most purchase, Auerbach's account of figural interpretation has been widely construed as a sweeping claim to have found the universal 'key' to the interpretation of history. As we saw above (§3), among Christian theologians, especially those of the 'post-liberal' variety, Auerbach's account of figural interpretation has been deployed, in concert with the work of Hans Frei, to support a return to a 'classic' hermeneutical mode of biblical interpretation, according to which the scriptures can be read as 'history-like,' that is, as realistic narrative. In both of these discursive fields, Auerbach tends to figure as a nostalgic philologist, lamenting the passing of the West into its modernity, where transcendence, timelessness, and the religious character of morality are abandoned in favor of the self-assertive human subject. Unlike the theologians, the literary theorists are often ambivalent about this nostalgia.

And yet, as James I. Porter points out, Auerbach's works have little—if anything at all—to do with nostalgia, nor are they lamentations. "In point of fact" Porter writes, "in the passage from religion to secularism one kind of uncertainty is traded for another."<sup>1</sup> Auerbach does not argue for a recuperation of—nor for a return to—the pre-modern. Instead, what he has in view, from his early work on Dante to his late writings on philology and world

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<sup>1</sup> James I. Porter, "Introduction," in SE xiv.

literature, is the question of the self-realization of human beings in time and history (*pace* Hegel, this self-realization is constitutively incomplete). Apropos of Auerbach's endless enthusiasm for the powerful portrait of humanity presented in Dante, Porter writes that

human possibilities are no less compellingly intense in later periods [of human history] than in the Christian poem of Dante. It is the experience of these possibilities, not their realization *per se*, that Auerbach seeks to capture with his rubric, which he did not coin but merely made his own, 'tragic realism.'<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the misunderstanding, which is seemingly endemic among Auerbach's inheritors, is to think that his appreciation for—and pioneering theorization of—figural realism is the key to his thought. In fact, it is the problem of realism (*Realismus*) as such that preoccupies Auerbach's research. Figural realism and tragic realism are species of realism. Neither of them, for Auerbach, represents the culmination or perfection of realism. They are, rather, the historically determined modes of reading and writing by which human beings represent their own becoming. If Auerbach pays so much attention to the figural tradition, it is not because he himself is ultimately a 'figural' thinker, but because *figura* is the name of a most consequential and colorful thread in the vast tapestry of the historical consciousness of the West.

In this chapter, I begin to chart the wind of that thread by attending to the wider arc of Auerbach's work. For a number of questions follow from our account of Auerbach's reading of *figura*. What, for instance, is Auerbach's ultimate position regarding figural interpretation? In what sense does he embrace it? In what sense does he reject it? On what grounds does he

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<sup>2</sup> Porter, "Introduction," in SE xiv.

do so and what, for that matter, are the stakes of doing so? Is Auerbach a Christian, even if only in an intellectual sense? He is certainly and self-consciously a European. In his own words, he is “Prussian and of the Jewish faith,” but, too, a German exile and an avowedly secular Jew. Is he a Hegelian? And what—into the bargain—does any of this have to do with the logic of supersession?

I argue that much of the confusion surrounding Auerbach’s reception can be clearly and definitely dispelled by bringing the problem of supersession to the fore. While Auerbach does not himself thematize supersession as such, the problem haunts all of his writings, especially those (“Figura” and *Mimesis* among them) that were composed during his exile in Istanbul. In Chapter 2, I was chiefly concerned with giving a clear and careful exposition of Auerbach’s theory of *figura*; in the present chapter, I turn my attention to the profound tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions generated by the practice of figural interpretation. While the specific mode of figural interpretation with which this study is concerned is distinctive of the Latin theological understanding of history and biblical exegesis, the problems that arise in and through figural interpretation are broadly characteristic of Christian thought throughout its various histories. The problems, too, are various (e.g., the distinction between history and eschatology, between flesh and spirit, between literality and spirituality, between time and eternity, between creature and creator, etc.), but my sense is that those varieties can be meaningfully condensed into the theological and hermeneutical distinction between letter and spirit. I argue in what follows that the Christian concept of history is a theological symptom of the hermeneutical hesitation between the letter and the spirit, which gives rise to a set of contradictions regarding the reality of history and the truth of history. The eschatological transience of the world, and of the really existing history of the

world, puts Christian thought in a curious double bind. On the one hand, God's revelation in the Christ is a literal, historical event. On the other hand, the history in which the Christ was revealed is nothing more than a promise of a final revelation to come. The Christian tradition is thus bound—and bound to affirm—to what it must ultimately annul: the world-historical significance of the Jewish people.

I begin (§14) this chapter by considering the pitfalls of Auerbach's reception among literary theorists, so as to get a clearer view of his historical method and, ultimately, his latent and ambiguous critique of figural interpretation. After showing that Auerbach has been consistently misunderstood by his critics, I chart (§15) the development of Auerbach's theory of *figura* from its origin in the 1938 "Figura" essay to its deployment in his 1946 *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. This analysis will lead us (§16) to a consideration of Auerbach's understanding of the social and political forces of historical events, which percolate up from the depths of everyday life and manifest as symptoms, and (§17) to the true 'origin' (the *archē*, or the conceptual grammar) of history in the peculiar literary realism of Hebrew scripture. I then turn (§18) to a reflection on the closely-linked problems of monotheism, prophecy, and universal history. Finally, I conclude (§19) this chapter by considering the way that the logic of supersession gives expression to the peculiarity of the Christian symptom, namely, the tendency in Christian theologies of history to deny what they must affirm: the meaning of Jewish history.

The central claims of this chapter are thus: (1) In spite of his deep attachment to a number of texts and writers in the Christian tradition, Auerbach's fealty to western literary history is pre-eminently and ultimately Jewish; and (2), that the logic of supersession—and the concept of history it generates—must be understood as the outcome of the Christian

attempt to *cure* what Auerbach calls the *symptom* of the Jewish interpretation of reality. For now, it is a matter of understanding just what it is that is said to be superseded in the Christian construal of salvation history, and what is wrought by that supersession.

#### §14 *Figura* and Its Vicissitudes

Let us briefly survey Auerbach's reception among literary theorists. Edward Said, for one, claims that Auerbach's theory of *figura* entails that the "second, concealed meaning" of the Biblical figures "can *only* be recovered by a very particular act of interpretation," namely, "figural interpretation."<sup>3</sup> Said notes the "combination of pride and distance" in Auerbach's description of the emergence of Christianity and its figural transformation of the world, and remarks on the "irony" that, in his fastidious attention to the Christian tradition, the non-Christian Auerbach "travels from his roots still further."<sup>4</sup> The implication is that Auerbach himself adopted—or at the very least was sympathetic to—the Christian-figural hermeneutic. Along these lines, Claus Uhlig argues that Auerbach's emphasis on the 'vertical dimension' commits him to an unhistorical theory of figural "omnitemporality."<sup>5</sup> Uhlig goes so far as to claim that the figural theory of history is Auerbach's own theory of history.<sup>6</sup> The impulse

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, "Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition," in M xx. I follow James I. Porter in emphasizing the word 'only' in Said's text. As we'll see below, this exclusive modifier not only misunderstands but, in fact, obscures what is at stake in Auerbach's thought.

<sup>4</sup> Said, "Introduction," in M xvii-xviii.

<sup>5</sup> Claus Uhlig, "Auerbach's 'Hidden' (?) Theory of History," in Seth Lerer, ed., *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology: The Legacy of Erich Auerbach* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Uhlig, "Auerbach's 'Hidden' (?) Theory of History," 43. Uhlig here adduces Geoffrey Green, *Literary Criticism and the Structures of History: Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). Uhlig badly overstates his case here, as Green makes no such claim. Green's argument, regarding Auerbach's desire to emphasize the continuity between Jews and Christians, is that Auerbach is responding to the specific political and social context of his

among literary theorists to identify Auerbach with his object of study seems almost irresistible. Timothy Bahti, for instance, writes that “a history of literary secularization [as we find in *Mimesis*] is a figural writing of history, a *literary* history with the accent on the adjective—an *allegory* of history as its own literalization.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Hayden White conjures something he calls “figural causation” out of his reading of Auerbach. Such ‘figural causation’ is meant to underwrite White’s assertion that Auerbach’s *Mimesis* is a presentation of the history of Western literature “as a story of the ‘fulfillment’ of the ‘figure’ of figurality” itself.<sup>8</sup> In the footnote appended to this claim, White adduces a passage from “Figura,” concerning the figure of Vergil in Dante’s *Comedy*, and a passage from “Vico’s Aesthetic Historicism,” in which Auerbach allegedly suggests that Vico’s philosophy of history is figural.<sup>9</sup> Let us follow the trails of this evidence, beginning with the reference to Auerbach’s reading of Vico and then turning to Auerbach’s commentary on Dante.

White writes that

in his commentary on Vico, in “Vico and Aesthetic Historicism,” Auerbach suggests that Vico’s philosophy of history is itself figural. The ‘poetic imagination’ of Vico’s ‘first men’ (the Age of the Gods) is a ‘figura,’ Auerbach argues, of the ‘poetic

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time (i.e. the rise of National Socialism and the attempt to de-canonize the Old Testament *tout court*).

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Bahti, “Auerbach’s *Mimesis*: Figural Structure and Historical Narrative,” in Gregory S. Jay and David L. Miller, eds., *After Strange Texts: The Role of Theory in the Study of Literature* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 138.

<sup>8</sup> Hayden White, “Auerbach’s Literary History,” 125.

<sup>9</sup> For Auerbach’s “Vico’s Aesthetic Historicism,” see SE 36-45.



imagination of the 'third age' (that of Men) which 'fulfills' it.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, Auerbach argues no such thing. Not only is the language of 'figure and fulfillment' entirely absent from the essay in question, but Auerbach actually says exactly the opposite of what White claims that he says. Vico's 'third age' is described by Auerbach as

a rationalistic and democratic period, where imagination and poetry have lost their creative power, where poetry is only an embellishment of life and an elegant pastime, where all men are considered as equals and are governed by elastic and liberal religions and laws. (SE 42)

Unless we are meant to understand the modern diminution of creative poetic power, and its relegation to a pastime, as the 'fulfillment' of the figural 'promise' of the primitive poetic imagination, it is difficult to see what exactly White is driving at. Perhaps White has in mind Auerbach's comment regarding Vico's theory of cognition, according to which the possible forms of human life and thought are to be "found in the potentialities of the human mind," meaning that humans are "capable of re-evoking human history from the depth of our own consciousness" (SE 40). Yet even here, there is no mention of 'figural,' and we are given no indication that such a re-evocation takes the form of a fulfillment. Auerbach's comments on Vico are focused, rather, on the magical powers of poetic speech in primitive humans (i.e., animism), and the occlusion of that power in modernity.

The flimsiness of White's claim is all the more apparent when one considers the fact that the "Figura" essay distinguishes between the class of magical, mythic symbols and speech-

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<sup>10</sup> White, "Auerbach's Literary History," n.4, pp. 278-279.

acts treated by Vico and the class of *figurae* with which Auerbach is narrowly concerned (SE 98-99). While magical symbols are related to figural interpretation in important ways (Auerbach gives the example of the Eucharist as an intermediate form, combining the symbolic with the figural; see SE 99, n.39), they are distinguished, decisively, by their relation to history.

Such symbolic or mythical forms intersect with figural interpretation in several ways. Both lay claim to being able to interpret life in general and to endow it with order; both are only conceivable in religious or related spheres. Yet differences are also immediately apparent. Symbols by necessity possess magical powers; *figura* does not. *Figura* must always be historical; the symbol is not. There is of course also no dearth of magical symbols in Christianity, but *figura* as such is not one of them. (SE 99)

If one adds to this the fact that Vico, infamously, held to a cyclical theory of history, then the claim that the Vichian philosophy of history is ‘figural,’ in the specific sense of the word developed by Auerbach, falls apart before it has even gotten underway.<sup>11</sup> It seems undeniable that White—but not only White—has warrant to make such a claim only on the basis of a badly mistaken projection of the universality of the figure-fulfillment trope, a projection which is itself based on a basic misreading of Auerbach.

What about White’s reference to the passage on Dante in “Figura”? A cursory reading of

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Löwith remarks on this very feature of Vico’s thought. In spite of being a devout Catholic and a staunch, even radical, believer in providence, Vico is not interested in the figural interpretation of history. See Karl Löwith, *Meaning and History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), 127-131; cited hereafter as MH. For Vico’s three ages, see Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. and ed. Jason Taylor and Robert Minor (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), 385-6; for his comments on method, see *ibid.*, 114-122; for his theory of historical cycles, see *ibid.*, 419-440.

the passage in question shows that it is not a programmatic description of Auerbach's own approach to reading and writing literary history. It is, rather, a pivotal moment in Auerbach's argument, concerning the persistence of figural interpretation in the Christian literature of the Middle Ages, and, moreover, is meant to show that Dante represents the literary summit of the figural mode of consciousness.<sup>12</sup> What Auerbach says in this passage is said *of* Dante and *of* Dante's Vergil, not of himself and not of his own theory or method. Again and again, Auerbach prefaces the individual moments of his analysis with the proviso: '*bei Dante,*' '*bei ihm.*' A closer reading reveals even more clearly the paucity of White's claims, for Auerbach emphasizes not the continuity of figural reading throughout all of Western history, but rather its discontinuity and singularity: "*In an entirely different way* than in modern poetry [*Ganz anders als bei den modernen Dichtern*], a character [e.g. Vergil] becomes more real in Dante's poem in direct relation to how completely it is interpreted, how accurately it takes up a place in the eternal plan of redemption" (SE 109). Auerbach is signaling the difference between Dante's figural realism and modern realism, not their unity or identity. If that weren't enough, Auerbach historicizes Dante again in the very next sentence, this time distinguishing the poet from his ancient predecessors: "And for him, unlike the ancient poets [*ganz anders als bei den antiken Dichtern*] of the underworld for whom earthly life was real and the life below only a play of shadows, it is the Beyond that is the true reality" (SE 109-

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<sup>12</sup> Auerbach frequently gives the impression that Dante represents the literary summit of figural interpretation. While figural interpretation played an important role in the Reformation (Auerbach, SE, 96), and persisted as a structuring element of European consciousness into the eighteenth century (ibid., 102), it is in Dante's work that figural interpretation finds its own fulfillment, with the astonishing result that "figure surpasses fulfillment, or more properly: the fulfillment serves to bring out the figure in still more impressive relief," and Dante—the "poet of the secular world [*Dichter der irdischen*]"—destroys the "Christian-figural being" in the "very process of realizing it" (M 200, 202). See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 2003).

110).<sup>13</sup>

White might have benefited from reading another page or two further in the text of “Figura.” There, he would have stumbled upon a methodological remark that, in my view, compromises, if not demolishes, the commentarial consensus according to which *figura* serves as Auerbach’s universal, master trope. As Auerbach turns from the figure of Vergil to the figure of Beatrice, he pauses, and says the following:

Of course this insight into the figural character of the *Divine Comedy* does not offer a universally valid method for interpreting every individual disputed passage. Yet we can deduce several basic principles of interpretation from it [*Die Einsicht in den figuralen Charakter der Komödie bietet zwar gewiß keine allgemein gültige Verfahrensweise für die Deutung jeder strittigen Stelle, allein es lassen sich doch aus ihr einige Grundsätze für die Deutung herleiten*]. (SE 111 [90])

One wonders how *figura* can be expected to bear the hermeneutical burden of serving as the universal skeleton key to the entirety of the Western literary tradition (from Homer to Woolf, as *Mimesis* has it) when it cannot even serve as a universally valid method for reading Dante—yet this is exactly the way that Auerbach’s method is described by his critics! It might be objected that, because Auerbach proposes to derive basic principles of

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<sup>13</sup> Jane O. Newman’s translation of this latter sentence (rendering *ganz anders als bei* with ‘unlike’) suppresses the force of Auerbach’s repetition of *ganz anders als bei* in regard to the ancient poets. Auerbach is trying to show that Dante’s figural realism is what *distinguishes* his poem from ancient and modern literature, not that one can read ancients and moderns ‘figurally’ as one does with Dante. Relatedly, the older translation of “Figura,” by Ralph Manheim, obscures the force of the *ganz anders als bei* entirely, rendering the comparison to both the moderns and the ancients with the same, pallid ‘unlike.’ For Manheim’s rendering, see Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, 71.

interpretation from the figural character of Dante's poem, the criticism holds some water. But these principles of interpretation are themselves derived from Auerbach's investigation of the Christian theological tradition, and are thus generalizable to the Christian figural stream of the Western literary tradition, but not to 'the West' as a whole, and certainly not to world history as such.

Of these basic principles of interpretation, Auerbach says the following:

We can be sure that every historical or mythical character that appears in the poem can only mean something that was intimately connected with what Dante knew about that individual's historical or mythical existence, connected, that is, in the way that figure and fulfillment are connected. We must take care not to give these characters only a conceptual or allegorical meaning and to deny them their earthly and historical existence. [...] For Dante [*bei Dante*], the literal meaning and historical reality of a character do not contradict that figure's deeper meaning. Rather, they figure it. Historical meaning is not annulled by this deeper meaning. Rather, it is confirmed and fulfilled in it. (SE 111 [90])

It could not be more obvious that Auerbach is proposing a novel method for reading Dante, not a universal method for reading the Western canon. The last words of "Figura" make the historical and theoretical limitations of *figura* abundantly clear:

With this [i.e. the analysis of the *figura* of Beatrice] I bring my study of *figura* to a provisional end. My aim was to show how a word branches out from its semantic meaning and into a world-historical situation and how the structures that emerge out of this situation can remain effective for many centuries. The world-historical

situation that led Paul to undertake his mission among the Gentiles did much to shape figural interpretation and paved the way for the broad impact that it went on to have in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. (SE 113)

We know, in hindsight, that the essay “Figura” was indeed provisional, and that the analysis of the decisive role played by figural interpretation in Western literature was taken up again in relation to numerous other texts in the pages of *Mimesis*.

In this regard, it is telling that while Auerbach’s interpreters never stop insisting that *figura* is the interpretive key to *Mimesis*, and, *ipso facto*, to Auerbach’s work as a whole, they seemingly never stop to consider the fact that *figura* virtually disappears from Auerbach’s lexicon in the latter half of *Mimesis*. To be specific, it all but vanishes after the chapter on Dante (see M 174-202). This is difficult to explain if one wishes to insist that *figura* is the master trope of Auerbach’s thought, but it is readily understood if one recognizes, as Porter does, that, for Auerbach, *figura* is a vanishing mediator.<sup>14</sup> *Figura* (the word, its semantic range, and its history) and figural interpretation (the specifically Christian exegetical method) are, indubitably, fundamental features of Auerbach’s quest to articulate a theory of historical realism, but they are neither the first nor the last word of that quest. If *figura* is a first word, it

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<sup>14</sup> Porter: “Wherever one looks one finds a consensus among scholars that Auerbach’s vision of literary history can be read through the lens of figural reading, as though he had adopted this interpretive technique and made it his own, not only in ‘Figura,’ where Auerbach is giving a historical account without endorsing a thing, but also in *Mimesis*, whether in his reading of the Hebrew Bible in the famous first chapter of that work or even in later chapters where his analysis concerns secular and no longer Jewish or Christian writing. At another extreme, it can be asserted that history is grasped by Auerbach as itself a figural mechanism under the sign of *mimesis*. *Figura* here becomes something like a master trope in Auerbach’s conceptual arsenal, and it threatens to overwhelm the whole of his thinking. Can the figure of *figura* bear so much meaning? [...] I doubt that it can. A closer look at the role of *figura* in Auerbach’s writings will bring out some of the intricacies of this concept and will show that *figura* functions for him more as a vanishing mediator than as a master trope, much as late antiquity was in Auerbach’s mind a watershed but also a passing moment in the history of Western culture” (“Disfigurations,” 82-83).

is so in the sense that it is an instance of what Auerbach called the *Ansatzpunkt*, ‘concrete point of departure.’ But an *Ansatzpunkt*, situated as it is *in media res*, is neither properly ‘first’ nor in any way ‘last.’<sup>15</sup>

These confusions can, and should, be avoided by attending to what Auerbach himself says about figural interpretation and the history forged in its crucible. Be they literary-theoretical or post-critical-theological (on the theological dimension of Auerbach’s reception, see above, §3), the reception histories of Auerbach’s thought should be understood as symptoms of a distinctive incapacity—or refusal—to read him on his own terms. As Porter puts it,

To claim that biblical background meanings ‘can *only* be recovered by a very particular act of interpretation,’ one that Auerbach ‘described as figural interpretation,’ is to get hold of the matter from the wrong end. [Contra Edward Said], figural readings do not ‘recover’ biblical meaning; they foist meaning on what was never meant to be grasped. Indeed, figural reading is nothing other than a desperate response to this perplexity of the Jewish faith, and an inherently destructive one at that. In Auerbach’s view [contra Hayden White, et al.], figural reading is an act of *disfiguration* and *disvaluation*. Mimesis is *opposed* to the figural interpretation of reality, not identical with it.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gellrich registers this point: “[Auerbach’s] claim, we may recall, is that *figura* is an instance of what he would later call *Ansatzpunkt*, a point of departure providing insight into very large literary or cultural movements—in this case the separation between classical and Christian forms and attitudes” (Jesse M. Gellrich, “Figura, Allegory, and the Question of History,” in Seth Lerer, ed., *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996], pp. 107-123; esp. 107).

<sup>16</sup> Porter, “Old Testament Realism in the Writings of Erich Auerbach,” 194. Elsewhere, Porter

Let us consider in more detail what Auerbach says of—and does with—mimesis in *Mimesis*.

### §15 From “Figura” to *Mimesis*

Auerbach’s account of the origin and function of *figura* in Western literature plays a major role in *Mimesis*, yet its importance has been both exaggerated and underestimated. As I’ve noted above, and as we’ll soon see in detail, the exaggerations often come in the form of sweeping claims about Auerbach’s enthusiasm for figural reading and writing, where *figura* is construed as a skeleton key to Auerbach’s thought, or (inasmuch as Auerbach is wrongly thought to have embraced an ‘omnitemporal’ or ‘figural-causative’ point of view on history) to history itself. What is more interesting, I think, is the way that such exaggerations are themselves the result of a profound underestimation of the historical singularity and specificity (that is, the christianity [sic]) of figural interpretation. This coupling of exaggeration and underestimation, and the confusion that results, has much to do with Auerbach’s ambiguous intellectual debts to Hegel.<sup>17</sup>

*Mimesis* can be profitably compared to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The two works are similar. Both texts attempt to survey the history of western civilization as a series (Auerbach and Hegel both make use of the term *Reihe*, ‘chain,’ ‘line,’ ‘row,’ or ‘series’) of expressions of human self-consciousness, which develop in complexity and concreteness as

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remarks that (in the readings of Auerbach proposed by both Hans Frei and John David Dawson) “imagining a *Jewish* reader lies beyond the reach of both approaches” (Porter, “Disfigurations,” 94-95, n.27).

<sup>17</sup> Luis Costa-Lima, for instance, remarks that Auerbach often seems to want to have things ‘both ways,’ and attributes this tendency to the influence of Hegel; see Luiz Costa-Lima, “Auerbach and Literary History,” in Seth Lerer, ed., *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 55-56.



they near the modern moment in which the respective authors pen their books. But the comparison of the two books is apt, too, for the way it illuminates the basic *dissimilarity* of the world-historical conditions in which they appeared. Hegel's moment is characterized by the triumphalism of the post-Napoleonic nation-state, in which *Geist*, (human mind/spirit, the self-conscious self-relation of developing culture) achieves its self-transparency and freedom. Auerbach's moment, by contrast, is that of the grim advent of National Socialism and the horrific, world-historical violence of the second World War and the Shoah (to say nothing of Auerbach's status as a literary and political exile). Hegel's book charts the path of self-conscious spirit as a development that proceeds according to the necessity of its own immanent self-negation. Auerbach's book considers fragments of the Western literary canon as historical symptoms of tectonic shifts in the underlying historical forces of the life and thought of everyday human beings.<sup>18</sup>

The play of similarity and dissimilarity between *Mimesis* and *Phenomenology of Spirit* is condensed most clearly and distinctly in the question of *figura*—that is, in the logic of supersession. As we'll see in this chapter and those that follow, Auerbach's attempt to chart the expressions (or symptoms) of human self-consciousness in time and history resembles Hegel's account of universal history inasmuch as the 'figures,' to which Auerbach pays such special attention, resemble, in turn, the 'shapes,' 'patterns,' 'forms'—yes, even 'figures' (*Gestalten*)—of consciousness and spirit treated by Hegel in the *Phenomenology*. Yet, in

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<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Auerbach sometimes sounds a little like Freud, but never a psychoanalyst; sometimes a little like Marx, but never a historical materialist—ever not quite. On the other hand, he very often sounds like Nietzsche, which is not surprising, since both were philologists. For Auerbach's use of 'symptom,' see M 8 [10]. The German reads: "Die Gottesvorstellung der Juden ist nicht sowohl Ursache als vielmehr Symptom ihrer Auffassungs- und Darstellungsweise"). For the language of occult, historical forces, see M 33, 44. I return to this below (§§16-19).

Hegel these *Gestalten* are present from end to end of spirit's journey, forming, as it were, the representative (or, rather, representing: they are *Vorstellungen*) vertebrae of the spine of universal history. They hang like portraits in a museum gallery in the throne room of the palace of absolute knowledge.<sup>19</sup> In Auerbach, the procession of *figurae*—and their supersession—is but one, particular thread in the tapestry of history. That thread is, of course, the one stitched by the Latin Christian tradition. Christianity lays claim to universal history, and does so in a manner that, as I argue in Chapters 4 and 5 below, not only anticipates but also determines, at least in part, Hegel's own claims to the same. But Auerbach is quite clear that the powerful influence of figural interpretation is historically circumscribed. It has an origin: in the letters of Paul, certainly, but most properly and radically in Tertullian. It also has a terminus of sorts: the influence of the figural mode of reading and interpreting history begins to wane in modernity, though it “continued to play a role for most European peoples up through the eighteenth century” (SE 102).<sup>20</sup> Let us consider the span of the figural thread as Auerbach conceives it.

The figural interpretation of reality furnished the Christian tradition with a decisive

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<sup>19</sup> “However, the other aspect of spirit's coming-to-be, *history*, is that *knowing self-mediating coming-to-be*—the spirit relinquished into time. However, this relinquishing is likewise the relinquishing of itself; the negative is the negative of itself. This coming-to-be exhibits a languid movement and succession of spirits, a gallery of pictures [*Galerie von Bildern*], of which each, endowed with the entire wealth of spirit, moves itself so slowly because the self has to take hold of and assimilate the whole of this wealth of its substance.” (GW 9:433). Italics in original.

<sup>20</sup> It might be objected that figural interpretation is still practiced—or, at least, it is still taught—in many contemporary Christian churches. Indeed, I can attest to its survival in the religious life of my upbringing, in the churches of Northwest Arkansas. But Auerbach's point is not that figural interpretation should have disappeared as such, only that its practice, and its relevance, was relegated to ‘merely religious’ status in the wake of secularization. Today, no serious historian or philosopher practices figural interpretation outright. On the other hand—and here we must register a slight disagreement with Auerbach's sanguine appraisal of the inexorability of the secularization thesis—figural interpretation does have various secular afterlives. We'll turn to one of those afterlives (viz. the philosophy of history) in Chapter 4 below.

political-theological narrative frame with which to prosecute its global and imperial expansions. Already in “Figura” Auerbach refers to the “massive expansion of Christianity” (one might say, too, the *mondialatinization* or ‘globalatinization’) that was made possible by figural interpretation:

[T]he Old Testament was transformed as a result of figural interpretation from a book of laws and a national history of Israel into a series of figures of Christ and of Redemption [...] In this form and in this context, in which the national history and the national character of the Jews was eclipsed, the Celtic and Germanic nations, for instance, were able to accept the Old Testament. On the one hand, it was a part of the universal religion of redemption; on the other, it was a necessary component of a vision of world history that was similarly grand and unified and that was communicated to them along with this religion. In its original form, as a book of laws and as a history of such a foreign and distant nation, the Old Testament would have remained inaccessible to them. (SE 95)<sup>21</sup>

This narrative elaborates on the basic picture of the expansion of Christian historical consciousness that Auerbach had set out a decade prior in his book on Dante. There, he writes that the “mimetic content of the story of Christ [*mimetische Gehalt der Geschichte Christi*]” spread, albeit slowly, throughout the whole world and reshaped the consciousness of the peoples whom it touched. He remarks that Christian doctrine was transformed in its

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<sup>21</sup> On the theme of *mondialatinization*, see Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” trans. Samuel Weber, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 40-101. See also Anidjar, “Of Globalatinology.”

transmission: the need to adapt the doctrine to the “mentality of various peoples [*der jeweiligen geistigen Verfassung der Stämme oder Gruppen*]” required modifications, each of which chipped away a fragment of the “concrete reality [*sinnlichen Evidenz*]” of the Christ-event, resulting in dogmatic abstractions (D 15 [23]). Already in 1929, Auerbach is skeptical of allegorical hermeneutics.

Yet, he insists that “the reality was never wholly lost.” The realism of the Gospel narratives ultimately overcame the threats posed by the various heresies derived from Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism (D 15).

Not without dogmatic obfuscation but with a consistent tenacity, the Western Church, in opposition to spiritualist influence, held fast to the life of Christ on earth as a concrete event [*als konkretem Ereignis*], as the central fact of history [*als zentraler Tatsache der Weltgeschichte*], and conceived of history as a true record [*die wahre Geschichte*] of the relations of human individuals with one another and with God. (D 16 [24-25])

Just as we saw above (§11), Auerbach attributes the survival of the historical realism of the Christian faith to Augustine: “In Augustine the history of salvation is taken concretely [*In ihm ist die Erfahrung der Heilsgeschichte ganz konkret*], and that is why, as Harnack once wrote, he is able to endow Latin and the future tongues of Europe with ‘a Christian soul and the language of the heart’ (D 17 [25])<sup>22</sup>. What is lacking in Auerbach’s study of Dante is

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<sup>22</sup> Auerbach, *Dante*, 17 [25]. In the same passage, Auerbach writes of Augustine that he “managed to save a good deal from the spiritualism of the Neo-Platonists and Manichaeans: by his analytical investigation of consciousness, he preserved the unity of the personality; with his metaphysical speculation, he saved the idea of a personal God; and in his teleological history of the world he saved the reality of earthly happening. The very way in which he formulated the problem of free will and predestination bears witness to the fundamentally European determination not to abolish

precisely what he discovered during his years of exile: the singular role played by *figura* in the historical development of Christianity and the influence of the Latin tradition on the historical consciousness of the West. That so many of Auerbach's critics have taken the (supposedly prophetic) absence of *figura* in Auerbach's *Dante* as dispositive of Auerbach's methodological commitment to the conceptual pairing of figure and fulfillment (such that one can say that "Figura" fulfills *Dante* and that *Mimesis* fulfills both) is dispositive only of a profound—yet pervasive—misunderstanding. We can chart the course of this misunderstanding by turning to the role played by *figura* in *Mimesis*.

Auerbach reiterates the story of *figura* throughout *Mimesis*. In the first chapter, he writes of the way that the interpretation of scripture was caught up in the sort of process that tends to react upon itself, enlarging and modifying its own frame of reference. This is all the truer when, as in the case of the biblical literary tradition—here, the legendary narratives of the Old Testament—what is at stake is universal, or world, history [*Weltgeschichte*]. The Old Testament, Auerbach writes,

presents universal history [*Weltgeschichte*]: it begins with the beginning of time, with the creation of the world, and will end with the Last Days, the fulfilling of the Covenant, with which the world will come to an end. Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence [*als Glied dieses Zusammenhangs*]; into it everything that is known about the world, or at least everything that touches upon the history of the Jews, must be fitted as an ingredient

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reality by speculation, not to take flight into transcendence, but to come to grips with the real world and master it." See also Adolf von Harnack, "Vorwort," in Augustin, *Reflexionen und Maximen* (Tübingen, 1922).

[*Bestandteil*] of the divine plan. (M 16 [18])

When the framing narrative is all-encompassing, any sufficiently determined interpretation will serve as an alchemical catalyst that, when added to the solution, precipitates a transformation of the chemical character of the whole.

Interpretation in a determined direction [*das Deuten in einem bestimmten Sinne*; i.e., a specific ‘will to interpretation’] becomes a general method of comprehending reality; the new and strange world which now comes into view and which, in the form in which it presents itself, proves to be wholly unutilizable [*ganz unbrauchbar*] within the Jewish religious frame, must be so interpreted that it can find a place there. But this process nearly always reacts upon the frame [*wirkt dies auch auf den Rahmen zurück*], which requires enlarging and modifying. The most striking piece of interpretation of this sort [*die eindrucksvollste Deutungsarbeit dieser Art*] occurred in the first century of the Christian era, in consequence of Paul’s mission to the Gentiles: Paul and the Church Fathers reinterpreted the entire Jewish tradition as a succession of figures [*Figuren*] prognosticating the appearance of Christ, and assigned the Roman Empire its proper place in the divine plan of salvation. (M 16 [18-19])<sup>23</sup>

What is notable here is that, far from attributing to figural interpretation a universal and transhistorical vocation, Auerbach is, in fact, historicizing *figura*. The will to interpretation (*Interpretationswille*) found in Paul and his inheritors is specific to them and their respective historical conditions. Paul is not Tertullian, Tertullian is not Augustine, but they are united in

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. the parallel passages in M 48, 73-74.

a meaningful sense by the pre-eminence of the figural mode of reading scripture.

That such a highly determined will to interpretation should become a “general method of comprehending reality” is not surprising, but it is by no means unique to figural hermeneutics. Interpretation is, likely inescapably so, partial and revisionist. Much like translation (which is no small part of the story of *figura*), it gives as much as it takes. What is unique about the vicissitudes of *figura* is that the figural tradition managed, more or less, to do what its proponents set out to do. Namely, to reinterpret the whole history of the world in terms of the Incarnation, to render history as salvation history, and to gather every tribe, tongue, and nation into the fold of the one who—as was prophesied—“shall feed them and be their shepherd” (Ezek. 34: 23-24, NRSV). That Auerbach’s critics (see above, §14) should surmise that Auerbach considers figural interpretation to be a universal key to history and that he adopted it as his own method is not surprising, because figural interpretation, so to speak, won the day. How else could history ‘as such’—History with a capital H—appear to us except as a totality, be it governed by providence or reason, oriented toward the highest good?<sup>24</sup> Auerbach gives this impression from time to time. Even secular people (indeed, even ‘very secular’ people) are often given to reading history with eyes colored by a faith, however rarified, in providence and progress.<sup>25</sup> History has an arc that, apparently, bends toward justice. Modern democracies are fulfillments of ancient promises made by the Greeks,

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<sup>24</sup> Even Kant, the great domesticator of reason, held that reason itself had a history, and that that such a history could be oriented toward nothing but the highest good. On this topic, see the fascinating study by Yirmiahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

<sup>25</sup> On the afterlives of Christianity that confront (and often confound) ‘very secular’ people, see Joseph Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Non-Religious* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

transmitted to ‘us’ through the medieval mediation of ‘Judaean-Christian’ values. Secular liberalism is the fulfillment and—if its partisans are to be believed—is as close as can be gotten to the perfection Christian ethical and political ideals.<sup>26</sup> As we’ll see below (Chapter 4), the logic of supersession lurks among these secular articles of faith.

What, however, is Auerbach’s considered position? It seems that the point of Auerbach’s study of *figura* is that, if we see things in this way, it is because we are on ‘this side’ of the figural distortion of the concept of history. To be sure, this distortion is also an invention of sorts. As we’ll see in a moment (§§16-17), Auerbach locates the first beginnings of historical consciousness elsewhere than in figural interpretation. As Porter puts it, glossing Auerbach’s motives for writing *Mimesis*, “the rise of historical consciousness inevitably has to pass through an initial Jewish moment. Must it also *supersede* this moment? The question haunts all of Auerbach’s writings.”<sup>27</sup> If the analysis above (in Chapter 2) is sound, then this is to be expected. For figural interpretation necessarily arrives late on the scene. Its aim is to justify and explain the path it took toward its arrival, to enlist in the plot of its *Bildungsroman* the figures it met along the way, and to make of them the rearguard of its world-historical adventure. This adventure is such that it can only ever retreat from its cryptic, subterranean origins in the depths of Jewish prophecy toward its destiny in the eschaton. That is to say, figural interpretation writes (and rewrites) history as the outworking of the logic of supersession.

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<sup>26</sup> On secular governance, see Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). See also the much-maligned, but very influential Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Porter, “Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology,” 143; emphasis in original.



## §16 The Depths

Auerbach repeats his narration of the historicity of figural interpretation throughout *Mimesis*. Apropos of the production and dissemination of the gospel narratives in the wake of Paul's missions in the Mediterranean, he writes that

an adaptation of the message to the preconceptions of a far wider audience, its detachment from the special preconceptions of the Jewish world, became a necessity and was effected by a method rooted in the Jewish tradition but now applied with incomparable boldness, the method of revisional interpretation [*umdeutenden Interpretation*]. The Old Testament was played down [*entwertet*] as popular history and as the code of the Jewish people [*als Volksgeschichte und Gesetz der Juden entwertet*] and assumed the appearance of a series of 'figures,' that is of prophetic announcements and anticipations [*Vorverkündigungen und Vorandeutungen*] of the coming of Jesus and the concomitant events. (M 48 [51])<sup>28</sup>

This repetition appears, in fact, in the concluding paragraph of the conclusion of Auerbach's second chapter, titled "Fortunata." This is significant for two reasons. The first reason is so simple that it barely warrants mention: it is the *second* chapter. Another chapter ("Odysseus's Scar") precedes it and sets the stage for it (we will come back to this shortly). The second reason, too, is simple, but deceptively so: Auerbach is not directly concerned, in "Fortunata," with the figural tradition as such, but with a comparative analysis of a gospel narrative

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<sup>28</sup> *Entwertet*, the term Auerbach uses to describe the Pauline and patristic treatment of the Old Testament is translated literally as 'devalued,' but also as 'cancelled' (as when one cancels a reservation). Trask's rendering ('played down') softens the edge of Auerbach's polemic.

alongside two other texts of antiquity. He takes up a passage from the first-century Latin author Petronius's *Satyricon* (a fiction), and a contemporary passage from Tacitus's *Annals* (a work of antique historiography). As will have been the case in the first chapter of *Mimesis*, where Homer is compared to the Elohist, Auerbach's argument in "Fortunata" is intended to chart the historiographical and realist limits of the literatures of antiquity. That is to say, he wants to show what the ancients *cannot* accomplish in their thought and writing.

What is revealed in the fictional narrative of a raucous banquet in the *Satyricon* and in the historiographic account of the military revolt in the *Annals* is the "limit of antique realism and thus of antique historical consciousness" (M 40).<sup>29</sup> In spite of the fact that Tacitus' text depicts "a revolutionary movement from the depths" (M 33), Tacitus has in view only "vices and virtues, successes and mistakes;" he cannot see the historical and social forces at play (M 38). Petronius, to his credit, reaches the "ultimate limit of the advance of realism in antiquity," but the dinner scene of the *Satyricon* is pure comedy; it represents its characters and their speech in a *merely* ordinary and everyday way, without developing the enigma of their individuality in relation to their social milieu (M 30). Here, again, Auerbach notes that what is missing is a sense of the social forces at play:

In the realistic literature of antiquity, the existence of society poses no historical problem; it may at best pose a problem in ethics, but even then the ethical problem is

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<sup>29</sup> A little earlier, Auerbach sounds a rare methodological note on this score: "If the literature of antiquity was unable to represent everyday life seriously, that is, in full appreciation of its problems and with an eye for its historical background; if it could represent it only in the low style, comically or at best idyllically, statically and ahistorically, the implication is that these things mark the limits not only of the realism of antiquity but of its historical consciousness as well. For the it is precisely in the intellectual and economic conditions of everyday life that those forces are revealed which underlie historical movements" (M 33). I return to this below.

more concerned with the individual members of society than with the social whole. No matter how many persons may be branded as given to vice or as ridiculous, criticism of vices and excesses poses the problem as one for the individual; consequently, social criticism never leads to a definition of the motive forces [*bewegenden Kräfte*] within society. (M 32 [35])

Auerbach intends to draw a stark contrast between the literature of antiquity, be it fiction or historiography, and that of the modern world (“A modern Petronius would link a portrait of a profiteer to the inflation after the First World War” [M 32]), but that is not the only contrast at stake in “Fortunata.”

Auerbach has before him the Gospel of Mark. He is concerned, in particular, with the profound realism of the scene depicting Peter’s denials (Mark 14: 66-72). The scene is ordinary but also world-historical. Its cast are prosaic and average: the servant girls and the guards of the court of the High Priest of Jerusalem—and Peter, who warms himself by a fire. There, his face illuminated, Peter is recognized as one of the comrades of the condemned, which precipitates his famous, repeated denials of his association with Jesus. The scene is also drenched by the sublime. It is, after all, a prelude to the crucifixion, which will have been the hinge on which swings the door of salvation history. The narrative’s structure (to say nothing of its immense spiritual freight) depends on the revelation of Peter’s pathetic individuality, the terrible conflicts and crises by which his person is riven, and his implication in a sequence of events—indeed, the event par excellence—that outstrips him and, for that very reason, confirms him in his faith.

Auerbach’s reading of Mark’s gospel is interesting for the fact that the text in question is both Jewish and Christian; or, perhaps, it is no longer properly Jewish nor yet properly

Christian. The authors and editors of the gospels were likely aware of Paul's pioneering appropriations of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, but they were not yet practicing figural interpretation as such. For them, the question of the 'parting of the ways' had not been settled. It was, on the contrary, a question being raised by the text itself, pressing upon everyone within and without Jerusalem. The problem of supersession is, perhaps, latent and undeveloped in the gospels, but the rapid circulation of the gospel texts contributed to the acceleration of the nascent Christian community's self-recognition as the superseding and spiritually superior heirs to God's covenant with the Jews. Soon, Christians would come to call themselves such (viz. 'Christians'). Soon, the question of the 'parting of the ways' (or, per Boyarin, the 'partitioning') would reach its second-century 'answer' in Justin's *Dialogue*, and would proceed soon thereafter to its hermeneutical crystallization in Tertullian and its providential apotheosis in Augustine. And yet, in spite of the fact that he is treating a foundational document of the Christian faith, Auerbach is not—not here, at least—concerned with figural interpretation.

Auerbach's enthusiasm for the narrative of Peter's denials is indelible and it is significant that he is attuned not to the figural-prophetic form of universal history implicit in the gospels, but rather to the profundity, mystery, and historicity of the psycho-social milieu from which the gospels emerged.

Peter and the other characters in the New Testament are caught in a universal movement of the depths [*einer allgemeinen Bewegung der Tiefe*] which at first remains almost entirely below the surface and only very gradually ... emerges into the foreground of history [*geschichtlichen Vordergrund*], but which even now, from the beginning, lays claim to being limitless and the direct concern of everybody, and

which absorbs all merely personal conflicts into itself. What we see here is a world which on the one hand is entirely real, average [*alltäglich*], identifiable as to place, time, and circumstances, but which on the other hand is shaken in its very foundations, is transforming and renewing itself before our eyes. For the New Testament authors who are their contemporaries, these occurrences on the plane of everyday life assume the importance of world-revolutionary events, *as later on they will for everyone*. (M 43 [46]; my emphasis)<sup>30</sup>

We can surmise that the last clause of the passage just cited refers to the rise of Christianity as a universal religion and to the development of figural interpretation, which was, as we've seen, able to render the coming of the messiah meaningful to those outside the Jewish matrix of messianic expectation (that is, to make the Old Testament legible for one and all). Here, however, Auerbach is interested not in the 'vertical line' that gathers together the fragmentary promises—nor in the *figurae* who figure the fulfillments—but in the social and historical depths from which the messiah known as Jesus of Nazareth surfaced.

These depths should not be mistaken for another 'vertical line' that would supplement the first. Still less should we identify the depths with the 'original' vertical line of transcendence. There is nothing vertical, nor transcendent, about the depths. Nor do they belong to the 'horizontal' plane on which historical events take their place in succession. In the context of Auerbach's remarks, depth is something like the condition of possibility of charting the difference between the horizontal, successive, relations between persons and events of

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. M 44 [47]: "What considerable portions of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles describe, what Paul's Epistles also often reflect, is unmistakably the beginning of a deep subsurface movement, the unfolding of historical forces [*das Entstehen einer Tiefenbewegung, das Sichenfalten geschichtlicher Kräfte*]."

diachronic history and their providential, vertical, synchronic gathering. The abstract lines of horizontality and verticality are ‘drawn,’ as it were, from the roiling shapes of the depths of everyday life, in all of its material and spiritual variety and indeterminacy. These depths cannot be known as such, since what Auerbach has in mind is the basically inscrutable, yet undeniably salient, character of the intercourse of individuals with their others, their social milieu, their world, and even themselves.<sup>31</sup> We should therefore conceive of the depths as a ‘diagonal’ or ‘volcanic’ line, which crosses and gives shape to its vertical and horizontal correlates but cannot be identified with either of them. Depth is not something added to history; it is what gives the ‘domain’ of history to be thought.<sup>32</sup> In the figural interpretation of

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<sup>31</sup> I discuss the significance of the ‘depth’ dimension of history—and the literatures that lay claim to it—for Auerbach’s understanding of realism and truth in more detail below, §17.

<sup>32</sup> In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze describes just such a vulcanism of thought and history: “Depth is like the famous geological line from NE to SW, the line which comes diagonally from the heart of things and distributes volcanoes: it unites a bubbling sensibility and a thought which ‘rumbles in its crater.’ Schelling said that depth is not added from without to length and breadth, but remains buried, like the sublime principle of the *differend* which creates them.” See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 230. Apropos of thermo- and electro-dynamics, Deleuze describes an intensive (or volcanic) *spatium* from which the world of extension and events emerges in flows of molten empiricities: “In this sense, energy or intensive quantity is a transcendental principle, not a scientific concept. In terms of the distinction between empirical and transcendental principles, an empirical principle is the instance which governs a particular domain. Every domain is a qualified and extended partial system, governed in such a manner that the difference of intensity which creates it tends to be cancelled within it (*law of nature*). But the domains are distributive and cannot be added: there is no more an extensity in general than there is an energy in general within extensity. On the other hand, there is an intensive space with no other qualification, and within this space a pure energy. The transcendental principle does not govern any domain but gives the domain to be governed by given empirical principle; it accounts for the subjection of a domain to a principle. The domain is created by difference of intensity, and given by this difference to an empirical principle according to which and in which the difference itself is cancelled. It is the transcendental principle which maintains itself in itself, beyond the reach of the empirical principle. Moreover, while the laws of nature govern the surface of the world, the eternal return ceaselessly rumbles in this other dimension of the transcendental or the volcanic *spatium*” (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 240-241); “Along the broken chain or the torturous ring we are violently led from the limit of sense to the limit of thought, from what can only be sensed to what can only be thought” (243). Inasmuch as it is a transcendental principle, the volcanic line can be said to create the relation of the vertical (transcendence) and the horizontal (immanence). For more on the diagonal line, see Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

history, that 'domain' is conceived as a mesh of horizontal lines gathered together by the vertical. Much like those moments when he speaks of 'symptoms,' Auerbach's account of the social forces percolating in Mark's Gospel sounds much like Marx, Freud, or Nietzsche. Something else, something discontinuous and fecund, lies beneath the smooth succession of legends and histories; some other thing flickers beneath the shining faces of things; some other will insinuates itself into the apparently unitary actions of the characters in the narrative; some other word rumbles in Peter's throat, but chokes off and leaves him dissolute, on the lam. In the social and historical milieu to which Auerbach points us, an abyss is yawning open; the swinging "pendulum" of Peter's denials describes a curve that threatens to plunge into the depths from which its ponderous motion arises. Everything is on the verge.

It is true that the world-historical occurrences that are depicted in the gospels would come to be understood as indices—even *figurae*—of a soteriological drama that is, ultimately, extra-worldly and supra-historical. The Christ will not have been a merely political actor, but the very Son of very God, savior of one and all. Auerbach himself says as much, but he signals again and again toward what precedes and persists in the profound realism of the gospel texts.

To be sure, in all this we must not forget that the transformation is here one whose course progresses to somewhere outside of history, to the end of time or to the coincidence of all times, in other words upward, and does not, like the scientific concepts of evolutionary history, remain on the horizontal plane of historical events. That is a decisive difference; and yet, whatever kind of movement it may be which the New Testament writings introduced into phenomenal observation, the essential point is this: the deep subsurface layers, which were static for the observers of

classical antiquity, began to move. (M 45)

So, history will have gotten its Christian wings, buoyed up on the orthogonal winds of the eschaton. Yet, it is the historical ‘accident’ of Peter’s Galilean accent that betrays him as one of the companions of the condemned. Peter has a history, a hometown, a trade; he speaks like a country bumpkin because—incredibly—he is exactly that: a fisherman of no account. But he is at the center of everything. Peter does not only ‘have’ depth, He is not just in the depths but is ‘in deep.’ Indeed, he is in so deep that, at the critical moment, when he is recognized as a disciple of the Nazarene, he resorts to denials and disavowals. If we have read Matthew’s gospel account of the miracle on the sea of Galilee (14: 22-33), we can perhaps imagine Peter’s mood as he flees the scene of his denials: he is out over the deep water again, losing faith, sinking beneath the waves.

Apropos of the realism of the gospels, Auerbach avers that they are a genre unto themselves. There is simply nothing like them in antiquity.

Surely, the New Testament writings are extremely effective; the tradition of the prophets and the Psalms is alive in them, and in some of them—those written by authors of more or less pronounced Hellenistic culture—we can trace the use of Greek figures of speech. But the spirit of rhetoric—a spirit which classified subjects in *genera*, and invested every subject with a specific form of style as the one garment becoming it in virtue of its nature—could not extend its dominion to them for the simple reason that their subject would not fit into any of the known genres. A scene like Peter’s denial fits into no antique genre. It is too serious for comedy, too contemporary and everyday for tragedy, politically too insignificant for history—and the form which was given it is one of such immediacy that its like does not exist in



the literature of antiquity. (M 45)

What is this prophetic and poetic tradition that lives on in the gospels? What does the seemingly unrelated question of literary style have to do with the gospels and their prophetic and poetic patrimony? In what ways do the gospels, and the biblical commentarial tradition, inherit (and disinherit) that patrimony? In order to address these questions, we should turn—back, as it were—to the motive and meaning of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, that is, to its celebrated first chapter.

#### §17 Homer and the Elohist

Like “Figura,” *Mimesis* was composed during Auerbach’s exile in Istanbul. It appeared in German in 1946 and in English translation in 1953. Its scope is staggering. Though it proceeds by way of textual fragments and by no means touches on every literature in the history of the West, Auerbach’s vision extends from his famous comparison of Homer and the Hebrew Scriptures through Geoffrey Chaucer, Dante Alighieri, Miguel de Cervantes, Marcel Proust, and others, and concludes with a virtuosic reading of Virginia Woolf’s inimitable *To The Lighthouse*. Each chapter attempts, as if it were a monad, to describe the whole development of human self-consciousness in history in terms of the specific mode of representation of the text in question. Auerbach dispenses with scholarly apparatuses, footnotes, and many of the genre conventions of Romance philology; every chapter save the first begins with a lengthy excerpt of the text to be examined, then commences with its commentary, proceeding at a leisurely pace, here and there punctuated by moments of intense historical reflection.<sup>33</sup> Auerbach remarks in his epilogue that the book might not have

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<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, M 19-20, where Auerbach momentarily suspends his discussion of antique

been written at all had it not been for the fact of his exile and the consequent lack of access to his library in Marburg (M 557).

In *Mimesis*, Auerbach is determined to make a two-fold contribution to literary and historical criticism: (1) to show that the classical separation of literary styles (the high style for the sublime, the low style for the comic) is confronted by a profound challenge (the ‘mixture of styles’) in the biblical literary tradition and in the figural interpretative lens brought to bear on the biblical literature; and (2) to show that modern realism is characterized by a return of the mixed style, which had fallen fallow in the sterile fields of the Renaissance, which had revived the classical tradition of reserving high, poetic language for the divine and the sublime, while utilizing low, vulgar language for the comic and the everyday. Auerbach’s object of inquiry is thus the invention (and the various afterlives) of the ‘mixed style,’ in which high and low (a binary pair that can be declined in many ways: transcendent and immanent, divine and mundane, abstract and particular, rational and sensuous, spiritual and carnal, eternal and temporal...) greet one another in the literary representation of everyday reality.

The classical separation of styles was articulated very early in the western canon. Already in Aristotle’s *Poetics* a difference of personal character corresponds to a difference in form: “And the making of poetry split apart in accordance with [the characters of the poets], for the more dignified poets imitated beautiful actions and people of the sort who perform them, while the less worthy sort imitated actions of low people, first making abusive poems just as

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historiography to situate the reader in his time and history, namely, in an epoch riven by two catastrophic wars and the rise of National Socialism.

the others made hymns and praises.”<sup>34</sup> Significantly, Aristotle’s example of a ‘serious’ poet, one who writes in the high style, is Homer, whose *Illiad* and *Odyssey* serve as the paradigms of tragedy, for which only the high style is sufficient. Auerbach, too, begins with Homer, but does so in order to depose him rather than fête him. The first chapter of *Mimesis*, “Odysseus’s Scar,” is justly celebrated as a tour de force of literary criticism. It is also central to the scholarly controversy that greeted *Mimesis* upon its publication and which survives to this day, albeit muted by the decades and transmuted by its reception in other fields. Let us consider the argument that opens *Mimesis*, since it lays the groundwork for everything that follows it, especially the pivotal role played by figural interpretation.

“Odysseus’s Scar” is, in the first place, a reading of a passage from Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus, disguised as a wandering stranger, has returned home to Ithaca. The titular scar refers to a tell-tale mark on the hero’s thigh, by which his housekeeper, who is washing the stranger’s feet, recognizes him as her long-lost master. Auerbach’s interest in the passage has to do with the fact that the scene plays out, so to speak, on center stage, in the spotlight. Everything is described in perfect detail (“Homer does not omit to tell the reader that it is with his right hand that Odysseus takes the old woman by the throat to keep her from speaking, at the same time that he draws her closer to him with his left”); even the explanation of the origin of the scar (a boar hunting accident in Odysseus’s youth) is described in detail in a digression that interrupts the tension of the scene of recognition (M 3-4). The whole narrative, even the expository interruption, is described and narrated “with such a complete externalization of all the elements of the story and of their interconnections as to leave nothing in obscurity” (M 4). The interruption (to which, Auerbach notes, are

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<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2006), 23.

devoted some seventy lines of verse) is not intended to create suspense but rather to relax the tension of the scene. If the interruption, which occurs at the critical moment of recognition, were supposed to raise the feeling of suspense in the reader, the crisis would have to remain—percolating and threatening—in the background of the narrative as long as the interruption persists. But, Auerbach avers, there is nothing like this in Homer, for Homer “knows no background [*kennt keinen Hintergrund*]” (M 4 [6-7]). It seems worthy of note that Auerbach’s term, *Hintergrund*, also means ‘history.’

According to Auerbach, the “basic impulse of the Homeric style: to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatio-temporal relations” (M 6). So, too, are the psychological processes and events of the persons and peoples in Homer made available in their entirety: “nothing must remain hidden and unexpressed” (M 6). Homer’s characters “vent their inmost hearts in speech,” and where they do not relate their inwardness to one another, they speak aloud in their own minds, which are placed by Homer well within earshot of the reader. There are no gaps in Homer, not even the basic temporal gap introduced by recollection. Everything takes place in the ‘foreground’ (*Vordergrund*), locally, presently, and lucidly (M 7 [9]). There is nothing to interpret; everything is illuminated. Such is the peculiarity (*Eigentümlichkeit*, which Trask renders as ‘genius’) of Homer’s style: it is high and mighty, the very paradigm of the epic, which is ultimately indifferent to the historical reality of the narrative web it weaves with such astonishing detail (M 7 [9]). For Homer “does not need to base his story on historical reality.”

His reality is powerful enough in itself; it ensnares us, weaving its web around us, and that suffices him. And this ‘real’ world into which we are lured, exists for itself,

contains nothing but itself; the Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret second meaning. Homer can be analyzed [...] but he cannot be interpreted. (M 13)

It is easy to see why *Mimesis* drew the ire of the classical philologists of Auerbach's day: he reduces their object to a catalog of overexposed affects and events and relegates the role of the Homeric scholar to the menial labor of textual analysis.<sup>35</sup> For his part, Auerbach admits, again in the "Epilegomena to *Mimesis*," that his presentation of Homer is one-sided; the emphasis on the lack of tension and the absence of any background is put too strongly. He even remarks that he considered omitting the Homer chapter entirely, since, as he expressly admits, it would have been sufficient to begin his literary-historical tour around the time of the birth of the Christ (M 560).<sup>36</sup> Here, again, Auerbach seems to cede too much to his critics, but his justification for the ultimate inclusion of the Homer chapter ("somewhat toned down in regard to the first draft") is illuminating. It seemed to him the only feasible

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<sup>35</sup> For Auerbach's summary of some of those criticisms and his response to them, see his "Epilegomena," in M 559-566.

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Auerbach had already, in his 1929 book on Dante, located the literary-revolutionary break in the historical period of the gospel narratives: "The story of Christ revealed not only the intensity of personal life but also its diversity and the wealth of its forms, for it transcended the limits of ancient mimetic aesthetics. Here man has lost his earthly dignity; everything can happen to him, and the classical division of genres has vanished; the distinction between the sublime and the vulgar style exists no longer. In the Gospels [*der Heilsgeschichte*], as in ancient comedy, real persons of all classes make their appearance: fisherman and kings, high priests, publicans, and harlots participate in the action; and neither do those of exalted rank act in the style of classical tragedy, nor do the lowly behave as if in a farce; quite on the contrary, all social and aesthetic limits have been effaced. On that stage there is room for all human diversity, whether we consider the cast of characters as a whole or each character singly; each individual is fully legitimated, but not on any social grounds; regardless of his earthly position, his personality is developed in the utmost, and what befalls him is neither sublime nor base; even Peter, not to mention Jesus, suffers profound humiliation. The depth and scope of the naturalism in the story of Christ are unparalleled; neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity had the opportunity or the power to narrate human events in this way" (D 14-15 [22-23]).

way to introduce the central problem of the book. As was mentioned above, the problem concerns the revolution in the structure and procession of historical consciousness signaled by the advent of the mixture of high and low styles. Auerbach is not interested in showing some new dimension of what Homer can think and do, but in showing what Homer *cannot* think and do. To wit, he cannot mix his styles. The high style is for high things (tragedy); the low for low (comedy). Homer's representations of the inner and outer lives of his characters (all their speech, commerce, intercourse, and violence) cannot grasp the simple and sensuous everyday reality of historical human beings. As we saw above (§16), in the cases of Petronius and Tacitus, the literary capacity of Homer and his contemporaries to represent reality is limited by their social and historical conditions.<sup>37</sup>

The question of style is, therefore, not a merely aesthetic one. Its stakes are epistemological, political, historical, and, ultimately, theological. Truth is at stake. Auerbach's wager is that the relative strength of the realistic style in a given historical and cultural milieu is a measure of the limits of the historical consciousness of that milieu.

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<sup>37</sup> Writing in response to his critics, Auerbach avers that his use of "the word 'limits' [regarding] ancient historical writing contains no negative value judgment at all. Quite the contrary." (M 561). This seems, on the one hand, to be rather evasive. On the other hand, we might read Auerbach's remark in a materialist—even Marxian—key, such that the point is similar to that made by Marx in *Capital, Vol. 1*: namely, that Aristotle's failure to discover the form of value in exchange was not the result of a deductive error on his part, but rather because the "historical limitation inherent in the society in which he lived prevented him from finding out what 'in reality' this relation of equality consisted of" (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 151-152. Aristotle failed to find the truth of value because his social conditions—structured by slavery rather than by waged labor—did not allow for its appearance. Auerbach may have in mind something similar regarding the capacity of the authors of antiquity to represent the truth of history. On the other hand, Marx is not the most reliable guide to the vicissitudes of the idea of slavery in history. For a trenchant criticism of Marx's (non-)theory of slavery (and therefore of his theory of value), see Sara-Maria Sorrentino, "Natural Slavery, Real Abstraction, and the Virtuality of Anti-Blackness," *Theory and Event*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (July 2019), pp. 630-673; and Sara-Maria Sorrentino, "The Abstract Slave: Anti-Blackness and Marx's Method," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 96 (Fall 2019), pp. 17-37.

If the literature of antiquity was unable to represent everyday life seriously, that is, in full appreciation of its problems and with an eye for its historical background; if it could represent it only in the low style, comically or at best idyllically, statically and ahistorically, *the implication is that these things mark the limits not only of the realism of antiquity but of its historical consciousness as well*. For it is precisely in the intellectual and economic conditions of everyday life that those forces are revealed which underlie historical movements; these, whether military, diplomatic, or related to the inner constitution of the state, are only the product, the final result, of variations in the depths of everyday life. (M 33, my emphasis)

So, the Homer chapter stayed put, and its pilot position will have proven to be decisive, because “Odysseus’s Scar is also a reading of another text, which hails, as it were, from another antiquity. I refer to the famous narrative of the binding of Isaac (the *Akedah*) in Genesis 22. Ultimately, Auerbach’s criticism of Homer is intended to supply an occasion to champion the mysterious author of the *Akedah*: the Elohist.<sup>38</sup>

The selection of the *Akedah* for comparison to Homer’s *Odyssey* is by no means trivial. “Odysseus’s Scar” is polemical from end to end. Auerbach was engaged in a profound political struggle against his own academic culture, that of German philology during the Third Reich. In a series of studies on Auerbach’s theory and method, Porter has described Auerbach’s exilic works as a quest to ‘Judaize philology,’ and as a defense of what Porter

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<sup>38</sup> Auerbach is referring to the so-called ‘E source’ of the Pentateuch. On the documentary-source hypothesis (or the Wellhausen hypothesis), which dominated twentieth century biblical criticism, see Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987). The documentary-source hypothesis has, more recently, come under scrutiny; the existence of an independent ‘Elohistic’ source has been challenged. On this question, see John Van Seters, *The Pentateuch: A Social-Scientific Commentary* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

calls ‘Old Testament realism.’<sup>39</sup> The political-philological circumstances of Auerbach’s exile have been noted by numerous commentators. For instance, John David Dawson, opens his *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* by recalling the 1933 sermons of one Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber, who, in the face of a chorus of voices calling for the decanonization of the Old Testament, sought to preserve the relevance of the Old Testament for Christians.<sup>40</sup> Faulhaber’s defense of the dual canon, unfortunately, did not entail a defense of the Jews of German civil society, whose terrible fate was already being contemplated and enacted by the ascendent National Socialists. Dawson remarks that Faulhaber’s dispute with the *Deutsche Christen* was motivated not by opposition to their antisemitism but by their “disparagement of the Old Testament.” Faulhaber resolved to save the text—because, as I’ve argued in Chapters 1 and 2 above, Jewish scripture is among the most precious and pre-eminent of the grounds of Christian self-recognition—by sacrificing the people of the Book, namely, the Jews of his day and place.<sup>41</sup> Without the scriptural and historical warrant of the Old Testament, the supersessionist understanding of history as the fulfillment of prophecy is imperiled. We might say that Auerbach’s work—from “Figura” to *Mimesis*—pursued a similar goal, but that he aimed to save the people by saving the text. For, by the time Auerbach was composing “Figura” and *Mimesis*, the political life of the Germany he had left

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<sup>39</sup> See Porter, “Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology,” 115-147; Porter, “Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach’s Theory of *Figura*,” 80-113; Porter, “Old Testament Realism in the Writings of Erich Auerbach,” 187-224.

<sup>40</sup> See Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*, 1-3. See also Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber, *Judaism, Christianity and Germany*, trans. George D. Smith (New York: Macmillan, [1934] 1935); Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). My thanks to Benjamin Fisher for pointing me to these sources on the *Deutsche Christen*.

<sup>41</sup> Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 2.



behind had deteriorated even further. The chorus of voices calling for the abandonment of the Old Testament altogether had swelled to a fever pitch. Auerbach's choice to celebrate the binding of Isaac (condemned as particularly *Undeutsch* by his philological cohort) is meant to establish the singular importance of Jewish history and literature for Western identity and culture.

Porter points out that Auerbach's reading of Homer and the Bible is, in fact, an exercise in *contrastive* rather than comparative literature.<sup>42</sup> Auerbach does not—not exactly—intend to contribute to the literary criticism of the Homeric corpus; he rather wishes to illustrate, in the starkest possible terms, the problem at the heart of *Mimesis*, namely, the radical break in style and consciousness represented by the biblical literary tradition. Auerbach is determined not only to show that the two texts (and the literatures they represent) are different in kind, but also to argue that the biblical text is superior, both in terms of its literary power (its realism) and, *therefore*, its historical truth.

To be clear, Auerbach is not interested in establishing what we might call the 'truth-value' of either Homer or the Bible. It is not a matter of deciding whether either narrative corresponds to this or that empirically verifiable fact that occurred in the distant past. It is rather a question of the status of the *claim to truth* that the text makes upon its reader and the resulting, corresponding structure of a given shape of historical consciousness.<sup>43</sup> What

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<sup>42</sup> James I. Porter, "Auerbach, Homer, and the Jews," in Susan A. Stephens and Phiroze Vasunia (eds.), *Classics and National Cultures* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 240. Cf. Porter, "Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology," 120: "Far from constituting a project in comparatives, thanks to which Auerbach would be remembered as the father of modern comparative literature, his juxtaposition of the two major literary and cultural traditions of the West creates a dissonance within the projects of reading, of classicism, of Biblical scholarship, and of literary history and criticism—in short, of philology. Auerbach ought to be remembered as the father of *incomparative literature!*"

<sup>43</sup> Auerbach's argument seems to anticipate the idea of the 'Mosaic distinction,' as it is theorized

matters is the extent to which, and the intensity with which, a literary representation of reality demands, and therefore calls, or calls for, a will to interpretation, even in cases where the text can be said (as Tertullian says of scripture) to interpret itself.<sup>44</sup> Auerbach argues that the *Odyssey* sounds no such call, makes no such claim. The Bible, by contrast, stakes a most radical (even “tyrannical [*tyrannisch*]”) claim to truth, for it excludes all others. “The world of the Scripture stories [*Die Welt der Geschichten der Heiligen Schrift*],” Auerbach avers,

is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no right to appear independently of it, and it is promised that all of them, the history of all mankind, will be given their due place within its frame [*Rahmen*], will be subordinated to it. The Scripture stories do not, like Homer’s, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels. (M 14-15 [17])

Auerbach admits that, while Homer, strictly speaking, was still somewhat removed from the separation of styles that was universally adopted in the later, Hellenistic period, the Homeric verses are much closer to that paradigm than to the narrative structure and style of

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in Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Jan Assman, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). See also Gil Anidjar’s provocative reflections on Assman and Freud (“Jesus and Monotheism”) in Anidjar, *Blood*, 235-258.

<sup>44</sup> Auerbach remarks on the peculiar demand for interpretation signaled by the *Akedah* narrative: Thus the journey [of Abraham and Isaac to Moriah] is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath, a process which has no present, which is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead, and which yet is measured: three days! Three such days positively demand [*rufen*] the symbolic interpretation [*symbolische Ausdeutung*] which they later received” (M 10 [12]).

the Old Testament. If Homer's poems are characterized by the purity and lucidity of the foreground, then the Elohist narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac (but so, too, the narratives and characters of Jacob and Esau, Hagar and Sarah, Saul and David, etc.) is, by contrast, *hintergründig* ('cryptic,' 'enigmatic'), which Trask renders as "fraught with background" (M 12, *passim*). The differences between the Homeric and biblical styles are stark (one does not need a degree in comparative literature to notice them), but what makes Auerbach's argument so compelling—and subject to so much controversy—is the lesson he derives from those differences. Namely, that it is precisely the silences, lacunae, and mysteries of the biblical literatures that mark them in the first place as authentic, historical, and true.<sup>45</sup>

Consider Auerbach's reading of Genesis 22. The passage records Abraham's dialogue with God regarding the sacrifice of his son, Isaac:

God appears without bodily form (yet he 'appears'), coming from some unspecified place—we only hear his voice, and that utters nothing but a name, a name without an adjective, without a descriptive epithet for the person spoken to, such as is the rule of every Homeric address; and of Abraham too nothing is made perceptible except the words in which he answers God: *Hinne-ni*. [...] Moreover, the two speakers are not on the same level: if we conceive of Abraham in the foreground, where it might be

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<sup>45</sup> Auerbach: "It would be difficult, then, to imagine styles more contrasted than those of these two equally ancient and equally epic texts. On the one hand, externalized, uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground; thoughts and feeling completely expressed; events taking place in leisurely fashion and with very little of suspense. On the other hand, the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and 'fraught with background'" (M 11-12).

possible to picture him as prostrate or kneeling or bowing with outspread arms or gazing upward, God is not there too: Abraham's words and gestures are directed toward the depths of the picture or upwards, but in any case the undetermined, dark place from which the voice comes to him is not in the foreground. (M 9)

Similarly, the famous conversation between Abraham and Isaac, which transpires as they climb the hill toward the site of the fateful sacrifice, leaves virtually everything unexpressed. To Isaac's question ("The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb?"), Abraham replies that God will provide the lamb for the holocaust (Gen. 22: 7-8, NRSV). Abraham's reply says everything by saying—as Søren Kierkegaard famously argues in *Fear and Trembling*—what amounts to nothing.<sup>46</sup> When Auerbach writes of the “multilayeredness [*Vielschichtige innerhalb*]” of the individual characters presented by the Elohist, he likely has in mind, too, Kierkegaard's remarks about the “double-movement” of resignation and faith in Abraham's soul.<sup>47</sup> Such complexity is basically absent in the Homeric epics: “In Homer, the complexity [*Vielfalt*] of the psychological life is shown only in the succession and alternation of emotions; whereas the Jewish writers are able to express the simultaneous existence of various layers of consciousness and the conflict between them” (M 13 [15]).

The cryptic background and enigmatic depth of the Old Testament is nowhere more

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<sup>46</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, trans. Howard V Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 82-120, esp. 118-119.

<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 119: “But a final word by Abraham has been preserved, and insofar as I can understand the paradox, I can also understand Abraham's total presence in that word. First and foremost, he does not say anything, and in that form he says what he has to say. [...] Now, if Abraham had replied: I know nothing—he would have spoken an untruth. He cannot say anything, for what he knows he cannot say. Therefore he answers: God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son! From this we see, as described previously, the double-movement in Abraham's soul. [...] So he does not speak an untruth, but neither does he say anything, for he is speaking in a strange tongue.” See also the earlier description of the double-movement at *ibid.*, 35-37.

evident than in the historicity, temporality, and memory of its persons, and in the events that befall them. Not only the hidden God, but also each of those with whom he makes covenants and to whom he promises the world, possesses a ‘background’—or is possessed by it.

Abraham’s actions are explained not only by what is happening to him at the moment, nor yet only by his character [...] but by his previous history; he remembers, he is constantly conscious of, what God has promised him and what God has already accomplished for him—his soul is torn between desperate rebellions and hopeful expectation; his silent obedience is multilayered, has background [*sein schweigender Gehorsam ist vielschichtig und hintergründig*]. (M 12 [14])<sup>48</sup>

If Auerbach is unfair to Homer and the other poets and historiographers of antiquity, it is not on account of naïveté, nor even, strictly speaking, of prejudice. The account of the difference between Homer and the Elohist is intended to show that their respective works are symptoms of a profound difference in historical consciousness. The story of Abraham and Isaac is no more empirically reliable and verifiable than the narrative of the wanderings of Odysseus is. Both, Auerbach insists, are legendary tales. The difference is that the narrator of the former, the Elohist, “had to believe in the objective truth of the story.” Moreover, the Elohist had to believe in it “passionately [*mit Leidenschaft*],” or else—but the result is the same—he had to be a “conscious liar,” a “political liar with a definite end in view, lying in the interest of a claim to absolute authority” (M 14 [15-16]).

Against the tendency toward rationalizing, deflationary readings of the admittedly

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<sup>48</sup> Compare Auerbach’s description of the Homeric heroes, “whose destiny is clearly defined and who wake every day as if it were the first day of their lives” (M 12).

legendary portions of the Old Testament, Auerbach insists that the Elohist's relation to the truth (viz. the truth of his story, but also that of his religious and political tradition) is more passionate than anything that can be found in Homer. The *Akedah* narrative is also more determined and constricted than any verses of Homer, since the Elohist was not ultimately aiming for what modern critics would call reality (*Wirklichkeit*) but aimed squarely and with the utmost intensity at laying claim to the truth of his tradition. Realism, such as it is, is but a means to the Elohist's true end, namely, *Wahrheit*, truth (M 14 [16]).<sup>49</sup> That history could be true; that such truth could be more than mere reality; that such reality could be more than its representation; that such representations could be more than mimetic rehearsals; that such rehearsals (conducted in the dark crypt where the mind of God and the soul of Abraham enjoy their impossible proximity) could be so much more than legends: this is the inheritance bequeathed by the Elohist to the West.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "Er mußte genau das schreiben, was sein Glaube an die Wahrheit der Überlieferung, oder, vom aufklärerischen Standpunkt, sein Interesse an der Wahrheit derselben von ihm forderte—in jedem Fall waren seiner freien, erfindenden oder ausmalenden Phantasie enge Schranken gesetzt; seine Tätigkeit mußte sich darauf beschränken, die fromme Überlieferung wirksam zu redigieren. Was er hervorbrachte, zielte also zunächst nicht auf '*Wirklichkeit*'—wenn ihm auch diese gelang, so war dies doch nur Mittel, nicht Zweck—, sondern auf Wahrheit" (M 14 [16], my emphasis). Confusingly, Trask renders Auerbach's *Wirklichkeit* as "realism," thereby obscuring—even reversing—Auerbach's central point: that literary realism is a negotiation between competing claims on reality.

<sup>50</sup> Auerbach: "Fraught with their development, sometimes aged to the verge of dissolution, they show a distinct stamp of individuality entirely foreign to the Homeric heroes. Time can touch the latter only outwardly, and even that change is brought to our observation as little as possible; whereas the stern hand of God is ever upon the Old Testament figures [*die alttestamentlichen Gestalten*]; he has not only made them once and for all and chosen them, but he continues to work upon them, bends them and kneads them, and, without destroying them in essence, produces from them forms which their youth gave no grounds for anticipating. [...] For they are bearers of the divine will, and yet they are fallible, subject to misfortune and humiliation—and in the midst of misfortune and in their humiliation their acts and words reveal the transcendent majesty of God. There is hardly a one of them who does not, like Adam, undergo the deepest humiliation—and hardly one who is not deemed worthy of God's personal intervention and personal inspiration. Humiliation and elevation go far deeper and far higher than in Homer, and they belong basically together. The poor beggar Odysseus is only masquerading, but Adam is really cast down, Jacob really a refugee, Joseph really in the pit and then a slave to be bought and sold. But their greatness, rising out of humiliation, is almost

Everything is legendary in Homer. By contrast, as one proceeds through Torah, and further, into the precincts of the Nevi'im and Ketuvim, the patently legendary material gives way to historical reporting. I say 'patently legendary' because, as Auerbach points out, it is typically a simple matter to distinguish the historical from the legendary, even in cases where a legend doesn't immediately betray itself by describing miraculous events. Legends run smoothly. History runs across itself and contradicts itself.<sup>51</sup> Auerbach refers repeatedly to the narratives of the life of David, which, while they contain legendary material (he adduces 1 Samuel 17, which records the tale of David and Goliath), are also, and quite obviously, a species of historical reporting. Scholarship is divided even today on the question of whether the manifestly 'pro-David' framework of 1 Samuel gives way, in 2 Samuel, to a 'Court History,' and the extent to which the authors and editors were attempting to neutralize or solidify David's hold on the monarchy.<sup>52</sup> Such questions—heavy-laden with literary-historical, source-critical, social, and political baggage—could not even arise if the material were purely legendary.

As Auerbach is keen to point out, the authors who composed the historical portions of the Old Testament also served as editors of the older legends, resulting not only in a potent

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superhuman and an image of God's greatness [*ein Abbild der Größe Gottes*]" (M 18 [21]).

<sup>51</sup> Auerbach: "The historical event which we witness, or learn from the testimony of those who witnessed it, runs much more variously, contradictorily, and confusedly; not until it has produced results in a definite domain are we able, with their help, to classify it to a certain extent; and how often the order to which we think we have attained becomes doubtful again, how often we ask ourselves if the data before us have not led us to a far too simple classification of the original events! Legend arranges its material in a simple and straightforward way; it detaches it from its contemporary historical context, so that the latter will not confuse it; it knows only clearly outlined men who act from few and simple motives and the contiguity of whose feelings and actions remains uninterrupted" (M 19)

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Hidden Book of the Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 1999).

cross-pollination of legend and history in their literature, but also—this is the whole point of Auerbach’s study—a distinctive and novel shape of historical consciousness.

In the stories of David [*Davidzählungen*], the legendary, which only later scientific criticism makes recognizable as such, imperceptibly passes into the historical; and even in the legendary, the problem of the classification and interpretation of human history is already passionately apprehended—a problem which later shatters the framework of historical composition and completely overruns it with prophecy. (M 20-21 [23-24])

Thus, legend is imbricated with history. The Old Testament runs the gamut of “legend, historical reporting, and interpretative historical theology” (M 21), and it does so by way of a profound indifference to any classical separation of styles. The sublime and the divine penetrate into the rhythms of daily life and the psychic lives of the heroes and heroines of the Old Testament. The conflicts and promises—and conflicts regarding promises—of the Old Testament are not just petty squabbles, nor are they merely casual instances of commerce and human intercourse. Doubtless, they are all of these things, but they are at the same time expressions of God’s will, God’s wrath, and God’s love. Here, Auerbach avers, the high and the low “are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable [*nicht nur tatsächlich ungetrennt, sondern grundsätzlich untrennbar sind*]” (M 23 [26]).

### §18 Monotheism and Prophecy

We have seen, in Chapter 2 above, that Auerbach discovers in figural interpretation something like a distinctively Christian key to understanding history as totality, in which the history of the world is ultimately identified with salvation history. In figural interpretation,



the horizontal matrix of promissory figures and their eschatological fulfillments is guaranteed by the verticality of the eternity of the mind of God. Such, anyway, is the basic outline of the construal of historically real prophecy in the Christian tradition. We have seen, in the present chapter, that Auerbach is describing the anteriority of a founding Jewish moment in the development of historical consciousness, upon which figural interpretation intervenes. In highlighting this feature of Auerbach's project in *Mimesis*, I follow a line of interpretation suggested by James I. Porter. Seemingly alone among readers of Auerbach, Porter endeavors to read Auerbach's project as a Jewish—rather than merely Romance, still less Christian—philology.<sup>53</sup> Porter argues that

Christianity has a significant though not quite central place in this narrative [of the development of historical consciousness]: It occupies, we might say, the displaced center of the historical evolution that Auerbach relates. At the real center of his story stand the Jewish inheritances of Christianity and their later residues in the West, which is to say the contribution of the Jewish traditions to an evolving sense of historical consciousness that was registered in literature as a sense of human, this-worldly reality. [...] Historical consciousness first appears in the Hebrew Bible. It

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<sup>53</sup> One of Porter's interlocutors is John David Dawson, who attempts to rehabilitate Auerbach's theory of figural interpretation by bringing it into closer proximity to the hermeneutics of Origen (Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 83-126). The upshot of Dawson's reading is a profoundly Christian—or, rather, Christianized—Auerbach. Of Dawson's reading of Auerbach (but also that of Hans Frei), Porter remarks wryly that "imagining a *Jewish* reader lies beyond the reach of both approaches" (Porter, "Disfigurations, 94-95, n.27). See also Jane O. Newman, "Auerbach's Dante: Poetical Theology as a Point of Departure for a Philology of World Literature," in Joachim Küpper (ed.), *Approaches to World Literature* (Akademie Verlag, 2013), pp. 39-58; and Jane O. Newman, "The Gospel According to Auerbach," *PMLA* 135.3 (2020), pp. 455-473. In Newman's view, too, Auerbach comes off as more or less a Christian, but, in any case, as writing for Christians.

then matures within, but to a great extent in spite of, the Christian tradition.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, there are ambiguities in Auerbach's presentation. We saw just above that Auerbach construes the Old Testament as having staked a claim to universal history, or to its representation. What, then, distinguishes the Hebrew claim to universal history from the Christian claim to the same? What distinguishes Jewish prophecy from Christian prophecy? And what distinguishes the Jewish and Christian conceptions of God?

The question of monotheism is raised very early on in "Odysseus's Scar," when Auerbach first introduces the Elohists' depiction of Abraham as a point of contrast with Homer. Why does God tempt Abraham? We are not told. From where does God call to Abraham? Again, we are in the dark. Auerbach anticipates an easy answer: God's paradoxical non-appearance is due to the Jewish concept of God, that is, to Jewish monotheism. But, Auerbach avers, this answer explains nothing; it is rather what demands explanation.

For how is the Jewish concept of God to be explained? Even their earlier God of the desert [*Wüstengott*] was not fixed in form and content, and was alone [*war einsam*]; his lack of form, his lack of local habitation, his singleness [*Einsamkeit*], was in the end not only maintained but developed even further in competition with the comparatively far more manifest gods of the surrounding Near Eastern world. The concept of God held by the Jews is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things [*Die Gottesvorstellung der Juden ist nicht sowohl Ursache als vielmehr Symptom ihrer Auffassungs- und -Darstellungsweise*].

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<sup>54</sup> Porter, "Old Testament Realism," 188.

(M 8 [10])

This is a pivotal methodological claim, the likes of which—as Uhlig points out—are relatively rare in Auerbach’s work.<sup>55</sup> Apropos of this methodological reflection, Porter observes that Auerbach is not interested in constructing a Jewish theology, nor is he affirming the “religious truth” of the Old Testament. Auerbach’s claim rather concerns what Porter calls the “ideology” of Jewish scripture, whose “grasp of reality is itself decidedly historical.”<sup>56</sup>

The claim that monotheism is a *symptom*, not a cause, of the Jewish mode of grasping and representing historical reality effects a decisive reversal: the universal history proclaimed and described by Jewish scripture does, indeed, derive from the monotheistic idea, but the concept of a single, unique, and universal God is itself a symptom of the exilic and diasporic history of the Jews. History, and the mode of historical consciousness that at once undergoes and undertakes it, is here construed as originally Jewish.<sup>57</sup> As we saw above (§17), for Auerbach, what marks history *as historical* is precisely its lacunae and aporias—its discordance with itself. The truth of history is found not in the ultimacy of the God who guarantees it but in the chaotic and conflictual character of human experience.<sup>58</sup> God is not

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<sup>55</sup> Uhlig, “Auerbach’s ‘Hidden’ (?) Theory of History,” 49.

<sup>56</sup> Porter, “Old Testament Realism,” 192.

<sup>57</sup> Here, Auerbach seems quite close to the thought of Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), whose posthumous work of 1919, *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (English edition: Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995]) Auerbach would surely have encountered while at Marburg. On Cohen and Auerbach, see Benjamin Fisher, “The Critique of Myth in German-Jewish Thought,” PhD Dissertation, UC Davis, 2023, 60-150.

<sup>58</sup> Auerbach assumes a Vichian posture with regard to history and to the sciences that charge themselves with investigating history. The historical sciences, especially philology, are, according to Auerbach’s reading of Vico, called to seek and find the truth of historical and political life. In this

the lord of history but its absolute symptom. For history, as Porter writes, glossing Auerbach, “is not a record of easily digestible facts. It is the symptomatic record of writhing contradictions, as well as the slow and painful awareness of this fact.”<sup>59</sup>

Doubtless, monotheism ‘reacts back’ on both the material and spiritual constitution of Jews; it widens the horizon of their national struggle to the point where it embraces the destiny of the whole world. There is extant in the Old Testament a distinctively Jewish play of horizontality and verticality. As Porter puts it, Auerbach’s point

about the Old Testament is that it is the product of a particular mode of construing the, so to speak, vertical and horizontal axes of human experience as both utterly imbricated and mutually inextricable. The intrusion of the divine vertical axis does not introduce a timeless and transcendental dimension into everyday reality. Nor does it point those whom it affects to another world beyond the present. On the contrary, it introduces historical depth *into* the everyday reality of an entire people.<sup>60</sup>

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regard, Auerbach, channeling Vico, writes that “all possible forms of human life and thinking, as created and experienced by men, must be found in the potentialities of the human mind (*dentro le modificazioni della nostra medesima mente umana*); [and] that therefore we are capable of re-evoking human history from the depth of our own consciousness” (Auerbach, “Vico and Aesthetic Criticism,” in SE 40). Auerbach’s point is that, for Vico, the physical world (and its natural laws) can be known only by its creator; by contrast, the historical and political world can be known only by *their* creators, namely, human beings.

<sup>59</sup> Porter, “Old Testament Realism,” 195. Clearly, Auerbach is not pursuing the same course as Jean Daniélou (*The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History*, trans. Nigel Abercrombie [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1958]). Nor is Auerbach doing quite what Löwith (*Meaning in History*) is doing. I turn to Löwith in Chapter 4.

<sup>60</sup> Porter, “Old Testament Realism,” 192. Cf. Auerbach’s commentary in *Mimesis*: “The claim of the Old Testament stories [*Erzählungen des Alten Testaments*] to represent universal history, their insistent relation—a relation constantly redefined by conflicts—to a single and hidden God, who yet shows himself and who guides universal history by promise and exaction [*welcher verheißend und fordernd die Weltgeschichte lenkt*], gives these stories an entirely different perspective from any the Homeric poems can possess. As a composition, the Old Testament is incomparably less unified than

This is significantly different than the Christian-figural construal of the horizontal and the vertical, so much so that we should register a slight disagreement with Porter. What he describes as the “divine vertical axis” of Jewish monotheism should be understood, as Auerbach explicitly says, as a *symptom* of the Jewish mode of grasping reality. Porter is correct to deny that the divine points to another world beyond the present (at least, this is not a necessary consequence of divine intervention), but he overstates the case when he says that this verticality *introduces* historical depth into the everyday reality of the Jewish people. For the historical depth is there, as it is in any social milieu whatever. What the Jewish symptom (its ‘verticality’) adds is a narrational and metaphysical coherence for the volcanic turbulence of the history of the Jews. God is the conceptual content of the Jewish mode of representation of reality.

A symptom is commonly understood as the detectable sign of an invisible, underlying condition or cause. A persistent cough could be a symptom acute pulmonary disease or a symptom of a heavy smoking habit (or both). A low election turn-out could be a symptom of political apathy or a symptom of political repression (or both). When a physician, or a psychiatrist examines a patient, they seek to catalogue and analyze the patient’s symptoms, so as to infer from those symptoms a likely cause of disease or anxiety and to treat, not the

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the Homeric poems, it is more obviously pieced together—but the various components all belong to one concept of universal history and its interpretation. If certain elements survived which did not immediately fit in, interpretation took care of them; and so the reader is at every moment aware of the universal religious-historical perspective which gives the individual stories their general meaning and purpose. The greater the separateness and horizontal disconnection of the stories and groups of stories in relation to one another, compared with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the stronger is their general vertical connection, which holds them all together and which is entirely lacking in Homer. Each of the great figures of the Old Testament, from Adam to the prophets, embodies a moment of this vertical connection [*In jeder einzelnen der großen Gestalten des Alten Testaments, von Adam bis zu den Propheten, ist ein Moment der gedachten vertikalen Verbindung verkörpert*]”(M16-17 [19]).

symptoms, but the cause accordingly. Similarly, when a political scientist or a critical theorist investigates a given social problem, it is imperative that they—like the physician—endeavor to distinguish symptoms from causes, so as to avoid rendering judgment on what is merely epiphenomenal. Certainly, symptoms themselves can be treated, as when NSAIDs are prescribed for pain management, but the etiological function of the physician is to distinguish symptoms from causes and to offer aid on the basis of that distinction. Just so, economic symptoms can be treated directly (e.g., a universal basic income for those struggling to find employment in tight labor markets), but the etiological function of the political scientist or theorist is to seek the (social or political) causes of the ‘economic’ symptoms of underemployment and stagnating wages. What is interesting about Auerbach’s use of the term *Symptom* is the fact that he does not—not overtly, at any rate—assign a pathological connotation to the ‘Jewish symptom.’ God is not, for Auerbach, the symptom of a spiritual illness in the life and thought of the Jewish people. On the contrary, God is that which gives the sense of—because it gives sense to—the Jewish experience of suffering time, history, and truth.<sup>61</sup>

It seems to me that we might say that what we witness in the emergent historical consciousness of the Hebrew scriptural tradition is the way that the Jews ‘enjoy their symptom.’ While a symptom is commonly understood as a sign or signal of an underlying condition or cause, Freudian theory adds that a symptom is the “representative” of, or “substitute” for, what has been repressed from consciousness.<sup>62</sup> What is important for our

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<sup>61</sup> On the importance of the true-false distinction in monotheism, see Assman, *The Price of Monotheism*, 1-30.

<sup>62</sup> See Sigmund Freud, “Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety,” in *The Standard Edition*, Volume 20 (1925-1926), trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), 90. Cf. Sigmund Freud, “Repression,” in *The Standard Edition*, Volume 14 (1914-1916), trans. James Strachey (London: The

analogy is the fact that the ancient Jewish relation to their symptom (God) is mediated (i.e., enjoyed) in and through a distinctive set of literary forms, among which prophecy is paramount. To say that the prophetic imagination and literary representation of the ancient Israelites is a question of *enjoyment* is not to say that it is pleasurable and good; but neither is it right to say that such enjoyment is pathological *per se*, even if it is indubitably a matter of the highest and most sublime pathos. The enjoyment (*jouissance*) at stake here is at once liberating and inhibiting, an unpleasant pleasure; it is bound up with suffering, yet irreducible to pain pure and simple. Derek Hook describes *jouissance* as “an enjoyment intermingled with suffering; it is a type of painful arousal posed on the verge of the traumatic; an enjoyment that stretches beyond the bounds of the pleasurable.”<sup>63</sup> In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, upon which Hook is drawing, Jacques Lacan goes so far as to say that enjoyment *is* suffering (“*la jouissance est un mal*”).<sup>64</sup> One suffers (from) one’s symptom. The symptom is not that which afflicts me but rather that in and through which I recognize that I am afflicted (it is *my* symptom).

For our purposes, it is enough to note that, inasmuch as enjoyment is a term that describes a transgression of the bounds of what Freud named the pleasure principle, it rhymes with the difference between legend and history.<sup>65</sup> Homeric legend is pleasurable; it takes half-

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Hogarth Press, 1957), 147.

<sup>63</sup> Derek Hook, “What Is ‘Enjoyment as a Political Factor’?”, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (August 2017), pp. 605-620; see esp. 607.

<sup>64</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), 184 [*Le séminaire, livre VII: L’éthique de la psychanalyse*, 1959-1960, Éditions du Seuil, 1986, p. 217].

<sup>65</sup> On the pleasure principle, see Freud’s early *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: The Definitive Edition*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962). See, too, Freud’s important, later revision of the libido theory of psychic life in terms of the drives that overwhelm and

measures, ensures constancy and consistency; it shirks plausibility in favor of enchantment and epic. History, by contrast, violently overthrows the equilibrium and equanimity of the legends that try to domesticate it; it establishes its horizons by wrenching open the turgid circles of ancient time. History has the ‘drive-structure’ of a repetition-compulsion.<sup>66</sup> Homer has his symptoms, certainly, but Auerbach’s point is that history ‘begins,’ so to speak, in and through the Jews’ negotiation with their symptom. The symptom (here, the one, true God) is not what makes the Jews who they are: for they are, already, a people of exile and return. It is rather that by which they recognize themselves as who they are: they are the chosen people of God, a people of the covenant and the promise. Here, things stand much differently than in the Christian-figural construal of God’s promises, in which the Christian process of self-recognition routes itself through ‘its’ Jewish antecedent. Certainly, God makes covenant with Israel; God promises, and in promising promises (inasmuch as God is God) to fulfill the promise. Yet, the figural paradigm of historically real prophecy, as described by Auerbach, is nowhere in evidence. Prophecy has a rather different form, and is put to various, other ends, in Jewish scripture. We might even say that it is a genre of enjoyment, which the Jews of the exilic and Temple periods took up with an enthusiasm and a rigor unmatched in the ancient world.

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suspend the smooth machinations of the pleasure principle: Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1961).

<sup>66</sup> Cathy Caruth writes: “At the beginning of the drive, Freud suggests, is not the traumatic imposition of death but rather the traumatic ‘awakening’ to life. Life itself, Freud says, is an awakening out of a ‘death’ for which there was no preparation. The origin of the drive is thus precisely the experience of having passed beyond death without knowing it. And it is in the attempt to master this awakening to life that the drive ultimately defines its historical structure: failing to return to the moment of its own act of living, the drive departs into the future of a human history. (Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* [Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996], 65).



Auerbach reports, in his “Epilegomena to *Mimesis*,” that numerous reviewers of *Mimesis* considered its method to be sociological, even that the book tended towards socialism. Auerbach responds that such tendencies are “far removed [*ganz fern liegen*]” from him, but he demurs from addressing the criticism in detail (M 570 [E 13]). In spite of this denial, it must be admitted that Auerbach’s approach often does resemble that of sociology, so long as we take the precaution of adding that whatever is ‘sociological’ in Auerbach is such in service of his avowedly philological and historical-critical aims. We have seen examples of the sociological tendency already: in the language of ‘symptom,’ in the invocation of the historical depths of the social milieu of the Second Temple under Roman occupation. Auerbach also strikes a sociological chord in his description of the origins of prophecy.<sup>67</sup>

Whereas in Homer we are given only the life and times of the ruling classes, in the Old Testament there is social life and political struggle among classes, factions, and sundry groups of people, ranging from ordinary goatherds to Egyptian pharaohs. At first there are only inklings of such social antagonisms, but by the time the Jewish people emerges as such (i.e., in the exodus from Egypt), the image of a people riven by contradictions and antagonisms takes center-stage, where they relentlessly rehearse their destinies, from exile to exile.

As soon as the people [*das Volk*] completely emerges—that is, after the exodus from Egypt—its activity is always discernible, it is often in ferment, it frequently

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<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Auerbach comes very close to what his contemporary, the Weimar- and Nazi-era jurist, Carl Schmitt, called ‘political theology,’ which Schmitt describes as a sociology of concepts. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1985), 36-52, esp. 45. On the lasting importance of Schmitt’s thought, especially in light of his reprehensible embrace of Nazism, see Jacob Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt: Gegenstrebiges Fügung* (Berlin, Merve Verlag, 1987).

intervenes in events not only as a whole but also in separate groups and through the medium of separate individuals who come forward; the origins of prophecy seem to lie in the irrepressible politico-religious spontaneity of the people [*die Ursprünge der Prophetie scheinen in der unbändigen politisch-religiösen Spontaneität des Volkes zu liegen*]. (M 21 [25])

On the one hand, Auerbach's claim—that prophecy originates in the “politico-religious spontaneity” of the Jews—does not tell us much. ‘Spontaneity’ is a term that explains little; it rather demands explanation. He even seems to drift towards fetishism when, apropos of the Jewish origins of prophecy, he continues:

We receive the impression that the movements emerging from the depths of the people of Israel-Judah must have been of a wholly different nature from those even of the later ancient democracies—of a different nature and far more elemental. (M 21-22)

On the other hand, the context of Auerbach's remarks makes clear that what he has in view is not an abstract, indeterminate spontaneity but the material conditions of a people who, because they are so deeply marked by their history, mark that history as history. Doubtless, the prophetic literature collected in the Hebrew scriptures is prophecy in the usual sense. It is predictive and anticipatory: it writes the future, whose central figure is the messiah (but the messiah prophesied is not—not yet—a *figura*). At the same time, and more importantly, the prophets of the Old Testament were writing in a genre that we might call, with only the barest anachronism, social and political critique.

In *The Prince of This World*, Adam Kotsko argues that prophecy is one of three political-

theological paradigms in the Hebrew biblical tradition, which he categorizes as the Deuteronomistic, prophetic, and apocalyptic.<sup>68</sup> The political context of the Deuteronomistic paradigm is that of Israelite self-rule. Prophecy, by contrast, is composed in the context of diaspora and exile, where the Jews are ruled by other, variously indifferent and benevolent, political powers. Following, and sometimes overlapping with, prophecy is apocalyptic, in which context the Jewish diaspora is oppressed by hostile, foreign rule. To the political context of each paradigm corresponds a hermeneutical lens through which (1) the relation of the earthly ruler (be it an Israelite or foreign king) to God is refracted, (2) the meaning of suffering is interpreted, and (3) the reason for the delay of God's justice is explained. In the Deuteronomistic paradigm of self-rule, the earthly ruler figures as a *rival* to God, suffering is understood as God's retributive punishment for Israel's sins, and the delay of justice is construed as an interim of—and for—repentance. In the prophetic paradigm of diaspora, the earthly ruler appears as the *instrument* of God, suffering is understood as punishment meant to purify Israel for its eventual return to its homeland, and the delay of justice is construed as God's instrumentalization of the evil deeds of the earthly ruler towards an ultimate, and imminent, good. In the apocalyptic paradigm of diaspora, the earthly ruler becomes the *enemy* of God, and both suffering and the delay of justice are understood not simply as a means to a specific end (such as the rebuilding of the temple), but as necessary parts of God's overarching divine plan.

Kotsko's analysis is helpful for the present inquiry because of the way it highlights the pivotal and indissoluble connection between prophecy and monotheism—or, in the terms we have developed above, between enjoyment and symptom. If, as Auerbach claims, the

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<sup>68</sup> Kotsko, *The Prince of This World*, 19-46, see especially the table on p.44.

monotheism of the Jews is a symptom of their way of grasping reality, then prophecy can be understood as a genre of enjoyment, as a way of enjoying God. As we saw just above, enjoyment is a way of relating to one's symptom. To lose one's relation to one's symptom (to cease all enjoyment) is not to be cured and restored to the stability of reality but to abandon reality. A person who neither enjoys nor suffers, a person with no symptoms whatever, is either psychopathic or comatose. Enjoyment is both painful and pleasurable, but pain and pleasure are the very stuff of life. Without enjoyment, there is only suffering (i.e., only pure passivity, where one is at the mercy of one's symptom). Certainly, enjoyment is itself a kind of suffering, but a meaningful suffering—suffering interpreted, even relished. This is nowhere more evident than in Jewish prophecy, which, on Kotkso's account, construes the suffering of the Jewish people in exile as a divine punishment that is not to be resisted or denied, rather endured and enjoyed, for it will have been a purifying fire.

The term that links monotheism and prophecy is *promise*. Inasmuch as God is God (such is the tautology—the truth—of radical monotheism), the promise is the substance of the covenant relation between God and God's people. Prophecy is the literary form that enjoyment assumes when the symptom is maximally symptomatic, when the promise seems most unpromising. It is endurance in the face of the world's perdurance.<sup>69</sup> Doubtless, the Christian construal of prophecy and Providence rehearses this injunction to endurance (for

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<sup>69</sup> It is all too easy to dismiss the Jewish concept of God as a delusion. Similarly, it is facile to dismiss prophecy as ideological obfuscation or mere wish-thinking. In this regard, Freud's distinction between illusion and delusion is relevant. "An illusion," Freud writes, "is not the same thing as an error; nor is it necessarily an error." Rather, "what is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes. In this respect they come near to psychiatric delusions. But they differ from them, too, apart from the more complicated structure of delusions. In the case of delusions, we emphasize as essential their being in contradiction with reality. Illusions need not necessarily be false—that is to say, unrealizable or in contradiction to reality" (Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 30, 31.

justice, now understood as the Parousia of the Christ, is yet again delayed), but does so according to a different conceptual grammar, and in relation to a different symptom. What is the Christian symptom? How—by what means—do Christians enjoy it?

### §19 The Christian Symptom

Kotsko's typology of the political-theological paradigms of the Hebrew biblical tradition is helpful, too, for thinking about the way that Christianity intervenes in that tradition, for the Christian textual and theological traditions grew out of the apocalyptic attitude of Second Temple Judaism. As we've seen above, the contents of the Old Testament were systematically (re-)interpreted as prefigurations of the coming of the messiah, whom Christians identified as Jesus of Nazareth. Kotsko writes that, for the early 'Christian' communities, Jesus's execution at the hands of the Romans did not represent the defeat and failure of the divine plan, but was "actually the greatest possible proof that he really *was* the messiah. [...] Not only was Jesus predicted in the Hebrew scriptures, but his resurrection shows that he is an integral part of the apocalyptic sequence."<sup>70</sup> Kotsko emphasizes that, in the Hebrew biblical tradition, prophecy and apocalyptic each represent a 'doubling down' on the faith of the Jews in God's promise.<sup>71</sup> If they have been exiled, it is not because God has failed them, but because they have wandered from God's law, or because a satanic prince has been chosen by God to carry out God's plan. The Christian appropriation of God's promise is yet another double-down. Supersession is at once the claim that the promise has been fulfilled (in the Incarnation), and that what is yet outstanding in the promise (viz. world

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<sup>70</sup> Kotsko, *The Prince of This World*, 49-50.

<sup>71</sup> Kotsko, *The Prince of This World*, 48.

history) is not the failure of God's plan but its perfect, providential execution.

This brings us to the question of the Christian symptom. The Christian concept of God, too, comes from the depths. It is a symptom, not the cause, of their way of representing things. But the Christian concept of God (and the concept of history guaranteed by the same) does not admit of its depths, nor, ultimately, of any depth whatever. Ultimately (that is, already), everything is revealed, illuminated by the person of the Christ. For the Christian depths are Jewish. The Jewish depths of Christianity must, on the one hand, as we have seen in our analysis of figural interpretation, be preserved as depths. The Jews must remain Jews; the Old Testament must remain the *Old Testament*. On the other hand, those depths must be—indeed they have been—plumbed, their shadows dispelled. In the view of Christians who think according to its conceptual grammar, what is accomplished in and through the logic of supersession is the *cure* of the Jewish symptom. The God of the Old Testament is no longer shrouded in mystery, no longer enigmatic and cryptic. It is the same God, but now the background and the foreground converge in the person—not the figure—of the Christ. The mystery is no longer the name of the peculiar, historical Jewish experience of the promise, but the name of the world-historical task of bearing witness to its fulfillment, the perdurance of the Church as the measure of the enduring truth of the promise.

As we'll see below, in Chapter 4 (§23), the mystery—or, as the Latin tradition has it, the *sacramentum*—rehearsed by the Church in history is supersession itself. Supersession is the sacrament of history; it is what renders history effective and actual rather than happenstance and accident. Because the Christian tradition cannot admit of its depths qua depths, Christianity cannot admit of its lingering symptom, for the symptom is that which is—which has been—superseded. The hermeneutics of figural interpretation, and the logic of

supersession crystallized therein, is bound by its very structure to disavow the symptom as such, displacing it into other registers, such as theological anthropology (e.g., the doctrine of original sin). But for this very reason, the Christian symptom is disguised and recuperated elsewhere, borne especially by the people who, in spite of the Christian deterritorialization of their prophetic and apocalyptic attunements, have not ceased to enjoy God in their own, singular, way. For Christians, it is the Old Testament that is ‘symptomatic,’ in need of a cure. The *figurae* are the substitute symptoms of Christianity, but the figures are—precisely—Jews.<sup>72</sup> As we saw above (§6), Augustine describes the Jews as ‘useful’ precisely inasmuch as they are ignorant and recalcitrant, in bondage, slaves to the Law (OCD 3.5-6). To what ‘use’ are Christians meant to put the Jews? Toward enjoyment. Namely, the enjoyment of God, who alone is worthy of enjoyment, because God is not—not for Christians—the symptom but the cause and the cure of humanity and history (OCD 1.3-5). The Jews—as “living witnesses”—are the historical instruments of Christian enjoyment, just as the damned, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, are an eternal source of joy for the blessed in their celestial beatitude.<sup>73</sup> The Jews are the way that Christians enjoy their symptom, God,

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<sup>72</sup> “When,” inquires Porter (“Disfigurations,” 91), “are Saul—or Moses, or Aaron, or Hagar, and so on—ever *themselves*?” The answer is obvious: never, not even in their concrete historical existence, which is ever already a sign-symptom of salvation history. Compare Porter’s gloss on Auerbach’s reading of the same ‘figures,’ which “affirms the real, concrete, and individual reality of each of the actors whose lives it, narrates in all their psychological complexity and depth, each of them deeply etched with time, from Adam and Noah to Sarah and Hagar, to Abraham and Isaac, David, Joab, Absalom, and the rest, none of whom is a stand-in for something else because all of them just are *themselves*” (ibid., 101).

<sup>73</sup> “It is a great confirmation of our faith that such important testimony is borne by enemies. The believing Gentiles cannot suppose that these testimonies to Christ are recent forgeries, for they are found in books held sacred for so many ages by those who crucified Christ, books still venerated by those who blaspheme him. ... The unbelief of the Jews has been made of signal benefit to us, so that those who do not receive these truths in their heart ... nonetheless carry in their hands, for our benefit, the writings in which these truths are contained. The unbelief of the Jews increases rather than lessens the authority of these books [i.e., the Old Testament], for their blindness is itself foretold in them. They testify to the truth by their not understanding it” (Augustine, qtd. in Fredriksen, *Augustine and*

whom they indefatigably mistake for a cure. Supersession is love.

Auerbach, for his part, cannot and would not have any truck with such a vision of humanity and history, still less of Christian eschatology. For Auerbach, the depths must remain deep in their depth. The mystery of humanity and of history—and of the God who touches both in the darkness—are not to be dissolved in the light of Providence, nor of the cunning of reason. His aim, from “Figura” to *Mimesis*, is to glimpse the darkness that, in turning its back to him, turns toward him. Auerbach is, as Agamben would put it, a profoundly contemporary thinker.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, it must be admitted that *figura* is not, in fact, the subject of *Mimesis*. It is, rather, a particular literary and hermeneutical thread of the text of the development of the concept of history in the literatures of the West. With the exception of the extraordinary chapter on Dante, *figura* is a marginal figure in *Mimesis*. It is mentioned throughout the work, but typically as a limit-case or an example of the paradoxical heights and depths, and the contradictions, afforded to realism by figural prophecy and its interpretation.

This is nowhere more clear than in the final words of “Fortunata,” where Auerbach gives an example of figural interpretation that, in his own words, may “stand for many.”

It is a visually dramatic occurrence that God made Eve, the first woman, from

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*the Jews*, 277). On the spectacle of the damned, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Third Part, Question 94, “On the Relations of the Saints Towards the Damned,” URL: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?” in *What is an Apparatus?*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). “The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. [...] The contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him. Darkness is something that—more than any light—turns directly and singularly toward him. The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time” (44, 45).



Adam's rib while Adam lay asleep; so too is it that a soldier pierced Jesus' side, as he hung dead on the cross, so that blood and water flowed out. But when these two occurrences are exegetically interrelated in the doctrine that Adam's sleep is a figure [*eine Figur*] of Christ's death-sleep; that, as from the wound in Adam's side mankind's primordial mother after the flesh, Eve, was born, so from the wound in Christ's side was born the mother of all men after the spirit, the Church (blood and water are sacramental symbols)—then the sensory occurrence pales [lit. 'evaporates'] before the power of the figural meaning [*so verflüchtigt sich der sinnliche Vorgang, überwältigt von der figuralen Bedeutung*]. (M 48-49 [51-52])

By contrast, the “specimens of realism” of the Greeks and Romans are “perfectly integrated in their sensory substance.” The poets and historiographers of antiquity, Auerbach avers, “do not know the antagonism [*Kampf*] between sensory appearance and meaning, an antagonism which permeates [*erfüllt*] the early, and indeed the whole, Christian view of reality” (M 49 [52]). As we'll see in greater detail in Chapter 4, the very thing that Tertullian, Augustine, and the Latin tradition endeavored so tirelessly to establish—the figural literality of the Old Testament—is the very thing that threatens, and for that reason vivifies and intensifies, the Christian enterprise. History is real (for the Word became flesh), but it is real in the way that chaff is real.

This conflict or antagonism—this struggle (*Kampf*) for and against the meaning of history—appears in exemplary fashion in Augustine and his inheritors. On the one hand, history is ultimately meaningless, for the (sensory) form of this world is passing away. On the other hand, everything that means anything is ultimately historical (that is, figural), because God has promised history from end to end. The truth of history is that everything is,

has been, and will be illuminated—for the true is the whole. This is a view shared, *mutatis mutandis*, by one inheritor of the Christian tradition to whom we will turn in great detail in what follows. To wit, at the triumphant conclusion of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes:

The realm of spirits, having formed itself in this way in existence, constitutes a sequence in which one spirit replaced the other, and each succeeding spirit took over from the previous spirit the realm of that spirit's world. The goal of the movement is the revelation of depth itself, and this is the *absolute concept*. (GW 9:432, italics in original)

## Chapter 4: Eschatology and Secularity

*The shift in level worked out by secularization often coincides not with a weakening, but with an absolutization of the secularized paradigm.*

— Giorgio Agamben

### §20 The Concept of History

In a discussion of St. Paul's second epistle to the church at Thessaloniki, Giorgio Agamben remarks that "history as we know it is a Christian concept."<sup>1</sup> It would be easy, and would not be wholly wrong, to read this claim as an unfortunate instance of a distinctively European chauvinism, in which the history of Christianity in the West (viz. 'Christendom') is positioned as a synecdoche of world history. One might attempt to soften the blow by noting that Agamben's claim contains an epistemological prevarication ("history *as we know it* is a Christian concept"), but the context of the passage, in which Agamben is reiterating his reading of St. Paul's messianic time *qua* historical time, suggests a profound, if guarded, sympathy for the Christian concept of history in question.<sup>2</sup> The same should be said of Agamben's remark, given in parentheses and attended by a cautionary 'perhaps':

Here everything hangs on how one interprets the eschatological theme that is

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days*, translated by Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 26.

<sup>2</sup> For the first, and fuller, exposition of Agamben's philosophy of messianic time, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). On Agamben's complicated relationship to Christianity and its theological traditions, see Adam Kotsko, *What is Theology?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 94-105.

inseparable from the Christianity philosophy of history (but perhaps every philosophy of history is constitutively Christian), and in particular on the sense that one attributes to the passage from the Pauline epistle [to the Thessalonians].<sup>3</sup>

Here, eschatology is not simply one feature among others in a dispassionate description of the Christian tradition and the philosophy (*née* theology) of history proper to it. The Christian eschatological experience, structured as it is by messianic time, is rather what is most essential in—even constitutive of—the history of Christianity, viz. the history that lays claim to history.<sup>4</sup>

In support of his remarks on the integral link between history and eschatology in Paul, Agamben adduces the work of Henri-Charles Puech, who writes, in his *En quête de la gnose*, that

Christianity is a historical religion not only because it is founded on a historical character and on events that are supposed to have historically happened, but also because it confers on time, conceived as linear and irreversible, a soteriological meaning. Moreover: by binding its own destiny to history, it interprets and conceives itself as a function of a historical perspective and carries along with it a sort of

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<sup>3</sup> Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> See Agamben's remarks (delivered, not incidentally, to a gathering of Roman Catholic priests) on the Church's eschatological vocation: Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and Kingdom*, trans. Leland de la Durantaye (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2012), esp. 35-41. The translator of the work comments that "Agamben presents his observations calmly and courteously to the Church in the Church. Notwithstanding this calm courtesy, the charge that he levels could hardly be graver. It is nothing less than that the Catholic Church has chosen—over the course of millennia—worldly dominion over its founding ideals, that it has chosen the consolidation of temporal power over a fundamental experience of time; he charges it with having lost its 'vocation'" (ibid., 48-49).

philosophy or—more precisely—theology of history.<sup>5</sup>

This is by no means a minority report. (Immediately after the reference to Puech, Agamben cites Ernst Bloch on the same theme.) One is reminded, for instance, of Hegel's philosophy of history, in which, from its humble beginnings in the 'Oriental' lands of the East, history as such is realized only, and finally, in the Christian lands of the West.<sup>6</sup> The realization of history passes, on its way to its mature articulation in Hegel's philosophy of history, through a necessary theological moment.<sup>7</sup>

Still today, many historians, theologians, and philosophers reiterate these dicta with remarkable consistency, even if they are ultimately skeptical of their truth-value. For one reason or another, scholars who are otherwise secular, atheistic, skeptical, and critical, are given to telling the story of the history of the West as a story of the vicissitudes of the Christian tradition. Why are there so many writers and scholars (be they 'critical' or 'caring') of western history that construe that very history in terms set by a Christian conceptual grammar that—in the most fashionable scholarly circles, at least—they do not even affirm as

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<sup>5</sup> Henri-Charles Puech, qtd. in Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 377-380 (§354-360).

<sup>7</sup> Thinking of Hegel, one wonders at the fact that such chauvinism could yet survive in the contemporary philosophical context, where the twinned conceits of universal history and historical necessity appear to have been discredited by a rather thoroughgoing skepticism (be it positivist or postmodern) regarding metaphysics and grand narratives of progress, to say nothing of dogmatic claims to truth (be they Christian or otherwise). It is now more or less *de rigueur* to denounce Hegel's historical works as outmoded—the product of his reliance on bad anthropological scholarship generated by the racist and colonial discursive regimes of his day. If one wishes to salvage something of Hegel's conception of world history, one must show that the *conceptual* armature of Hegel's historical thought can be meaningfully de-linked from his empirical claims. It is not clear that such a salvaging is possible. For a recent argument on the intractability of Hegel's racism, see Rei Terada, "Hegel's Racism for Radicals," *Radical Philosophy* 2.05 (Autumn 2019), URL: <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/hegels-racism-for-radicals>.

such? What should we make of the example of a world-renowned philosopher, with a résumé as ‘critical’ as that of Jürgen Habermas, who argues that political secularism is the true heir of ‘Judeo-Christianity’?<sup>8</sup> As Talal Asad points out in his pointed criticism of Habermas,

Habermas’s synthesis of two distinct religious traditions reduces a complicated theological history of ethics and the law to two mutually compatible ‘values,’ justice and love. Judaism is not seen as a tradition in its own right—including the right to define itself—but as a historical phase of truth that has been superseded by a higher truth (Christianity) and that, in turn, by an even higher one (secularism).<sup>9</sup>

Setting aside, for the moment, the problems that inhere in the usage of the term ‘Judeo-Christianity,’ which is as true an index of the logic of supersession as the appellation of the ‘Old’ Testament, it is obvious that Habermas is speaking in a supersessionist—and patently Hegelian—key. Habermas is not alone, and among his bedfellows are not a few voices who, taking the supersessionist line in a less liberal (and less Hegelian) direction, are considerably more dangerous.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, it would be easy, recalling Agamben’s statement, to chalk it up to chauvinism—as if it were a Christian hangover, a bad habit of Europeans—so as to write it off. Yet, to write it off would be to miss what is true in it. In this chapter, I propose to illumine that truth by examining the persistence of the logic of supersession in the philosophical narration of the

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<sup>8</sup> See Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 43-51.

<sup>9</sup> Asad, *Secular Translations*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Josh Hawley, “Our Christian Nation,” *First Things* (Feb. 2024), URL: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2024/02/our-christian-nation>.

transition from theologies to philosophies of history.

In Chapter 3, we saw that Auerbach's account of the vicissitudes of *figura* is not an endorsement of the truth of the Christian image of universal history as a providential totality but the story of a privileged thread in the tapestry of the historical consciousness of the West; that history is not 'made' according to the transcendent will of God, nor by the finite will of human beings, but 'happens' in the depths of human social and political life; that the respective monotheisms of Jews and Christians are symptoms, rather than causes, of their comprehension and representation of historical reality; and that prophecy—be it Jewish or the Christian-figural interpretation thereof—is the way that Jews and Christians 'enjoy' their suffering, viz., their exiles and returns, their anxious waiting and world-historical expansions. We saw that the providential history that Christianity claims to have inherited, and whose fulfillment it undertakes to safeguard, is itself the symptom of an antagonism between sensuous human reality and the significance imparted to that reality by figural interpretation. The scandal of the Incarnation is a stumbling block not only for Jews and other unbelievers, but confronts Christians, too, with several profound and lasting paradoxes. On the one hand, as we saw in Chapter 2, the image of history furnished by figural interpretation was that of a world that is truly and concretely historically real (the Word became flesh). On the other hand, the words of that Word proclaim a Kingdom of God that is not of this world. What is 'really real' is beyond the world and beyond history, yet history really points to it and the world is the real—and really historical—site of its revelation.

In the following, I argue that what Christians call history is ultimately identical to salvation history. Or, to put it more precisely, history will *ultimately, in the end*, be identified with, and dissolved into, salvation history. The future anterior tense expresses it well: history

*will have been* the history of salvation. Knowledge of the ultimate identity of history and salvation history is pre-eminently produced in and through the investigation of prophecy (i.e., figural interpretation), which furnishes a distinctively Christian genre of enjoyment of the eschatological anxiety peculiar to the Christian faith. For their part, the Jews, being figures of the eschaton, serve as so many tonics, opiates, and associations; their scriptures serve as the textual chaise-lounge on which the Church undergoes the transference of its world-historical therapeutics. And yet, as we've seen throughout this study, the eschatological question (i.e., the problem of the delay of the Parousia and the status of history as interregnum) is doubled by the deeper and more vexing constitutional question. With regard to the former, it is obvious that Christianity is a religion of the eschaton; its basic mood is apocalyptic, its faith is undiminished, even nourished, by anxiety. It is impossible to conceive of the early life of the church, broadly construed, without taking into account the eschatological freight of its understanding of its time as the end of time, or the time of the end.<sup>11</sup>

And yet the latter, constitutional, question must not be ignored. In order for Christianity to be or become what it is—or what it takes itself to be—it must ground itself in history, but not just any history will do. The Christian tradition is grounded in the particular history of the Jews; it is grounded in that history not as its continuation or expansion but as its fulfillment. As we saw in Chapter 2, one of the paradoxes generated by figural interpretation and the logic of supersession is that of the 'future original.' That paradox becomes all the more acute

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Löwith (see below, §§22-24) repeatedly insists upon this feature of the early Christian mentality. Cf. Agamben, who, in the *The Mystery of Evil* takes a rather different tack, insisting that the Christ event is not a signal towards something beyond history but the revelation of the true structure of historical time: "What interests the Apostle [Paul] is not the last day, it is not the *end of time*, but the *time of the end*, the internal transformation of time that the messianic event has produced once and for all, and the consequent transformation of the life of the faithful" (14). For a parallel discussion of this theme, see Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 62-72, 108-112.



when the questions of grounding and constitution are raised. No one can reasonably deny that Christianity is originally grounded in Jewish history. And yet, according to the conceptual grammar of supersession, Christianity is also—or rather, first of all—the (future original) ground of that very grounding. Christianity makes true the untrue that makes Christianity true.

We might say, adopting a quasi-Hegelian idiom, that Christians are not (abstractly) non-Jews—as are, for instance, pagans—but (concretely) not-Jews.<sup>12</sup> The historical relation of Christians to Jews is negative but concrete: they are *not* not Jewish in general but rather *not* Jewish in a particular and highly determined way. This negative determination is an expression of the logic of supersession in the historical Christian tradition. Christians recognize themselves as not-Jews. Christians are ‘more’ than Jews, since they are the fulfillment of the Jews, the ‘true Jews,’ or the “true spiritual Israel” (Justin Martyr) who preserve the textual and historical mandate of the Jews. At the same time, Christians are ‘less’ than Jews, for they have sloughed off the national particularity of the Jewish people in favor of a global and universal truth, namely, the truth of the Gospel. The fact that Christians were ‘originally’ Jews is no objection to this thesis, since it is this very fact—that Jews appear prior to Christians in history—which secures the soteriological and historical priority of Christians as ‘future originals.’ Christianity is constituted in history through supersession, the theory and practice of which is seeded in the New Testament and crystallized in the figural interpretation of the Church Fathers. As St. Paul put it in his missive to the church at Corinth, “Now, these things happened to them [the Jews] as an example [*typos*], and they were written down for our [the not-Jews] instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have

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<sup>12</sup> See my discussion of Hegel’s concept of negative determination below, §30.

come” (1 Cor. 10:11, NRSV). Here, the eschatological (*ho telos ho aiōn katantaō*, ‘the end of the ages’) and the constitutional (*egō*, ‘our;’ *eis os*, ‘upon whom’) are expressed as a single historical experience, the interpretation of which is determined by the *typoi-figurae* of the Old Testament.

It is tempting to seize upon Auerbach’s depiction of the Jewish origins of the concept of history in the Old Testament, so as to claim it as a radical alternative to the Christian narration of history as an eschatological mystery or drama. This is the course taken, for example, by James I. Porter, who defends Auerbach as a ‘Judaizing’ partisan of an ‘Old Testament Realism’ against the antisemitic currents in the philology of the Third Reich. There is much merit to this approach and there is, in my view, very little in Porter with which to disagree. Nonetheless, I intend to pose the question otherwise in the following. The interest that this study has taken in Auerbach’s study of western literature—and the *figurae* that crowd its theological metropole and are dispatched to its philosophical outposts—is due not to a desire to establish a better or truer theory of history. Neither is it my intention to derive or construct a new and rigorous concept of history, nor do I intend to raise the derelict ship of philosophy of history from the wreckage of the twentieth century (and yet we will find ourselves attending to its listing keel). I am not interested in unmasking sundry philosophies of religion as crypto-theological apologies, even if such an undertaking would, doubtless, bear sundry good fruits. I am not even interested in showing that the Christian construal of history as eschatology is, *in fact*, contingent and provincial, even though this, too, is undoubtedly true.

I am, rather, interested in how the logic of supersession determines the passage from the theologies of history of yore to the philosophies of history of the modern era. In this regard,

the present chapter is structured as something of a double *reductio*. On the one hand, it would be absurd to deny that Christianity is, in the modern world, much diminished. This hardly requires demonstration. Ours is a secular age in which prophecy and eschatology lie fallow. Today, Christianity typically appears as but one religion among others; Christendom, such as it was, is no more. On the other hand, I argue (for it must be argued) that it would be absurd to deny that the modern, globalized world remains, in a specific sense that will become clearer in what follows, a Christian world. The aim of this chapter is to show that this is so not in spite of the undeniable fact of Christianity's diminishment, but precisely because of it. That is to say, this chapter continues our analysis of the logic of supersession by taking up the question of secularization, or the trouble with 'worldliness.'

In what follows, I begin by situating the argument in the context of the dispute between Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg over the uses and abuses of the concept of secularization (§21). There I am concerned to show that even if the eschatological dimension drops out or undergoes one or another form of secularization, the question of the constitution of Christianity (to which the logic of supersession is given as answer) remains pressing. I then take up Löwith's *Meaning in History* in detail, examining his description of secularization as a declension narrative in which the essence of Christianity is compromised by its entanglements with world (viz. 'worldly') history, and the way that Löwith's narrative describes and reproduces the logic of supersession (§§22-25). I conclude the chapter by returning to certain of Blumenberg's criticisms in order to show that Löwith's study must be understood as an unwitting articulation of the question that modernity cannot seem to answer satisfactorily, namely, the Christian question (§26).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> On the Christian Question, see Bruno Bosteels, "On the Christian Question," in *The Idea of Communism. Volume 2*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2013), 37–55; and see Leon Rozitchner,

This chapter charts a course through the double *reductio* (the one obvious, the other yet obscure) in order to show that the logic of supersession is the cipher in which the following paradox is encrypted: Christianity's diminishment is its fulfillment, its secularity its epitome, its weakness its strength. The Christian construal of the meaning of history is not simply eschatological; it is also, and this more profoundly, constitutional. Christianity is constituted in history (i.e., it is a historical religion), but history—according to the logic of supersession—is constituted through the constitution of Christianity (i.e., by the supersession of the Jews). Christianity and history are so tightly entwined and co-implicated that the constitution of the one demands the constitution of the other. Conversely, the possibility of their mutual destitution gives rise to a paradoxical anxiety, which is itself tightly linked to the eschatological anxiety of Christians throughout the ages, for it is the eschaton itself that signals history's destitution. This is why the logic of supersession survives—and even provokes—the eventual decline of the explicitly theological mode of figural interpretation as the governing historical hermeneutics of the West. Even where the eschaton is 'immanentized' (or 'conceptualized,' e.g., in Hegel) and relocated within the very history to which it formerly beckoned from beyond, the constitutional problem remains. Secularization is not a brute fact of the history of the West but a distinctively Christian narration of the same. It is the discourse on—and of—the decline of Christianity and the triumph of Christianity. It 'says' both at once. Secularization is Christianity's supersession.

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"La cuestión judía," in Daniel Bensaïd, Karl Marx, Bruno Bauer and Roman Rosdolski, *Volver a 'La cuestión judía'*, ed. Esteban Vernik (Barcelona: Gedia, 2011), pp. 193-253; and see Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), pp. 26-52.

## §21 The Question of Secularization

Robert M. Wallace notes that philosophy of history (construed in the strong sense of its eighteenth and nineteenth century iterations, i.e., as a systematic interpretation of history as a totality or total process) has been all but abandoned as a serious intellectual endeavor.<sup>14</sup> The same should be said of theology of history (while allowing for its persistence in the ‘private’ sphere of theological reflection, be it academic or otherwise) and for the same reason: the modern world is—or has become—a secular world. The intellectual energies of modern historians and philosophers are no longer directed toward a systematic interpretation of the meaning and structure of history. Philosophy of history today is, more or less, a practice of reflecting on theory and method. And yet, philosophy of history once *was* a discourse on history as a totality. Channeling Blumenberg, and in a narrow sense Löwith, Wallace avers that it is “high time” (he is writing in 1981) that we inquire into how and why such a discourse could have or should have arisen.<sup>15</sup> Just so. The debate between Löwith and Blumenberg will serve us well in this regard. What is at issue between them is (1) whether or not the term ‘secularization’ can meaningfully describe the emergence of the modern world-view in the West and (2) whether or not the modern idea of progress is the bastard child of Christian eschatology.

Löwith’s study poses an alternative between Christian and Greek origins of historical consciousness. What characterizes the modern mind, on Löwith’s account, is the disavowal of the contradiction between those alternatives. In the Christian paradigm, history is the

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<sup>14</sup> Robert M. Wallace, “Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate,” *New German Critique*, No. 22 (Winter 1981), 74.

<sup>15</sup> Wallace, “Progress, Secularization and Modernity,” 74.

history of divine intervention, promise, fulfillment, and hope for the future redemption. History is eschatological, discrete, and linear. In the Greek (or pagan) paradigm, history is the history of cycles, repetition, rational and well-ordered laws. In Christianity, knowledge and wisdom are subordinated to self-justifying faith, whereas in pagan historical societies, wisdom is attainable by contemplation of the eternal return of the same. Since neither of these mutually exclusive options are viable for the modern mind, the latter is neither Christian nor Greek, but a pathetic mixture of the two. By this Löwith means that the modern idea of progress is that of an *infinite and linear* progression into the future. The unlimitedness of such modern progress suggests a certain (Greek) circularity, since only a circular movement is properly infinite, but such circularity is precisely what is rejected by moderns. Likewise, the linearity of modern progress suggests a (Christian) terminus, perhaps two, since it is difficult to conceive of a historical 'line' without a beginning and an end, but such reference to a beginning and/or an end is precisely what is rejected by moderns.

Thus, the idea of modern progress takes the form of a banal mixture of the two historical paradigms. It takes both, yet grasps neither, for the two historical perspectives are not only opposed to one another, but on Löwith's account are themselves the site of a fundamental historical struggle. He writes, in conclusion:

The modern mind is not single-minded: it eliminates from its progressive outlook the Christian implication of creation and consummation, while it assimilates from the ancient world view the idea of an endless and continuous movement, discarding its circular structure. The modern mind has not made up its mind whether it should be Christian or pagan. It sees with one eye of faith and one of reason. Hence its vision is necessarily dim in comparison with either Greek or biblical thinking. (MH 207)

As we will see in a moment, it is significant that Löwith poses the problem of modernity (which Blumenberg construes as an indictment) in terms of an opposition between Christian and Greek mentalities. Two issues stand out here. First, there is an occlusion of the deep and lasting influence of Hellenic thought on the development of Christianity. The opposition between the Christian and Greek minds would be better described in terms of an exchange. Second, there is an acknowledgment of the specifically Jewish contribution to the Christian ‘mind’ and its concept of history (such that the Greek-Christian exchange is not simply bilateral), but this acknowledgment is equally, and very frequently, an effacement. That is to say, the Jewish contribution (what Löwith loosely refers to as ‘prophetism’) is presented unfailingly as a historical *and historically superseded* moment of Christian eschatological destiny. Löwith avers (1) that what is originally and essentially Christian is the peculiar eschatological pathos of the Christian tradition, and (2) that what transpires in the passage to modernity is the secularization of that eschatological essence. Regarding (1), we will see below that the eschatological pathos in question is construed by Löwith as purely individual and extra-historical. Regarding (2), we will see that what has gone wrong in modernity, because it has gone wrong in Christianity, is what Löwith takes to be the oblivion of (1).

As for Blumenberg, he sums up his criticism of Löwith neatly when he writes that, if the word ‘secularization’ means anything, “it would be not the secularization *of* eschatology” (as Löwith’s declension narrative has it), but rather “secularization *by* eschatology” (LMA 45, *my italics*).<sup>16</sup> By this he means that secularization is not a process by which the original substance of Christianity’s eschatological faith is ‘immanentized’ by worldly forces that

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<sup>16</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1983), 45; cited hereafter in the body text as LMA.

intervene from without. It is rather the process by which the eschatological problem itself (the delay of the Parousia) gives rise to increasingly ‘secular’ and ‘modern’ solutions (in the various empirical sciences), none of which are ultimately satisfying and—for that reason—many of which end up abandoning the ‘religious’ answers altogether, in favor of technological and scientific research paradigms that prove to be more satisfying, and which better reflect (and to some extent produce) the special character of modernity’s drive to self-assertion (LMA 47-49, 65). For Blumenberg, the idea of progress is not, as Löwith has it, an eschatology stripped of its eschaton, rendered indefinite and empty (and thus illegitimate). The idea of progress is rather “the continuous self-justification of the present, by means of the future it gives itself, before the past, with which it compares itself” (LMA 32). The legitimacy of the modern age is, for this reason, not secured once and for all (nor can it be lost once and for all), but must be continually asserted, advanced, and defended.<sup>17</sup> For Blumenberg, nothing more than this is meant by the strong sense of the *idea* of progress. Whatever discrete progress occurs in various domains of scientific research (e.g., the sequencing of the human genome) is the content of, and evidence for, the idea of progress.<sup>18</sup>

We will return Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* below (§26). In the meantime, we should linger a while with Löwith, whose *Meaning in History*, while the pre-eminent target of Blumenberg’s trenchant criticism, has yet something to teach us. *Meaning*

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<sup>17</sup> Blumenberg describes the emergence of the modern idea of progress in terms of the novel experience of the coherence of an inter-generational, progressive project of knowledge and experimentation (i.e., of ‘Science’). Such an experience—“of the unity of methodically regulated theory as a coherent entity developing independently of individuals and generations”—was simply not possible in every period of history. See LMA 30-32.

<sup>18</sup> Obviously, progress in human genetics could also be marshaled by critics *against* the idea of progress, as in the case, *inter alia*, of the ongoing development of the gene-editing technology, CRISPR. One could adduce many other examples: atomic physics, artificial intelligence, etc.



*in History* is significant for at least two reasons. First, because Löwith's account of the secular decline of Christianity describes, without thematizing it, the logic of supersession. Second, because Löwith's account unwittingly enacts or reproduces that very logic of supersession in the description in question. This is due, in part, to the mode of presentation of Löwith's study, which I shall briefly describe.

*Meaning in History* takes the form of a 'regressive' survey of the origins and development of philosophy of history, ranging from the nineteenth century (Burckhardt, Marx, and Hegel) to the fifth century (Augustine and Orosius) and concludes with what Löwith calls the 'biblical' view of history (about which I will have more to say below). He stipulates that the object of his inquiry should be understood in the sense it acquired in the early modern era. The term 'philosophy of history' thus refers to "a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward an ultimate meaning" (MH 1). Löwith then avers that philosophy of history, in the sense stipulated, is "entirely dependent on theology of history, in particular on the theological concept of history as a history of salvation and fulfillment" (MH 1). Löwith's argument regarding secularization and his criticisms of the idea of progress stem from this principal claim about the dependence of modern philosophies of history on antique and medieval theologies of history. His charge is that, with the notable exception of Hegel, secular modernity has forgotten its theological origins and is thus doomed to misunderstand its time and its history (he is especially venomous, in this regard, toward Marx and Marxism; see MH 33-51). The modern misunderstanding results from the fact that the meaning of history is, for modernity, no longer ultimate and transcendent, and therefore no longer meaningful in the proper sense.

Löwith laments that the modern world is “Christian by derivation and non-Christian in consequence” (MH 197). By this is meant that the triumph of Christianity in world history is, in fact, its deepest and most unfortunate failure. For, by dint of its progressive entanglement in worldly affairs (i.e., its secularization), Christianity loses its true vocation as faithful witness to the *imminence* of the eschaton, which beckons from a transcendent Beyond—that is, from beyond the vicissitudes of *immanent* (i.e., merely political) history. Löwith’s complaint resounds like a refrain throughout the book: “Modern Christendom wants to forget that Christianity has always been at its best and most influential when it maintained its divergence from worldly culture” (MH 30). The modern product of the increasingly ‘worldly’ (i.e., secular) mentality of Christian Europe is a misbegotten concept of indefinite historical ‘progress,’ which falls stillborn from the lap of universal history.

It is the weakness of modern Christianity that it fully accepts the language, the methods, and the results of our worldly improvements in the illusion that all these inventions are but neutral means which can easily be christened by moral, if not religious ends. In reality, they are the result of extreme worldliness and self-confidence. And yet the irreligion of progress is still a sort of religion, derived from the Christian faith in a future goal, though substituting an indefinite and immanent *eschaton* for a definite and transcendent one. (MH 114)<sup>19</sup>

By Löwith’s lights, the diminishment-by-secularization of Christianity is so extreme, the

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<sup>19</sup> It is telling that Löwith and Blumenberg agree on the centrality of self-confidence (or self-assertion) to the modern experience of the world; their disagreement stems from the fact that, whereas Löwith views such self-confidence as catastrophic for the originary structure of the Christian faith, Blumenberg views it as a necessary, even virtuous, component of the stupendous achievements of modern science.

contradiction between the originary faith in a transcendent eschaton and its modern, ‘immanentist’ declensions so great, that he goes so far as to declare the expression ‘Christian history’ an oxymoron (MH 197).<sup>20</sup> He even avers that Christians “are not a historical people” (MH 195).<sup>21</sup> From this we should understand that Löwith’s argument depends upon, and proceeds in solidarity with, a vision of Christianity as an essentially other- or un-worldly faith.<sup>22</sup> For Löwith, Christianity is only accidentally involved in world history, and betrays its

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<sup>20</sup> Löwith: “Thus, if we venture to say that our modern historical consciousness is derived from Christianity, this can mean only that the eschatological outlook of the New Testament has opened the perspective toward a future fulfillment—originally beyond and eventually within, historical existence. In consequence of the Christian consciousness we have a historical consciousness which is as Christian by derivation as it is non-Christian by consequence, because it lacks the belief that Christ is the beginning of an end and his life and death the final answer to an otherwise insoluble question. If we understand, *as we must*, Christianity in the sense of the New Testament and history in our modern sense, i.e., as a continuous process of human action and secular developments, a ‘Christian history’ is non-sense” (MH 197, my emphasis). I return to this below (§25).

<sup>21</sup> Löwith: “Christians are not a historical people. Their solidarity all over the world is merely one of faith. In the Christian view the history of salvation is no longer bound up with one particular nation [i.e., the Jews] but is internationalized because it is individualized. In Christianity the history of salvation is related to the salvation of each single soul, regardless of racial, social, and political status, and the contributions of the nations to the Kingdom of God is measured by the number of the elect, not by any corporate achievement or failure. From this it follows that the historical destiny of Christian peoples is no possible subject of a specifically Christian interpretation of political history, while the destiny of the Jews *is* a possible subject of a specifically Jewish interpretation. Even if we accept the traditional thesis that the Christian church of Jews and Gentiles is the successor of the chosen people, the Christian church would yet remain the mystical body of Christ, distinct from the historical character of the chosen people, which is a church in itself. Hence one has to conclude that a Jewish theology of secular history is indeed a possibility and even a necessity, while a Christian philosophy of history is an artificial compound. In so far as it is really Christian, it is no philosophy but an understanding of historical action and suffering in the light of the cross (without any particular reference to peoples and world-historical individuals), and, in so far as it is a philosophy, it is not Christian. The perplexing situation is that the attempt at a philosophy of history depends on the Hebrew-Christian tradition, while this very tradition obstructs the attempt to ‘work out’ the working of God” (MH 195-196). In a way, Löwith here says everything. I return to this below (§25).

<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that Löwith himself is a practicing or confessing Christian—not exactly. A cursory reading of *Meaning in History* will, doubtless, uncover numerous moments of sympathy for the Christian tradition, but this sympathy is pitched in terms of an indifference to the meaning of profane history rather than at the register of confession or identification. Löwith’s Preface makes this clear: “More intelligent than the superior vision of philosophers and theologians is the common sense of the natural man and the uncommon sense of the Christian believer. Neither pretends to discern on the canvas of human history the purpose of God or of the historical process itself. They rather seek to set men free from the world’s oppressive history by suggesting an attitude, either of skepticism or of

essentially otherworldly character whenever and wherever it loses itself in historical accidents, or whenever and wherever it is subject to secularization.

In my view, Löwith is both wrong and right. He is right because Christianity is, indeed, beset by an antagonism peculiar to it. It is a historical religion that points, and points essentially, to something beyond history. He is wrong because Christianity's historicity is not accidental to it, but a problem that both haunts and inspires it. What Löwith takes as a contradiction between worldliness and faith—whose oblivion leads to the demise of Christendom—is, in fact, a principal feature of Christian activity and the (open) secret of its world-historical success. The antagonism between Christianity's worldliness and unworldliness (or its 'secularity' and 'religiosity') is not a fatal flaw in the Christian dispensation, but a vivifying principle of the history of Christianity. The antagonism is not crippling; it is energizing. It is the principle of the fear and trembling in which Christians throughout the ages have worked out (and 'worked through') their salvation. What Löwith takes as a confusion of the originary Christian mood of principled indifference to history with its secularized, bastard idea of progress is, in fact, the outcome of a highly determined and extremely powerful hermeneutical principle, viz. the logic of supersession as it is expressed in figural interpretation.

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faith, which is rooted in an experience certainly nurtured by history but detached from it and surpassing it, and thus enabling man to endure it with mature resignation or with faithful expectation. Religious faith is so little at variance with skepticism that both are rather united by their common opposition to the presumptions of a settled knowledge" (MH v-vi). For Blumenberg's cutting criticism of the slipperiness of the term 'unworldly' as applied to so-called primitive Christianity, see LMA 41-42, where he observes that "what can be secularized (made worldly) is only what claims by virtue of its descent or specificity to be extraworldly (42). The Christian *ethical* principle of unworldliness (i.e., indifference to what is supposed to be worldly) is the result of a prior distinction (a "spatial schematism" inherited from Neoplatonism) between the worldly and the extraworldly. I return to this below (§26).

What is striking about Löwith's book is that he has all of the pieces of the 'puzzle' of supersession ready to hand. He even recognizes, here without reference to Auerbach, the importance of figural interpretation.<sup>23</sup> His argument is pitched directly against those (he names Troeltsch and Dilthey) who dismiss the long tradition of the theological interpretation of history as negligible:

Against this common sense opinion that proper historical thinking begins only in modern times, with the eighteenth century, the following outline aims to show that philosophy of history originates with the Hebrew and Christian faith in a fulfillment and that it ends with the secularization of its eschatological pattern. (MH 1-2)

When Löwith claims that philosophy of history is dependent on theology of history, he refers to their common genesis in the prophetic traditions of Jews and Christians. Unlike the Greeks, for whom "a *philosophy* of history would have been a contradiction in terms" (MH 4), for

Jews and Christians, however, history was primarily a history of salvation and, as such, the proper concern of prophets, preachers, and teachers. The very existence of a philosophy of history and its quest for a meaning is due to the history of salvation; it emerged from the faith in an ultimate purpose. [...] History, too, is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts. But, since history is a movement in time, the purpose is a goal. Single events as such are not meaningful,

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<sup>23</sup> See the chapter on Joachim, MH 145-159, esp. n. 4 on MH 244, which I discuss below (§23). Löwith does cite Auerbach regarding Giambattista Vico; see MH 150-154, n. 9, 11, 13, p.238.

nor is a mere succession of events. (MH 5)

He even remarks, without thematizing it, on the *verticality* of prophecy, which guards against its reduction to mere prognostication. Prophecy is a conjugation of time and eternity; it concerns the the *present* of the past, the present, and the future.

The fulfillment of prophecies as understood by the Old and New Testament writers is entirely different from the verification of prognostications concerning historiconatural events. Though the future may be predetermined by the will of God, it is determined by a personal will and not by natural fatality, and man can never foretell it unless God reveals it to him. (MH 9)

The three excerpts just cited share a peculiar feature. In each case, Löwith is intent to show that the origin of philosophy of history—and of the robust concept of history as such—is both *Hebrew and Christian*, due to *Jews and Christians*, and to be found principally in the *Old and New Testaments*. All three of the instances cited above are taken from the introduction to the book, but the gesture is repeated throughout. What is the meaning of this gesture?

One obvious reply is that Löwith intends to give credit where it is due. To ignore the specifically Jewish contribution to the western concept of history would be both factually and politically wrong—a cruel erasure. And yet, the results of our investigation of figural interpretation suggest another reading of Löwith's gesture: it is the outworking of the logic of supersession, in which the Jews—and their decisive contribution to theologies-cum-philosophies of history—are not erased as such but revised and configured as a necessary moment in the constitution of Christianity. Löwith's narration of the process of secularization

is virtually everywhere marked by the logic of supersession.<sup>24</sup> References to Jews and Christians are endemic but are almost always accompanied by a swift reduction of the Jewish-Christian pairing to a discussion of the history of Christianity (for Christian eschatology, and its *diminishment*, is the true subject of Löwith's study), or to what Löwith calls the 'biblical' view of history (where 'biblical' signifies, quite clearly and unambiguously, the dual canon and its figural interpretation).<sup>25</sup> It is always Jews and Christians—together, as it were—at the origin of the concept of an ultimately meaningful history, but it is always Christianity who acts as the true witness and subject of that ultimacy. One gets the impression that one cannot simply leave the Jews *out* of the picture, but one cannot simply *leave* them there either.

Löwith's argument regarding the secularization thesis depends on a radical separation of (world) history and salvation history; the 'fact' of their confusion is what, by his lights, leads

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<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, MH 18, where Löwith brazenly asserts that the "religious futurism and nationalism" of Isaiah 2 are "*actually* teleological universalism" (my emphasis). In other words, the prophecy of the new Jerusalem is a figural anticipation of a future that will have been Christian, precisely because it was Jewish. Löwith bases his analyses in this passage on Hermann Cohen's theory of Jewish prophetism as the progenitor of the concept of history as futural. But even in Löwith's translation of Cohen (which Löwith admits is "freely translated") the idea of progress appears not as a modern misappropriation, but as the *original* insight of Jewish prophecy. See MH 17-18; cf. Cohen, *Religion of Reason*.

<sup>25</sup> Löwith: "For the Jews, the central event is still in the future, and the expectation of the Messiah divides for them all time into a present and a future aeon. For the Christian the dividing line in the history of salvation is no longer a mere *futurum* but a *perfectum praesens*, the accomplished advent of Jesus Christ. With regard to this central event the time is reckoned *forward as well as backward*. The years of the history B.C. continuously decrease while the years A.D. increase toward an end-time. In this linear, though double-faced, chronological scheme the biblical view of history is delineated as a history of salvation, progressing from promise to fulfillment, and focused in Jesus Christ" (MH 182). And consider Löwith's words in a passage from his conclusion: "The question is whether this tremendous sweep of Western activity has anything to do with the nonsecular, religious element in it. Is it perhaps Jewish Messianism and Christian eschatology, though in their secular transformations, that have developed those appalling energies of creative activity which changed the Christian Occident into a world-wide civilization? It was certainly not a pagan but a Christian culture which brought about this revolution" (MH 202-203).

to the modern morass and the aimless infinitude of secular progress. And yet, because Löwith thinks the constitution of Christianity from its eschatological pathos, rather than thinking Christian eschatology from Christianity's historical constitution, he leaves unthought what, in the Christian tradition—precisely by remaining unthought—binds the world to what is beyond it, namely, the figural.

### §22 The Crisis

Ultimately, secularization is understood by Löwith as a matter of decline. His argument presents a declension narrative, but his account proceeds as a regressive ascension to what he considers the origin of the idea of the meaning of universal history. In this section, I follow the thread of Löwith's account, so as to make clear the shape of his criticism of secularization and the idea of progress. Strictly speaking, Löwith's story begins with Ernst Burckhardt (1818-1987) and concludes with Augustine's contemporary, Paulus Orosius (385-420). Burckhardt is significant for Löwith because his *Reflections on History* represent a definitive abandonment of any pretension, à la Hegel, to the totalizing concepts of philosophy of history. Burckhardt is content (though not exactly happy) to be a secular and skeptical historian.<sup>26</sup> Orosius features as Augustine's double, only—according to Löwith—

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<sup>26</sup> Löwith: "It is characteristic of Burckhardt's honesty that he did not offer any self-styled solution but only stated the problem. He was completely free of modern prejudice, in particular, of that of Hegel, who saw in history a cumulative process of progressive development, realizing more and more the idea of Christianity in the secular world of history. Instead of such progressive development, Burckhardt discerned in 'modern' Christianity a contradiction in terms, because the evil genius of modern life, its *Erwerbssinn* and *Machtsinn*, the striving for power and gain, is downright opposed to voluntary suffering and self-surrender" (MH 31-32). We see here—and we will see below in detail—that Löwith's interpretation of Christianity is narrow enough that the essence of the historical Christian tradition is consistently reduced to an *individual* moral act of resignation vis-à-vis one's suffering, i.e., the ethics of 'voluntary suffering and self-surrender.' See Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*, trans. M.D.H. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1950).



slightly more interested in the coincidence of political events and salvation history (MH 177).<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, Hegel and Augustine are the true ‘poles’ of Löwith’s polemic.<sup>28</sup>

Hegel is presented as the great secularizer of Christian theology, dissolving the theological interpretation of history into the *Bildungsroman* of the philosophical Idea. By contrast, Augustine is presented as the original architect of theology of history.

Augustine’s *City of God* (412-26) is the pattern of every conceivable view of history that can rightly be called ‘Christian.’ It is not a philosophy of history but a dogmatic-historical interpretation of Christianity. Though he is demonstrating the truth of the Christian doctrine in the material of sacred and profane history, the history of the world has for him no intrinsic interest and meaning. [...] What Augustine achieves in the *City of God* is, therefore, an integration not of theology into history but of the faith of the primitive church into the doctrine of the church established” (MH 166,

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<sup>27</sup> Löwith: “Unlike Augustine, Orosius stresses the meaningfulness of the coincidence between the rule of Caesar Augustus and the birth of Jesus Christ, elaborating what has aptly been called the ‘political monotheism’ of many apologists. When the Roman Empire had gained the mastery of Asia, Africa, and Europe, God conferred all things by his decree upon a single emperor, who was pre-eminent in power and mercy. The whole world became unified by Roman law and peace. This was the earthly condition by which the gospel could spread abroad without hindrance. [...] Thus the empire of Augustus might be proved to have been prepared for the future event of Christ, already announced by many signs and prodigies” (MH 177-178). Löwith’s mention of ‘political monotheism’ refers to Erik Peterson’s 1935 work, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem*. See Erik Peterson, “Monotheism as a Political Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman Empire,” in *Theological Tractates*, ed. and trans. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 68-105. For a critical discussion of Peterson’s dispute with Carl Schmitt regarding the political significance of monotheism, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa with Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 1-14.

<sup>28</sup> Löwith’s chapter on Marx (which intervenes between the Burckhardt chapter and the Hegel chapter) is extremely significant in its own right. I am treating that chapter in a separate study and thus pass over it here. See Timothy Snediker, “The Revolution Will Not Be Prophesied,” *Political Theology*, Special Issue: Marx and Revolution, eds. Sara-Maria Sorrentino and Mikkel Flohr (forthcoming, 2024).

167).

Here, we glimpse a feature of Löwith's argument that will be most consequential for our reading. Löwith claims—early and often—that Augustine has no interest in secular history as such. If Augustine takes any interest in secular history (i.e., the rise and fall of various empires) at all, it is only inasmuch as such an empire (principally Rome) was “a means to the purpose of God” (MH 171; cf. CG 5.21), such that, in the order of salvation history, “the real significance of imperial Rome is to preserve earthly peace as the condition for spreading the gospel” (MH 168; cf. CG 5.46).

Löwith consistently adduces Augustine's disinterest in political history to bolster his argument that Christianity is originally and essentially a religion of disengagement from worldly affairs. The Christian life is a life of imitation (of the Christ) and awaiting (of the Christ's return). As we noted above, Christians are, for Löwith, not a properly “historical people”:

Their solidarity all over the world is merely one of faith. In the Christian view the history of salvation is no longer bound up with a particular nation but is internationalized because it is individualized. In Christianity the history of salvation is related to the salvation of each single soul, regardless of racial, social, and political status, and the contribution of the nations to the Kingdom of God is measured by the number of the elect, not by any corporate achievement or failure. (MH 195)

The basically Protestant character of Löwith's reading of the Christian life is striking. It is everywhere a matter of the (by all accounts solitary) individual who suffers historical events as the test or proof of their salvation, the substance of which has no connection whatever to

the vicissitudes of world history.

There is some merit to this. Löwith is certainly correct when he writes that, for Augustine, what really matters in history “is not the transitory greatness of empires, but salvation or damnation in a world to come” (MH 168). For Löwith, the Christian tradition is unique in that, for it, secular history is ‘merely’ the history of empires, all of which are transient and ultimately meaningless, without theological or soteriological significance. If the events and successions of secular history have any significance at all, it is a purely educative significance; educative not in the sense of a lesson, but in the sense of a test of faith, or a proving, that the believer must suffer.<sup>29</sup> At bottom, history is the experience of evil.<sup>30</sup> It is not wrong to say that, for Löwith, every step away from Augustine’s principled indifference to the forms or the patterns of the world (which, as St. Paul reminds the church at Corinth, are passing away) is a step away from the originary Christian eschatological experience and its corresponding ethic of humility and self-abnegation in the face of a history that is naught but a “divinely appointed pedagogy, operating mainly through suffering” (MH 170).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Löwith’s introductory comments on the original demand that gave rise to the interpretation of history, which is none other than the fact of suffering (MH 3), and his repeated references to Hegel’s invocation of world history as the world’s court of justice (MH 12, 58).

<sup>30</sup> Willem Styfhals writes that “the fundamental intertwining of evil and history is pivotal for Löwith: there can be no history without evil, no evil without history.” See Willem Styfhals, “Evil in History: Karl Löwith and Jacob Taubes on Modern Eschatology,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (April 2015), 199.

<sup>31</sup> See 1 Corinthians 7: “I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away” (v. 29-31, NRSV). It is interesting that Paul’s famous declaration that the present form of the world is passing away appears in the midst of his admonitions to the Corinthians regarding social and sexual ethics. Paul’s point, broadly construed, is that the eschaton is so near, the urgency of the faith so pressing, that marriage (and any other civil activity) may well prove to be a distraction, rather than a blessing. This is also the passage that contains Paul’s formulation of the logic of the *hōs mē*, the ‘as not,’ according to which the normal,

Indeed, the thread of the argument of *Meaning in History* is not so much a thread as it is a catalog of various early modern ‘steps’ away from Augustine (but such steps are, for Löwith, mis-steps). The ‘regressive’ mode of Löwith’s presentation is not a smooth and continuous survey of the history of the concept of the meaning of history in the West but is mainly concentrated in the early modern period, where Löwith perceives the rumbling of a profound crisis of western historical consciousness. Something—a something that Löwith names ‘secularization’—transpires between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or, in terms of Löwith’s outline, between Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet’s *Discourse* and Voltaire’s *Essay*.

In the former, Löwith perceives something like the final entry in theology of history properly so-called, prior to its definitive secularization. At the center of Bossuet’s *Discourse on Universal History* (1681) is the doctrine of providence, which, because it ensures that history is guided by the will of God, assures the believers in their expectation of their reward in eternity.<sup>32</sup> Bossuet ‘updates’ Augustine’s *City of God*, charting the path of world history from creation to the reign of Charlemagne (MH 138). Like Augustine, Bossuet avails himself of the prophetic and promissory character of history. The fulfillment of prophecy was “the most convincing of all proofs” of the providential design of the world: “To Bossuet the fulfillment of prophetic predictions proved that the history of the empires ultimately serves the Christian church” (MH 141). Yet even Bossuet—who is more ‘modern,’ and thus more attuned than was his fifth century predecessor to the vicissitudes of political history—shows

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and normative, dimensions of worldly life go on, in one sense, unimpeded, but, in another sense as if deactivated or rendered inoperative. On inoperativity and the *hōs mē*, see Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 23-26.

<sup>32</sup> See Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Discourse on Universal History*, trans. Elborg Forster, ed. Orest Ranum (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976).

signs of complicity with the secularization of theology of history.<sup>33</sup> He even seems to suggest that the Kingdom of God can be construed as an earthly empire (MH 141).<sup>34</sup> While not losing sight of their distinction, Bossuet insists on the correlation of sacred and secular history, which is maintained by a secret, providential ordering (MH 139-140). For Bossuet, the providential order is secret because it is, strictly speaking, hidden in the eternity of the mind of God, but also because its outcome is “unknown to the agents of history,” taking place ‘behind their backs’ as it were (MH 142).<sup>35</sup>

Löwith remarks wryly that Bossuet’s approach agrees not only with Hegel’s ‘cunning of reason,’ but also with the simple truth that historical, social, and psychic forces everywhere exceed the ken of finite human beings. But Bossuet’s agreement with Hegel is, in Löwith’s view, damning: they both proved too much. By this Löwith means that providence need not be—and, strictly speaking, cannot be—understood by the human intellect. To search for visible signs of providence in the history of the world is to evacuate faith of its substance, which is naught but the absence of certainty. Löwith even compares the attempt to make providence visible in the world to the temptation of the Christ by the devil (MH 143)!

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<sup>33</sup> Löwith writes that “Bossuet is more of a churchman than Augustine is. His work is not so much a city of God as a history of the triumphant church on the pattern of Eusebius, advisor of Constantine” (MH 139).

<sup>34</sup> “We see there [i.e., in the Old Testament] those famous empires fall one after another, and the new empire which Jesus Christ was to establish, is there described so expressly by its proper characters, that it is impossible to mistake it. It is the empire of the Son of Man, the empire that it is to stand amidst the ruins of all others, and to which alone eternity is promised” (Bossuet, qtd. in MH 141).

<sup>35</sup> “Therefore it is that all who govern, find themselves subject to a greater power. They do more or less than they intend, and their counsels have never failed to have unforeseen effects. [...] In a word, there is no human power that does not minister, whether it will or no, to other designs than its own. God only knows how to bring every thing about to his will: and therefore everything is surprising, to consider only particular causes; and yet every thing goes on with a regular progression” (Bossuet, qtd. in MH 142).

Bossuet, like Hegel, should have pursued a more modest use of the doctrine of providence. It would have been enough to keep to the Crucified, for in light of the cross, “only *one* inference as to the meaning of history would have been adequate: that history is a discipline of suffering, an opportunity for the creature to return to its creator—no more and no less” (MH 142-143, emphasis in original).

Thus Bossuet, ostensibly the modern heir of Augustine, is already stepping out and away from the latter. This (mis-)step leads to what Löwith describes as the “crisis in the history of European consciousness, when providence was replaced by progress,” namely, in the work of the Enlightenment *philosophe* Voltaire, who, in fact, coined the term “philosophy of history” (MH 104). Voltaire’s *Essay on the Manners and Mind of Nations, and on the Principal Facts of History from Charlemagne to Louis XIII* (1756) dispenses with the theological interpretation of history in favor of an empirical investigation of world history, thereby reducing salvation history to its secular components.<sup>36</sup> Prophecy drops out of the picture; figural interpretation plays no role in Voltaire. Löwith notes that Voltaire’s *Essay* was originally conceived as a continuation of Bossuet’s *Discourse*, but ended up becoming a refutation of the traditional (read: Augustinian) interpretation of history—thus, too, of Bossuet. Löwith notes that Voltaire’s criticisms of Bossuet were essentially two-fold: (1) what Bossuet presents as universal history is not, in fact, universal; (2) providence cannot be detected empirically in history (MH 110). Here, we have an excellent example of the way that Löwith’s argument tends—as if in spite of itself—to reproduce the logic of supersession. On the one hand, as we saw just above, Löwith is clearly sympathetic to (2), for to search for

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<sup>36</sup> See Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations* (1756). URL: <https://homepages.uc.edu/~martinj/French/Essai%20sur%20les%20Moeurs.pdf>.

providence in the empirical events of history is to commit a category error. On the other hand, Löwith cannot abide the charge contained in (1), because *it, too* is a category error. I draw attention to this because Voltaire's criticisms—and Löwith's ambivalence toward them—revolve around the question of the significance of the history of the Jews.

Voltaire, like Hegel after him, begins his account of world history in China, such that the course of world history moves, so to speak, from east to west. This starting point is significant for a number of reasons, but especially because beginning with China furnishes Voltaire with an apparently nobler origin of civilization than that of the history of the Jews, to which Voltaire (a rather vicious antisemite) attaches the epithets 'abominable' and 'barbarous' (MH 105-107). Voltaire objects to Bossuet's centering of the history of the Jews, because such a history cannot, for Voltaire, be properly universal; it is rather patently and self-consciously particularistic. As Löwith relates it, Voltaire complains that Bossuet treats only four empires of antiquity (namely, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome), all of which are treated in terms of their relation to the Jews, "as if the destiny of the Jews were the center of interest and meaning." Voltaire, by contrast, is determined to "speak of the Jews as we would speak of Scythians or Greeks"—that is, just as he would speak of any other nation or historical event (MH 110). Voltaire's solution is to massively expand the scope of the inquiry into universal history, rising from Bossuet's paltry four civilizations to considerations of roughly two-dozen historical empires. Yet, for Löwith, the solution misses the mark as much as the criticism does, "for history does not become universal by surveying, instead of the four civilizations of Bossuet, a score or twenty-one. It only becomes general" (MH 111). The universality of history in Voltaire is only apparent, an effect of the (admittedly impressive) comprehensiveness of its materials; the unity of history in Voltaire is secured by the meager

means of “chronological succession and the idea of progress as a hypothetical principle” (MH 111).

The substance of Löwith’s objection should now be obvious: the idea of universal history can by no means be deduced from mere succession; it certainly cannot be derived from the idea of an indefinite progress toward historical perfection, whether of human nature or of political life. Universal history is rather defined by the transcendence of its ultimate purpose and the execution of that purpose in history, and it is so defined by “Jewish messianism and Christian eschatology, on the basis of an exclusive monotheism” (MH 111). Here, again, we see Löwith’s kindly gesture toward the Jewish contribution to universal history; and again, in the very same passage, we see the reduction or revision in which the Jews are eclipsed—but not erased—by the Christian tradition, in relation to which Voltaire and his ilk play out the secularization of “the Christian hope of salvation” and “faith in God’s providence” (MH 111). We are again reminded, in the very next paragraph, that “it is Jewish-Christian futurism which opened the future as the dynamic horizon of all modern striving and thinking” (MH 111). In forgetting, or forgoing, the significance of the history of the Jews, Voltaire forecloses the origin of his idea. It is again tempting to credit Löwith for giving the Jews their due, but Löwith’s credit is due not to the Jews but to the Christian construal of the Jews, not in and for themselves, but as figures.

Just a few pages hence, in a critical appraisal of what he calls the “modern religion of progress,” Löwith avers that, while the Christian tradition brooks absolutely no compromise with the idea of progress as we find it in Voltaire, Christianity does, indeed, admit of a certain idea of progress. What Löwith calls ‘Christian progress’ is, in fact, a very specific—and, for us, very familiar—idea.



Christianity, far from having opened the horizon of an *indefinite* future like the religion of progress, has made the future paramount by making it *definite*, and it has thereby immensely accentuated and deepened the earnestness of the present instant. In this faithful expectation of a definite future glory and judgment is implied the assumption, not that history is indefinitely progressing, either by natural law or by man's continuous efforts, but that history has virtually reached its end. *Christian progress from the old Adam to a new creature is certainly a momentous progress*, yet it is entirely independent of historical changes in man's social and political, cultural and economic, conditions. (MH 113, my emphasis)

In a word, what Löwith calls "Christian progress"—which he affirms is "momentous"—is supersession. The "old Adam" is the (unambiguously Jewish) *figura* of the new creature or creation, the Christian, whose history ended precisely where it began, namely, with the advent of the Christ. If history has "virtually" ended, it is because the Christ event occurred when the time of the Jews—i.e., of the only history that matters—was fulfilled (MH 182). The rest of history, however it might be categorized or catalogued, is mere chaff, useless for the harvest (for which only the souls of the faithful serve as good grain) and best consigned to the fires of autumn. As Löwith remarks near the end of his study, in his chapter on the so-called biblical view of history, Voltaire—like his skeptical counterpart Celcus in the second century—is acutely aware of the "*scandalon* of a history of salvation" (MH 184). It renders superfluous and accidental everything the modern mind takes to be essential.

For Löwith, Voltaire is right about the impossibility of detecting providence in empirical history, but for the wrong reasons. Voltaire's skepticism is rooted not in an authentic faith in things unseen but in the misbegotten "belief in man's capacity to provide for his own earthly

happiness” (MH 111). Voltaire’s ‘step’ away from Augustine is, in fact, a leap—into Enlightenment optimism and ‘progressivism,’ thus a fall into benighted deism.<sup>37</sup> What is striking about Löwith’s criticism of Voltaire is not only the fact that Voltaire ‘secularizes,’ and thus debases, providence, but that Voltaire’s basic mistake was to have dismissed the significance (indeed, the singular importance) of the history of the Jews as the *real historical content* of the history of salvation. For the history of Jews culminates in—it is the historically real prophecy of—the eschatological event par excellence: the Incarnation. Even more striking is the fact that Löwith does not affirm the historical reality of the Incarnation. He is not writing an apology for the Christian faith *per se*. He is rather wielding it as a weapon against a modern ideology that he considers fundamentally compromised by its confusion of secular and salvation history. But to wield the Christian tradition is to wield in turn what it wields already, namely, its figures, the Jews. Again and again, Löwith laments that the Jewish and Christian origins of the idea of universal history have been forgotten, bastardized, and appropriated by a secularized culture that, because it is everywhere, is going nowhere. But the Christian idea of universal history is already, and essentially, an appropriation.

If Voltaire represents, for Löwith, the high point of the crisis of western historical consciousness, then one might be given to wonder: where lies the low point? And what would be the character of such a low point? It is tempting to turn to Löwith’s chapter on Giambattista Vico (which intervenes between the Voltaire and Bossuet chapters) to locate the low point, conceived as the point at which the Augustinian wing of the Christian tradition

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<sup>37</sup> Löwith: “The enormous success of Voltaire’s essay is due mainly to the fact that it provided the rising bourgeoisie with a historical justification of its own ideals by suggesting that all history was leading up to the eighteenth century. In Voltaire’s essay God has retired from the rule of history; he may still reign, but he does not govern by intervention” (MH 107).

most profoundly betrays its commitment to the transcendence of the eschaton—a sort of degree-zero of the ‘immanentization’ of eschatology. But Vico’s historical method is, as Löwith points out, divested of the traditional interest in prophecy, fulfillment, and the specific concept of history as a providential totality that serves as their correlative image (MH 128-131). To be sure, Vico’s thought is determined almost entirely—one might even say radically—by the idea of providence, but his is a providence that ensures the *circularity* of history, rather than its ultimacy.<sup>38</sup> There is in Vico nothing resembling a doctrine of the centrality of the Christ event to history (MH 129) and Vico’s discussions of the “destiny of the Jews” treat them not as figural prophecies, nor as necessary moments in the unfolding of an eschatological drama, but simply as an exceptional people, to whom God grants a special revelation that exempts them from the necessity of passing through the ‘first’ stage of history’s circle: the “brutish condition” that precedes the second, ‘heroic’ stage and the third, ‘rational stage’ (MH 130). Löwith writes that

in a certain way Vico’s divergence is even greater than that of Voltaire from Bossuet [and thus from Augustine], since Voltaire simply discarded sacred history altogether and spoke of the Jews as if they were ‘Scythians or Greeks.’ [...] Vico eliminates the Bible as a historical source in spite of his many endeavors to prove its truth from profane sources. He asserts the separate origin of the chosen people, but just for this reason the *New Science* does not comprise the principles of their history. (MH 131)

Vico’s novel approach to the study of history—i.e., his profoundly *empirical* method—is

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<sup>38</sup> Löwith: “Incompatible with this tentative outlook toward a ‘Christian world’ as the fulfillment of history is the consistent theme of [Vico’s] work, which stresses that history has no fulfillment and solution but is ruled by recurrences” (MH 133).

also a leap away from Augustine and the figural interpretation of history. The *New Science* is not the ‘low point’ that interests us.

It is tempting, too, to ‘progress’ to Löwith’s chapter on Hegel to find the low point that mirrors the heights reached by Voltaire and Vico in the early modern crisis. But Hegel is not the low point either. If we wish to discover the low point of Löwith’s declension narrative, so as to better understand the zero-degree of the crisis he perceives in early modernity, its consequences for the secularization debate, and the structuring role of the logic of supersession therein, then we must turn to a figure that we may rightly call the villain of *Meaning in History*: Joachim of Fiore.

### §23 The Sacrament of History

Given that Joachim (1135-1202) lived seven centuries after Augustine (354-430), one might expect that their respective chapters in Löwith’s reverse-chronological study would be separated by at least a few pages, if not dozens. As it happens, Löwith’s attention ‘regresses’ directly from Joachim to Augustine. Moreover, Löwith ‘regresses’ to Joachim from Bossuet (1627-1704), whose work, as we’ve seen above, is “the last theology of history on the pattern of Augustine” (MH 104). In terms of the declension narrative that Löwith wishes to tell, Joachim is poised midway—but ‘immediately,’ so to speak—between Augustine and Augustine’s last disciple, who are themselves separated in time by well over a millennium. We said above that Löwith’s attentions are centered predominantly on the early modern era, since it is in the work of those figures of the Renaissance and Enlightenment (Vico and Voltaire, but in their wake, too, Condorcet, Turgot, Comte) that the modern confusion of philosophy of history begins. And, as we’ve seen above, this makes good sense: it is where

the central action of Löwith's declension narrative takes place. And yet, on Löwith's own account, the trouble begins long before Voltaire's devastating criticism of providence. It begins, Löwith thinks, with Joachim.

To describe Joachim's thought in full, let alone his influence on later Christian thought, would take us too far afield. What is important for the present study is to ask what it is about Joachim that distresses Löwith. In this regard, a brief summary must suffice.<sup>39</sup> Joachim is best known for his daring revision of the traditional (predominantly Augustinian) scheme of the history of the world. Where Christian theology had traditionally divided history into two halves—bisected, as it were, by the Christ event—Joachim divided history into three ages: the age of the Father, the age of the Son, and the age of the Holy Spirit. The age of the Father corresponds to the history of the Jews; the Old Testament is its historical record. The age of the Son corresponds to the Christian era in which Joachim himself lives, but which he believes will soon reach its apocalyptic end. The age of the Holy Spirit is therefore yet to come, but, because the ages overlap with one another, and each successive age fulfills the prophecies and promises of the one prior, the beginnings of the final age of the Holy Spirit are detectable—by those with ears to hear—in the life and 'rule' of St. Benedict. For Joachim, the age of the Holy Spirit is to be an age characterized by monastic life, rather than the hierarchy and sacramental life of the Catholic Church. It is in the third age that the history of salvation will reach its fulfillment, and which will usher in the second coming of the Christ and the final judgment of the world.

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<sup>39</sup> My summary is drawn mainly from Löwith's own summary of Joachim's thought (MH 148-149). See also Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1969); Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

It is easy to see why Joachim's apocalyptic teachings posed a threat to the established church: they predict its disestablishment. In Joachim's theology of history, the church, as it existed from the first to the twelfth century, will have been a necessary but ultimately incomplete and inadequate moment in the history of salvation.<sup>40</sup> The future is not just a goal; the future of the faith itself has a future. (Or, it had one: the later Franciscan attempt to actualize Joachim's Eternal Gospel in the monastic life of voluntary poverty was met with stiff resistance from the Catholic hierarchy.)<sup>41</sup> As Löwith puts it, even the Gospel as it appears in the New Testament is still, for Joachim, on the order of the 'letter,' destined to become truly spiritual—and thus truly true—when the Eternal Gospel finds its fulfillment in the third and final age of history:

The times which have passed before the law, under the law, and under grace were as necessary as the coming epoch which will fulfill those preparatory stages; for the fundamental law of the history of salvation is the continuous progress from the time

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<sup>40</sup> Löwith seems to think that the finality of Jesus the Christ is compromised in Joachim's prophetic anticipation of a "messianic leader" who was to appear to usher in the last age (MH 151). Löwith makes this remark in order to absolve Joachim of any personal revolutionary pretensions; the Calabrian abbot did not advocate a revolution or reformation of the contemporary church structure; he only indicated that such a revolutionary moment would soon arrive, and that it would be led by one who would resemble a Christ. Historically speaking, that Christic role was played by—but clearly not consummated by—St. Francis.

<sup>41</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), esp. 91-143. Löwith implicates St. Francis and his disciples in the declension narrative, for which Joachimism serves as ground zero: "And yet it is one of the great paradoxes in the history of Christianity that the most authentic imitation of Christ, that of St. Francis, merged into a revolutionary interpretation of the 'Eternal Gospel' which led, by many detours and perversions, to a progressive interpretation of history which expected the *eschaton* not only in history but eventually also from it" (MH 144). The paradox is, indeed, from Löwith's point of view, extreme: the most unworldly (i.e., authentically Christian) form of life is the unwitting catalyst for the becoming-worldly (i.e., the secularization) of Christianity.

of the Old and New Testament ‘letter’ to that of the ‘spirit.’ (MH 149)

The three ages represent three different “dispensations” that pass progressively, revealing or manifesting the persons of the trinity in succession (MH 148). History is thus progressive in a strong sense: God is more fully revealed in the age of the Son than in the age of the Father, and will be revealed in full in the age of the Holy Spirit, when the new spiritual man will slough off the sacramental mediation of the church and “possess knowledge of God by direct vision and contemplation” (MH 151). We can refer to this as the *ecclesiological* problem posed by Joachim’s works, but there is also a profound *theological* problem posed by the Joachimite theology of history, and it is ultimately this latter problem that distresses Löwith.

The theological problem is a christological problem. Its contours are these: Joachim’s relegation of the age of the Son to a mere episode of salvation history calls into question the finality (thus the sufficiency) of the Christ event.<sup>42</sup> The Incarnation is not, or is no longer, the radical break that divides history in two and renders all subsequent historical action impotent and ultimately meaningless.<sup>43</sup> Nor is it the ‘hinge’ upon which salvation history turns: from law to grace, from Jewish particularity to Christian universality, and so on. This is not to say that the Christ is not pivotal for Joachim, only that the church—still ensnared in the ritual and doctrine of the age of the Son—has yet to truly pivot upon the Christ’s pivot. When the final pivot comes, it comes as prophesied in John’s *Apocalypse*: as apocalypse. This means that

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<sup>42</sup> On the problem of maintaining both the finality and universality of the Christ event, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Finality of Christ in an Age of Universal History: A Dilemma of the Third Century* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966).

<sup>43</sup> On these dimensions of the so-called ‘biblical’ view of history, see MH 182-188, where Löwith relies on Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Conception of Time and History*, Revised Edition, trans. Floyd V. Filson (London: SCM Press, 1962).

the theological problem posed by Joachimism is also, and basically, eschatological—but for that very reason is also, and basically, historical.

Löwith's distress is centered on this basic correlation of history and eschatology, because it threatens—and in his view eventually manages—to become an identity. The trouble with Joachim is that the fulfillment of history, the eschaton, is something historical.

The interpretation of history thus necessarily becomes prophecy, and the right understanding of the past depends on the proper perspective for the future, in which the preceding significations come to their end. This consummation does not occur beyond historical time, at the end of the world, but in a last historical epoch.

Joachim's eschatological scheme consists neither in a simple millennium nor in the mere expectation of the end of the world but in a twofold *eschaton*: an ultimate historical phase of the history of salvation, preceding the transcendent *eschaton* of the new aeon, ushered in by the second coming of Christ. The Kingdom of the Spirit is the last revelation of God's purpose on earth and in time. (MH 150-151)

It might be objected that, because he admits that Joachim's eschatology is "twofold," Löwith has already hit upon the solution to his distress. The true end of the world and time is transcendent; the Christ comes from—returns from—beyond time. Nonetheless, Löwith's concern is not that Joachim is, say, Hegel, but that the former opens the door to the latter.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For an argument that Hegel "is a modern, Joachimite Gnostic: world history is the story of the logos making itself flesh in the rational state and human rights," see Clark Butler, "Hegelian Panentheism as Joachimite Christianity," in David Kolb (ed.), *New Perspectives on Hegel's Philosophy of Religion* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 139. Butler's thesis is interesting, but apparently over-invested in a kind of modern philosophical heresiology, in which Hegel must be recognized as a Christian, so that he can be labeled a heretic (*ibid.*, 141). Butler notes that the connection between Joachim and Hegel was noted as early as 1810, in a letter from K.J.H.



The baleful light that slips through that cracked door can, in fact, be seen in the title of Löwith's book: *Meaning in History*. As Löwith stipulates at the outset of his study, he means meaning in the strong sense: ultimate meaning, purpose, goal. The fatal flaw of the modern world, on Löwith's account, is the pretension to locate, or to have located, the ultimate meaning or purpose or goal *of history in history* itself. Joachim thus anticipated and even, Löwith thinks, made possible this mistake. Worse still, Joachim located the ultimate meaning of history not in the Incarnation but—here lies the rub—in the historically real future of history.

It seems to me that Christian orthodoxy has warrant to worry about this. The delay of the Parousia gives rise to chiliastic enthusiasm and anxiety—in short, to millennialism and apocalyptic eschatology. Augustine attempts to ward off the threat by various means, but especially by way of his separation of the City of God from the City of Man (see §25 below). For his part, Tertullian resorts to half-measures, praying that the Parousia will be *further* delayed; an attitude that, in fact, leaves open the door through which slips a certain Grand Inquisitor.<sup>45</sup> But whether apocalyptic or non-apocalyptic, the relation of history and eschatology in the Christian tradition should be understood in terms of the paradoxes generated by the practice of figural interpretation and the logic of supersession expressed

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Windischmann to Hegel himself (*ibid.*, 131).

<sup>45</sup> For the parable of the Grand Inquisitor, see Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonksy (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 246-264. For a theory of the Grand Inquisitor as a literary figuration of the theological concept of *katechon* (the 'restraining power' to which Paul refers in 2 Thessalonians 2), see Carl Schmitt, quoted in Tracy Strong, "Foreword (2008)," in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, trans. George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), xxiv. For Tertullian's prayer for the delay of the Parousia, see Tertullian, *Apology*, Chs. 32, 39. See also Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Ch. 28, for an early precedent for Christian reading regarding the delay of the eschaton.

therein. Figural interpretation can be mobilized against the apocalyptic tendency as much as marshaled for its defense.

Apropos of the triumph of the early Christians in the “propaganda war” with their Jewish counterparts regarding the proper interpretation of the Old Testament (by which is meant: by the time that the logic of supersession had come to determine the historical consciousness of the Christian tradition), Bernard McGinn remarks that the partisans of traditional apocalyptic eschatology (e.g., the Qumran community) viewed the victory of the supersessionist faction with ambivalence,

because the contrast between the old aeon and the new in apocalyptic writings was by no means identical with the distinction between the Old Testament and the New in the patristic view. One important difference lay in the sense of immanent development implied by the Christian view of the Old Testament as the promise of the New, whereas the apocalyptic mentality had insisted on the strong division between the two aeons. We have here the germs of the sense of progress developed in subsequent Christian theologies of history.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, the problem that motivates Löwith’s critical genealogy of the idea of progress is not simply a matter of the encroachment of a misguided apocalypticism upon an authentic, primitive Christian faith in the transcendence of the ultimate meaning of history. The eschatological question is there from the start of—and throughout the peregrinations of—the

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<sup>46</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1985), 58-59. McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 58-59. McGinn adduces the analyses in Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity* (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 58-59.

development of Christian theologies of history. The eschatological question is tightly linked to the constitutional question (it is even its ‘symptom’).

The Christian tradition has, from the very beginning, been marked by apocalyptic anxiety regarding the imminence of the eschaton.<sup>47</sup> To this anxiety corresponds a desire to determine, by way of speculation or divination, and with more or less exactitude (e.g., the day or the hour or the year), the specific time of the end of time. We saw above (§11) that Augustine, like Paul, endeavored to reorient the anxiety of the believers toward a less apocalyptic (even non-apocalyptic) eschatological mood that, shorn of all prognostication regarding the end of time, reorders their temporality in terms of a faith for ‘living in the end times,’ in the ‘time of the end.’ Speculation and divination are to be avoided. If Joachim represents a break from that tradition, it is because, with Joachim, apocalyptic speculation was, as never before, “elaborated into a consistent system of historico-allegorical interpretation” (MH 145). Löwith characterizes Joachim’s system as “radically new” (e.g., MH 154), at least by comparison to the Augustinian view of history. Without wishing to downplay the novelty of Joachim’s prophetic project, it does seem important to point out that Joachim’s prophetic vision is not so much radically *new* as it is *radically* historical. That is to say, and this will become clear in what follows, Joachim’s ‘step’ away from Augustine is not (*pace* Löwith) so much a step forward into modernity as it is a step backward into the heart of the problem of the historical constitution of Christianity by its supersession of Judaism—that is, it is a step

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<sup>47</sup> Questions about the character and the generality of such anxiety in the early church have motivated a great deal of theological and historical-critical scholarship, especially during the heady decades of the mid-twentieth century. See, for example, Cullman, *Christ and Time*, which famously argues for the generality of the temporal-existential formula ‘already ... not yet’ in the New Testament worldview; for an alternative view, see Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, esp. 38-55. My discussion of these problems in this section is indebted to the concise but synoptic overview in McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 51-73.

toward Tertullian.<sup>48</sup>

Löwith admits that the quarrel between Joachim and the Catholic Church seems, to us, rather remote, but he insists that the implications of the Joachamite theology of history—which “opened the door to a fundamental revision of a thousand years of Christian history and theology,” questioning not only “the traditional authority of the church but also the temporal order” (MH 154)—were revolutionary. “There can be little doubt,” Löwith avers, that the Joachimite episode “re-enacts the spiritual fervor of early Christianity and also conditions the modern irreligions of progress” (MH 145). This comment is of interest to us because Löwith clearly means to say that Joachim’s idea of the ultimate identity of sacred and profane history anticipates (indeed, it *conditions*) the eventual process of secularization, but in the same breath Löwith has also said that Joachim’s doctrine of the Eternal Gospel repeats or rehearses (indeed, it *re-enacts*) the original spiritual situation of the early church. This suggests, again, and at the very least, that the trouble that so profoundly troubles Löwith begins long before Joachim. It rather begins at the ‘beginning,’ with the Incarnation, in which eternity appeared in time and history. If Joachim represents a break from the Christian tradition, it is not—not primarily—because he ‘immanentizes’ the eschaton but because he exploits, in a way that is truly radical (*viz.* to the root or *radix*), the latent potential of figural

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<sup>48</sup> Löwith is aware of the link between Joachim and Tertullian (see MH 243, n.1), but does not thematize it as such. Rather than developing the specific character of their linkage—namely, the figural interpretation of history—he attributes the provenance of Joachim’s idea of the three dispensations to the second century Montanist heresy, of which Tertullian was a major proponent. It would take us too far afield to consider Montanism in any detail here, but as we’ll see below, Löwith’s critical account of Joachim has everything to do with the unique powers of figural interpretation. That Löwith does not develop the Joachim-Tertullian relation in any detail is perhaps due to the fact that he does not consider Auerbach’s “Figura,” which had been published a decade prior. That Löwith was aware of Auerbach’s work is indisputable; he cites Auerbach more than once in the chapter on Vico.

interpretation.

Like Tertullian, Joachim puts allegory in service of the interpretation of historically real prophecy. Scripture is brimming with boundless mysteries, but every such mystery (in the sense of something enigmatic and inscrutable) is a key to the door of *the* mystery (in the sense of the mystery of God's economy, the *mysterium* or *sacramentum*) of history. For Joachim, writes Löwith, "the real significance of the sacraments is not, as with Augustine, the signification of a transcendent reality but the indication of a potentiality which becomes realized within the framework of history" (MH 151). The church is itself an historical figure of something to come in history:

Since the history after Christ is still on its way and yet revealed as having an end, the fullness of time is not to be conceived traditionally as a unique event of the past [i.e., the Incarnation] but as something to be worked out in the future, in the perspective of which the church, from Christ until now, is not an everlasting foundation but an imperfect prefiguration. (MH 150).

In other words, the life and action of the church is the *sacrament of history*; it is that which makes history actual and effective. But the life and action of the church is, above all, its testimony to the eternal truth of its historical calling. That is to say, the sacrament of history is the ritual and discursive repetition of the constitution of Christianity: it is supersession. Just as the power of God makes effective and actual what the priest says of the Eucharist and says over the baptized, so the power of God makes effective and actual what the church 'says' of itself and (its) history.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> On the notion of the effectivity of the sacraments, see Agamben, *Opus Dei*, 29-62.

On the one hand, Joachim is not saying anything different than what the Christian tradition says of itself and (its) history. The church is the prophetic fulfillment of another (but not wholly other) history, namely, the history of the Jews. The church is the historical becoming-body-and-blood of the bread and wine. That the Jews of the Old Testament are but ‘mere’ bread and wine is not their fault but their glory, for what is superseded (here: transubstantiated) is a necessary (but, in the Scholastic sense, *accidental*) moment of the sacrament. Like the bread-accident and the wine-accident, the Jews necessarily remain (they appear) in the world as witnesses to the miracle. On the other hand, the implications of Joachim’s prophetic paradigm point to a much more radical—and, for Catholic doctrine, much more distasteful—conclusion than any entertained by the traditional Christian interpretation of history. Joachim seems to imply that the necessity of the priesthood will have been an accident of the sacrament of history. That is to say, he threatens to make Christians, especially priests, into ‘Jews,’ destined to be superseded.<sup>50</sup> Here are united the ecclesiological problem and the eschatological problem. The subtle cord that binds them together is the thread we have been following throughout this work: the logic of supersession.

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<sup>50</sup> If Joachim is, as Eric Voegelin puts it, the great “anti-Augustinian,” he is such only inasmuch as he draws a different conclusion from Augustine’s criticism of the Donatist heresy: the persons of the church (i.e., its priests) are not the ultimate instruments of God, but provisional tools in the steady hand of providence, destined to be superseded by “the coming church of the Spirit, when the history of salvation has reached its plenitude” (MH 151). On the Donatist schism, see Augustine, *De Baptismo contra Donatistas libri septem*, URL: [https://www.augustinus.it/latino/sul\\_battesimo/index.htm](https://www.augustinus.it/latino/sul_battesimo/index.htm). For Voegelin’s remarks, see Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 107-132. McGinn finds Voegelin’s judgment that Joachim was an anti-Augustinian plausible but—rightly, in my view—doubts Voegelin’s corollary claim (*The New Science of Politics*, 113-114), that millenarian movements like Joachimism and gnosticism are at the heart of modern totalitarianisms, such as Nazism and Stalinism (McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 2). Voegelin appears to have picked up the idea from none other than Löwith; see MH 159.

Löwith himself, at the very outset of his chapter on Joachim, uses the language of supersession to describe Joachim's prophetic revolution:

What matters for the understanding of history is Joachim's revolutionary attempt to delineate a new scheme of epochs and dispensations by which the traditional scheme of religious progress from the Old to the New Testament became extended and superseded. (MH 145)

The "traditional scheme of religious progress" to which Löwith refers is summed up in exemplary fashion in *City of God*, where Augustine avers that the figures of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New Testament.<sup>51</sup> Joachim's break with Augustine has to do neither with any quarrel over the concordance of the Old Testament with the New, nor with the fact that there are extant and as yet unfulfilled promises in the New (for Augustine admits this explicitly), but with the *historical status* of the New Testament promises and their fulfillments. Joachim assigns to the promises of the New Testament a discrete historical age.

Joachim accomplishes this not by his own powers, but by way of a revelation—about St. John's Revelation. Löwith observes that

what was revealed to Joachim was both the historical and the mystical significance of the symbols and figures of the Old and New Testaments, converging in a total picture

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<sup>51</sup> Augustine: "These facts [i.e., the persons and events of the Old Testament—here the historically reality of the Flood] are so established that not even the most obdurate will dare to deny that deeper than the written record is its purpose; or that the facts have a meaning; or that the symbolical words have a basis in fact; or that there is a demonstrable relevance of the symbolism to the Church. On the contrary, such a man is bound to believe that there was a purpose in committing these facts to writing and in handing them down to future generations; that the events really took place; that what took place has a symbolic meaning; that the meaning is a foreshadowing of the Church" (CG 15.27).

of the history of salvation from beginning to end and the historical fulfillment of the Apocalypse [of John]. Developing the historical logic of the New Testament both into the past and into the future, [Joachim] finally understood the secret meaning of all its personages, figures, and animals as strictly significant, that is, as signifying definite persons and events of the actual history which to his religious understanding was nothing else than sacred history in terms of secular history. Once the key was found which, through typological and allegorical interpretation, opened the enigmatic meaning of all successive pictures and events, a final and comprehensive understanding of history was made available. (MH 147)

In a note to this passage, Löwith refers to the judgment of the Christian theologian Franz Overbeck that—here I quote Löwith quoting Overbeck—“the allegorical interpretation of scripture ‘is theology itself’” (MH 244, n.4). Here the question of the relation between *allegoria* and *figura* again raises its head (see my discussion of this problem above, §§9-10). In spite of his usage of the word ‘allegory,’ Löwith makes clear that what is at stake for Joachim—and, in Overbeck’s estimation, for Christian theology *tout court*—is not allegorical interpretation in the sense given it by Origen, but the figural sense given it by Tertullian.

The necessity of allegorical interpretation, in the widest sense, depends ultimately on the fact that the basis of the Christian doctrine and of the church is a *historical* document which has to be ‘interpreted’ spiritually in order to prove its *truth*. Substituting for history and truth the more fashionable distinction between facts and values does not solve the problem of their relations. It only dissolves definite scriptural meanings into indefinite ‘spiritual values,’ which may be found anywhere.” (MH 244, n.4, emphasis in original)



These lines might have been penned by Auerbach.

What matters for our purposes is that Joachim's "spiritual interpretation" has much more in common with Tertullian's hermeneutical protocols than with Origen's. The spiritual is not the contrary of the literal but the truth of the literal. One does not leave the 'body' behind in order to ascend to the spirit, the moral, or the sublime. Both the spiritual and the literal are historically true: the spiritual in full, the literal in part and for its part. Joachim's vision of a new, spiritual age of history is not a vision of celestial or otherworldly life; it is, quite explicitly, a vision of the unity of spiritual and material activity in monastic life. Joachim's investigation of the concordances between the Old Testament and the New is not, as Löwith himself admits, absolutely novel anyway. Löwith remarks that Joachim simply develops "a coherent application of the traditional patristic exegesis" (MH 150). The novelty, in Löwith's estimation, is that Joachim's exegesis

served Joachim's amazingly fertile imagination not for static—i.e., moral and dogmatic—purposes but for a dynamic understanding of revelation through an essential correlation between Scripture and history and between their respective interpretations. [...] Granted that history *is* a history of salvation and that the history of the church is its pattern, then the only fitting key to its religious understanding must be the Sacred Scriptures, the concordance of which proves to Joachim not an absolute doctrine but the meaningful structure of a historical process. (MH 150, emphasis in original)

And yet, that history is a history of salvation it is precisely what Löwith will not grant, neither in his own right, nor on behalf of the Christian narrative woven by his book. A

‘Christian history,’ Löwith avers, “is non-sense” (MH 197).<sup>52</sup>

We saw above that the principle of Löwith’s complaint is emblazoned in the title of his book: the trouble begins when Christians attempt to locate—or worse, produce—the meaning of history in history itself. We might say something similar of the German version of the work, whose title reads: *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*.<sup>53</sup> Here, the problem is condensed in the conjunction *und* rather than in the preposition *in*. The *und* is, and must be, a disjunctive conjunction, holding its terms apart from one another, for the substance of their relation is naught but the infinite distinction between time and eternity.

#### §24 Time and Eternity

That secular history and salvation history are, and must be, separated by the same—or strictly analogous—gulf as separates time and eternity is one of the central arguments of Augustine’s *City of God Against the Pagans*. Secular history is the history of the world, salvation history the history of faith. Since the world was created not *in* time, but with time—at the same time as time—its history is temporal and, unlike the eternal power and glory of the mind of God, subject to change (CG 11.6; cf. C 11.12-15). For that reason, the distinction between secular history and salvation history is beset by the same metaphysical, theological,

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<sup>52</sup> Löwith: “What really begins with the appearance of Jesus Christ is not a new epoch of secular history, called ‘Christian,’ but the beginning of an end. The Christian times are Christian only in so far as they are the last time. And, since the Kingdom of God is not to be realized in a continuous process of historical developments, the eschatological history of salvation also cannot impart a new and progressive meaning to the history of the world, which is fulfilled by having reached its term. The ‘meaning’ of the history of this world is *fulfilled against itself* because the story of salvation, as embodied in Jesus Christ, redeems and dismantles, as it were, the hopeless history of the world” (MH 197, my emphasis).

<sup>53</sup> The English *Meaning in History* appeared in 1949, followed by the German ‘version,’ also authored by Löwith, in 1953. Incidentally, 1953 marked the publication of the English version of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, which was preceded by its German original in 1946.

and political problems as the distinction between time and eternity is. These problems are likely inescapable, since they arise in essential relation to one of the most fundamental elements of the Christian tradition, the Incarnation. In Christian orthodoxy, the Incarnation is an indubitably and indisputably historical event. It occurred at a specific time, in a specific place, among a specific people, for a specific reason. The Incarnation ‘occurs’ not merely in time but in the fullness of time; it gives time its term (finitude) and history its reason (redemption). Yet, the Incarnation is also indubitably and indisputably the entry of eternity into time and the eternal sign of the presence of God in history.

Since the ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325 CE, Christian orthodoxy concerning the christological elements of the doctrine of the trinity has affirmed not only the divinity of the Christ, but has insisted that the Christ is the Son, consubstantial with the Father.<sup>54</sup> Jesus the Christ is temporal and eternal both. Inasmuch as the life of the church is the repetition of, and participation in, the life-through-death of the Christ, the church, too, is both temporal and eternal. That the church is, so to speak, stuck in history thus raises the question that burns in the heart of every thinking Christian, from Augustine to Schmitt: what, if any, is the properly historical role of the church in history?<sup>55</sup> We saw above (§§18-19) that, because it emerged

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<sup>54</sup> The literature on the christological controversy is vast. Accessible introductions to the topic can be found in Jaroslav Pelican, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 172-277; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Revised Edition (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 125-151, 192-212. See also Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 53-64.

<sup>55</sup> In *The Nomos of the Earth*, Carl Schmitt claims that he does 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 of the German kings” (Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (Telos Press, 2003), 60). While he admits that “the empire of the Christian Middle Ages lasted only as long as the idea of the *katechon* was alive” (*Nomos*, 60), Schmitt finds the signs of a katechontic afterlife in a number of literary and

from the apocalyptic traditions of the Second Temple period, the Christian tradition has long found itself in the paradoxical position of proclaiming and anxiously awaiting the end of all things, while, at the same time, praying that that very end will be continually delayed, so that the truth of the gospel might spread to every corner of the earth. We saw, too (§23), that Joachim's radical extension of the figural interpretation of scripture led him to 'historicize' the church in a way that threatened the church's role as the sacramental agent of the conversion of history into salvation history, and, by consequence, endangered its doctrinal and ecclesial claims upon the truth of the gospel.

As Löwith puts it, the trouble with Joachim (or 'Joachimism,' especially as it was developed in Franciscan spiritual life) was that the finality of the Christ, and the corresponding finality of the church's mandate, was compromised. In the conclusion to the Joachim chapter, Löwith writes that,

with Augustine and Thomas, the Christian truth rests, *once and for all*, on certain

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philosophical figures, such as Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor and the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. For Schmitt, the katechon remains a living, and essential, political concept. Consider the following passage from Schmitt's posthumous *Glossarium*, where the Grand Inquisitor and Hobbes are invoked as katechontic avatars: "The most important sentence of Hobbes remains: Jesus is the Christ. The power of such a sentence also works even if it is pushed to the margins of a conceptual system of an intellectual structure, even if it is apparently pushed outside the conceptual circle. This deportation is analogous to the domestication of Christ undertaken by Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. Hobbes expresses and grounds scientifically what Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor does: to neutralize the effect of Christ in the social and political sphere; to de-anarchize Christianity, while leaving it at the same time as a kind of legitimating effect and in any case not to do without it. A clever tactician gives up nothing so long as it is not completely useless. Christianity was not yet spent" (Carl Schmitt, quoted in Tracy Strong, "Foreword [2008]," in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, trans. George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein [Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008], xxiv). Another, more lapidary, statement, which can also be found in Schmitt's *Glossarium*, sums up Schmitt's apocalyptic attunement: "I believe in the katechon: it is for me the only possible way to understand Christian history and to find it meaningful" (Carl Schmitt, quoted in Calvin Dieter Ullrich, "Carl Schmitt: Katechon," *Critical Legal Terms*, July, 2018. URL: <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2018/07/03/carl-schmitt-katechon/>).

historical facts; with Joachim the truth itself has an open horizon and a history which is essential to it. [...] To Augustine the Christian truth is revealed in one single event, to Joachim in a succession of dispensations (MH 156, my emphasis).

Löwith reiterates this point in the Augustine chapter: “Augustine’s faith does not need any historical elaboration because the historical process as such can never establish and absorb the central mystery of the Incarnation” (MH 166). In this regard, it is worth noting that Löwith’s chapter on Augustine begins not with a summary of Augustine’s theology of history but with a brief account of Augustine’s refutation—on practical and moral, rather than theoretical, grounds— of the classical pagan doctrine of the eternity (and the eternal cycles) of the world (MH 160-166).<sup>56</sup> This is significant for our understanding of Löwith’s argument, for his declension narrative depends on Augustine’s status as the canonical theologian of history.

I have more than once remarked on the mode of presentation of *Meaning in History*, which regresses from the ‘fully secularized’ historical work of Burkhardt to Augustine. Strictly speaking, the book regresses still further, from Augustine to Orosius, and from Orosius to the so-called biblical view of history, but the chapter on Augustine is quite clearly the end (viz. the goal) of the argument. Now that our inquiry into Löwith’s inquiry has reached that end, it is worth reflecting on the basically teleological character of Löwith’s book, for a historical—or historiographical—regression, by its nature, necessarily seeks to

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<sup>56</sup> Löwith: “[Augustine’s] final argument about the classical concept of time is, therefore, a moral one: the pagan doctrine is hopeless, for hope and faith are essentially related to the future and a real future cannot exist if past and future times are equal phases within a cyclic recurrence without beginning and end” (MH 163). Cf. McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 62-65, who argues that “the brilliant analysis of the meaning of time in the eleventh book of the *Confessions* is the key to Augustine’s theology of history” (62). I return to McGinn—and to *Confessions*—just below.

return to its origin. The origin is the goal. On the one hand, every scholarly argument worth its salt is teleological in the sense that it seeks to demonstrate something; the conventions of academic writing even demand that the goal should be announced and described from the outset. The demonstration or account (i.e., the argument) is a matter of ‘settling the account’ by paying the balance incurred by the question or problem.

On the other hand, Löwith’s account seems to aim at leveraging, so to speak, the balance of another, in order to pay down his own debt. It is difficult to avoid the impression that Löwith, even if he refuses the possibility of affirming—much less returning to—the Augustinian theology of history, has nonetheless mounted a thoroughly Augustinian defense of the Christian view of the world and its history, therefore of the distinction between time and eternity and, in turn, the shape of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. One might be tempted to say that Löwith gives Augustine too much credit, but it seems to me that Löwith is not crediting Augustine so much as calling on Augustine’s credit. In other words, Löwith’s account is indebted, not accidentally but essentially, to Augustine. Without the pivotal reference to Augustine’s principled indifference to the worldly vicissitudes of secular history, Löwith’s declension narrative would have nothing from which to chart the decline it laments.<sup>57</sup>

In Augustine’s *City of God*, the eschaton is the supra-historical counterpart of the supra-historical act of creation. As for history, it is only an interim

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<sup>57</sup> For his part, Löwith accuses modernity of holding bad debt, owed to two creditors—or masters—with competing and irreconcilable interests: “Modern man is still living on the capital of the cross *and* the circle, of Christianity and antiquity; and the intellectual history of Western man is a continuous attempt to reconcile the one with the other, revelation with reason” (MH 165, emphasis in original). In other words, the modern west can but borrow from the one against the other, and from the other against the one.

between the past disclosure of its sacred meaning and its future fulfillment. Only within this perspective of a decisive *Heilsgeschehen* does profane history enter at all into the viewpoint of Augustine. Accordingly, only four books out of twenty-two [of *City of God*] deal in part with what we would call ‘history,’ the meaning of which depends on the prehistory and post history in heaven, on the transcendent beginning and end. Only by this reference to an absolute beginning and end has history as a whole a meaning. On the other hand, beginning and end are also not meaningful in themselves but with reference to the story which they begin and end, and the central happening of this history is Jesus Christ’s advent, the eschatological event. (MH 168-169)

The central conflict depicted in the *City of God* is the conflict between the titular *civitas Dei* and its antagonist, the *civitas Terrena*, the City of Man. As far as human history is concerned, the citizens of the City of God are but pilgrims (*peregrina*) sojourning in the City of Man (CG 18.1).<sup>58</sup> Thus, the two ‘cities’ are “not identical with the visible church and the state but are two mystical societies constituted by two opposed species of man” (MH 169). The City of God is not a potentiality to be actualized in history, as someone of a more apocalyptic persuasion might argue. The historical and worldly existence of the Christian church is only a “representative signification” (that is, a *figura*) of the “true, transhistorical city” (MH 166). For Augustine, the only historical task that falls to the church is to spread the truth of the gospel, for that truth is established and final.

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<sup>58</sup> For an excellent reading of the Augustinian theme of *peregrinatio* in *City of God* as a theology of migrancy, wherein the City of God is reimagined as the Camp of God, see Sean Hannan, “The Camp of God: Reimagining Pilgrimage as Migrancy in Augustine’s *City of God* 1,” *Political Theology* (2020), DOI:10.1080/1462317X.2020.1840036.

Löwith remarks that Augustine is thus content to leave the writing of secular history to Eusebius (MH 166). This is true enough; Augustine hews more or less to the Eusebian scheme of history (CG 11-18), and claims he does not intend to be, nor to become, a historian (CG 3.18). Yet, as McGinn points out, the profundity of Augustine's theology of history is reflected in the fact that he ultimately staked out a position at loggerheads with the nominally progressive and pro-imperial Eusebian historiography.<sup>59</sup> That is to say, Augustine attributes neither to Rome, nor to its sacking in 410, any special role in the history of salvation (for empires rise and fall, as does everything temporal and historical), but salvation 'proceeds' in a way that is visible to God alone; for, as the Christ advises (Matthew 6:4), God sees in secret and God's rewards are awarded in and through a secret history.<sup>60</sup> *City of God* is, at first glance, a defense of the Christian faith against the complaint of Augustine's contemporaries that God had failed to protect Rome from the Goths, but it is more profoundly a vindication of God's omnipotence and goodness, in relation to which Rome—come what may—is but a leaf on the wind of providence. McGinn rightly notes that, while his views on theology of history shifted over the course of his career, Augustine "was fundamentally interested not so much in history as in *historicity*, not so much in the unrolling of the world process as in the

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<sup>59</sup> McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 63-64. Löwith, too, recognizes this (MH 168, 171, 178), though without developing at any length the stark contrast that developed between Augustine and Eusebius.

<sup>60</sup> McGinn: "History unfolds itself in linear progression across six ages, but to look for progress in the events of this observable history is useless: the progress that does exist in the building up of the *civitas Dei* is visible to God alone (*The Calabrian Abbot*, 64). See also R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970): "since the coming of Christ until the end of the world, all history is homogeneous, [and] cannot be mapped out in terms of a pattern drawn from sacred history, [and] not cannot contain decisive turning points endowed with a significance in sacred history" (20-21). On "the history of God and of the name of God as the history of secrecy," see Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 108 and passim.



*theological significance of temporality* both in the particular and in the general instances.”<sup>61</sup>

Here, the ‘particular instance’ to which McGinn refers is Augustine’s own life, related in *Confessions*; the ‘general instance’ is the collective, but still individual, lives of human beings in history, related in *City of God*. In Book 18, Chapter 2 of the latter, Augustine reflects on the relation between the general and the particular, a relation secured by the common—that is, fallen—nature of humanity:

The society of mortals, then, was diffused throughout all lands; and despite all diversity of place, was linked by a kind of fellowship of common nature, even though each section of mankind pursued devices and desires [*cupiditates*] of its own. In this condition, not everyone, and perhaps no one, completely attains what he desires, because not all men seek the same end; and so mankind everywhere is generally divided against itself, and when one part is the stronger, it oppresses another. (CG 18.2)

Thus, the general shape of history is a reflection of the generality of *the particular predicament* in which each person, subject to endless dissatisfaction in their pursuits of temporal pleasures and victories, finds herself. Human society and history, taken as a whole, are characterized by a state of permanent civil war. While it is tempting—and would not be wholly wrong—to suggest a symptomatic reading of Augustine’s famous account of the divided self as a metaphorical reflection of the violent divisions and conflicts in society and history, Augustine himself suggests the contrary: it is the transience of history that reflects the wretched temporal condition of the self.

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<sup>61</sup> McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 62. My emphases.

For Augustine, history is a *distraction* in a double sense. It is, first, a distraction in the colloquial sense of something that diverts one's attention, such as the sound of birdsong (or, for that matter, a jackhammer) that tears one away from writing one's dissertation. It is a distraction in a second—and more important—sense that Augustine develops in *Confessions*, where *distractio* designates the condition of fallen humanity in which the soul, having torn itself away from God, is also torn apart from itself (C 8.8-10). History is thus the external 'object-cause' of distraction (the jackhammer—or, for that matter, the lures of the world as such) because it is the product of fallen human temporality, which measures time not objectively and externally (for time "is not the movement of a body" [C 11.24]) but mentally and internally (for time is measured in and through the mind [C 11.27-28]). For Augustine, "history is the product of the attention (*intentio*) of the soul, on the one hand remembering its past, and on the other awaiting its future."<sup>62</sup> Rather than focusing on the shape and succession of world history, let alone intervening therein, Augustine recommends that Christians focus on what produces the temptation to distraction in the first place, namely, the order—or, in this case, the disorder—of their loves. Because the only object worthy of love is God (OCD 1.22), and because God is "outside time in eternity" (C 11.1), every love of anything temporal must necessarily disappoint.<sup>63</sup> Augustine affirms unequivocally that each event of, and every person in, the whole history of the world are in God's hands (CG 18.2);

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<sup>62</sup> McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 63. My emphasis. See C 11.29: "I see now that my life has been wasted in distractions, but your right hand has supported me in the person of Christ my Lord, the Son of man, who is the Mediator between you, who are one, and men, who are many. [...] I look forward, not to what lies ahead of me in this life and will surely pass away, but to my eternal goal. I am intent upon this one purpose, not distracted by other aims, and with this goal in view I press on, eager for the prize, God's heavenly summons. Then I shall listen to the sound of your praises and gaze at your beauty ever present, never future, never past."

<sup>63</sup> See my discussion of Augustine's doctrine of *caritas* above (§6).

to concern oneself with, much less exert oneself upon, the social and political course of history is to mistake the transience of historical life for the truth of Christian life, which is destined for eternity.<sup>64</sup>

McGinn provides a helpful comparison between Augustine's view of the meaning of temporality (and the history it generates) for Christians and the meaning of temporality in the Neoplatonic tradition, which Augustine draws on and criticizes.

For Augustine, though time marks the distance between creator and creature, it is only *in* and *through* decisions made in the temporal realm that humanity can be saved. History is the arena of conversion and damnation, the victory of the *athleta Christi* (*Conf.* 8:6-7), or the defeat of one who becomes to himself a *regio egestatis* (*Conf.* 2:10). Christ's intervention in history had demonstrated that the road to enjoyment of God lay not in flight from temporality, as the Neoplatonists had it, but in the full actualization of human temporality in the process of conversion.<sup>65</sup>

Hence the significance of the *City of God*, which generalizes the account of the particular contest undertaken by every individual soul and recognizes that

the temporality not only of an individual soul but of all souls is the field of God's

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<sup>64</sup> Augustine: "If [life] is loved as it deserves to be loved—for a man cannot be happy if he does not love his life as it deserves—he so loves it must necessarily wish it to be eternal. Life, therefore, will only be truly happy when it is eternal" (CG 14.25). Cf. Löwith's commentary on the "only progress" that is legible from the Christian point of view: the sharpening distinction between belief and unbelief (MH 172).

<sup>65</sup> McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 63. For the Plotinian theory of time, see Plotinus, *The Enneads*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, trans. George Boy-Stones, John M. Dillon, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.7.7-13. On Augustine and Neoplatonism, see Jean Guitton, *Le Temps et l'éternité: chez Plotin et saint Augustin* (Paris, 1971).

action. ‘Two loves built two cities’ in the bishop’s famous phrase, and since these loves are instantiated in myriad individuals throughout history’s six ages, the inner story of love becomes the meaning of all history.<sup>66</sup>

Hence, too, Löwith’s judgment that Augustine’s “central theme and concern is the eschatological history of faith, which is, as it were, a *secret history within history*, subterranean and invisible to those who have not the eyes of faith” (MH 171-172, my emphasis).<sup>67</sup> The decision to convert is taken temporally—that is, somewhere in the span of a human life on earth—and its consequences play out in time and history, but the *meaning* of conversion is ultimate and eternal, beyond time. The meaning of history is to be read not in its cathedrals and palace halls, nor in the records of their temporal ebb and flow, but in the hiddenness of the human heart, where eternity—in the prophetic fullness of its Christic emptying—spills into time.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot*, 63. See CG 14.28: “Two cities, then, have been created by two loves: that is, the earthly by love of self extending even to contempt of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending to contempt of self. The one, therefore, glories in itself, the other in the Lord; the one seeks glory from men, the other finds its highest glory in God, the Witness of our conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, ‘Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head.’” Cf. CG 18.54: “Both cities alike make use of the good things, or are afflicted with the evils, of this temporal state; but they do so with a different faith, a different hope, different love, until they are separated by the final judgment, and each receives its own end, to which there is no end.”

<sup>67</sup> In other words, Augustine is concerned not with the ‘surface’ of history, but with its depths. And yet, those very depths—the Christian depths, so to speak—are not Christian at all. They are Jewish. See my discussion of the depths (§16) and the supersession of the Jewish symptom by the Christian ‘cure’ (§§18-19) above.

<sup>68</sup> On the theme of *kenosis*, in which time is fulfilled in the Christ’s self-emptying, see Goggin, “Hegel’s Sacrificial Imagination,” and Alex Dubilet, *The Self-Emptying Subject: Kenosis and Immanence, Medieval to Modern* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). The classic biblical reference is Phillipians 2:7. On the theme of the heart, see C 9.4, where Augustine writes: “The good which I now sought was not outside myself. [...] But in was *in my inmost heart*, where I had grown angry with myself, where I had been stung with remorse, where I had slain my old self and offered it in sacrifice, where I had first purposed to renew my life and had placed my hope in you, it was there that you had begun to make me love you and had made me glad at heart. It was my eyes that read

We remarked at the outset of this section that the gulf between secular history and salvation history is analogous to the gulf between time and eternity. In Augustine, the history of salvation is measured neither in, nor through, time; its decisions and accumulations are registered by the eternal repose of the heart in God. By contrast, secular history is time's symptom; it 'arises' and 'occurs' by dint of the distention of the human mind and the distortions of human desire. Hidden as it is in the depths of the heart, the surge of eternity into time is necessarily invisible. History is eternity's obscurity, not its clarification. And yet, eternity was once visible, once and once only, in the historical appearance of its truth in time: in the Incarnation.

Already in Augustine's time, the Christian tradition had affirmed unreservedly that the historical appearance of the Christ was not a matter of mere appearance. Against the Docetic heresy, according to which the Christ was a spirit or a specter who only appeared to be human, orthodoxy established that the Christ was a historically real person of flesh and blood, who lived and died truly (and was truly resurrected). This implies, or rather, it confirms, that the Incarnation has a history. That history is not only a personal history, but a secular history, charted by names and generations ("according to the flesh," remarks Augustine [CG. 15.15]), according to which one can say in good faith that Jesus the Christ is "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1, NRSV). The New Testament, such as it is, commences with a genealogy of the historical appearance of eternity in time. As Augustine notes, the Matthean genealogy is selective, retaining only those names that led from Abraham to David and from David to Jesus of Nazareth, who is Matthew's "intended

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these words *but my soul that knew their meaning*. They brought a cry to my lips and I wished no more for the manifold riches of this earth, things on which I should lose time, only to be lost in time myself. For in eternity, which is one alone, I had other corn and wine and oil" (my emphasis).

goal [*quo intenderat*]” (CG 15.15). Sacred and secular history converge in the person of the Christ.

And yet, the very fact that it leads to—and, in fact, gives birth to—the Incarnation, means that this secular history is not wholly secular, for it is the history of a sacred people. It is the history of their calling and their covenant, of their exiles and their returns, of their poetry and their prophecy. The sacred history of the Incarnation—the secular history, so to speak, of eternity—is the history of the Jews.

### §25 The History of Christianity

Near the end of his chapter on Augustine, Löwith remarks on the convergence of sacred and secular history, visible only to the “eyes of faith.”<sup>69</sup> In such a vision, “the whole historical process of sacred and secular history appears as a preordained *ordinatio Dei*” (MH 170).

Hence the whole scheme of Augustine’s work serves the purpose of vindicating God in history. Yet history remains definitely distinct from God, who is not a Hegelian god in history but the Lord of history. God’s dealing in history is beyond our disposal, and his providence (like Hegel’s ‘cunning of reason’) overrules the intentions of men. (MH 170)

Because he is intent upon highlighting as starkly as possible the distinction between Hegel’s and Augustine’s views on progress in (and through) history, Löwith is, here, compelled to

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<sup>69</sup> Löwith seems to have taken this expression, which appears throughout *Meaning and History* from Paul S. Minear, *Eyes of Faith: A Study in the Biblical Point of View* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1966 [first published 1946]).

bring them into a paradoxically intimate proximity. For Augustine, providence is “deep,” “hidden,” “secret,” and “unsearchable;” its cause is everywhere hidden (CG 1.28, 7.35, 8.25, 12.28). In Hegel, providence is the religious representation (*Vorstellung*) of the cunning of reason (*List der Vernunft*), which, like providence, works secretly, behind the scenes. Yet, for Hegel, the fact that providence is revealed to be the ruse of *reason* means that its reasons are not, or are no longer, inaccessible to rational inquiry. In Löwith’s view, Augustine and Hegel are united in their belief that God/reason is the hidden hand behind history, but they diverge when it comes to what knowledge can ultimately be attained thereof. They also diverge in several other—though all closely related—respects.

Throughout *Meaning in History*, Löwith returns repeatedly to Hegel’s claim that “the history of the world is the world’s court of justice” (*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*) (e.g., MH 12, 58, 170) which, Löwith never fails to remind us, has its true origins in the “prophetic view of the Old Testament” (MH 12).<sup>70</sup> In his chapter on Hegel, again in the context of the equation of *Weltgeschichte* und *Weltgericht*, Löwith writes that, because Hegel “transposed the Christian expectation of a final consummation into the historical process as such, he saw the world’s history as consummating itself” (MH 58). Here, Löwith says nothing about the ‘Old Testament origins’ of the idea. He is rather focused—not without reason—on the way that Hegel secularizes the specifically *Christian* doctrines of providence, history, and eschatology.<sup>71</sup> Löwith’s gloss is instructive:

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §340ff.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. MH 209 regarding Hegel, “who transformed the Christian religion into philosophy, an enterprise which can be interpreted (simply by quoting from Hegel) in two opposite ways: as an attack upon the Christian religion, though still in terms of theology, or as an apology, though in terms of philosophy.” Löwith’s footnote (MH 255, n.3) refers the reader to his *Von Hegel bis Nietzsche* (New York and Zurich: Europa Verlag, 1941), pp. 53ff, 219ff, 447ff. See, too, Löwith’s essay, “Hegel and the Christian Religion,” in Karl Löwith, *Nature, History, and Existentialism* (Evanston:

As the realization of the spirit of Christianity, the history of the world is the true theodicy, the justification of God in history. With this secularization of the Christian faith, or, as Hegel would say, with this realization of Spirit, Hegel believed himself loyal to the genius of Christianity by realizing the Kingdom of God on earth. (MH 57-58)

Both Hegel and Augustine are concerned with God's providence and its vindication, but where the latter is content to leave that vindication to its inscrutability and ultimacy (i.e., to its eschatological transcendence), the former is determined to make it plain and—into the bargain—profane.

In this regard, it is worth comparing Löwith's gloss of Augustine's view of *Weltgericht* (which follows directly upon the passage cited at the outset of this section):

It is, in particular, *the historical destiny of the Jews* which reveals to Augustine the history of the world as a court of justice and thereby the meaningfulness of purposeful history.<sup>72</sup> This does not mean that we are able by our own wisdom to judge the deserts of earthly kingdoms, which God gives to both pious and impious men. We can discern only *fragments of meaning*—those that God pleases to manifest to us. History is a *divinely appointed pedagogy*, operating mainly through suffering. (MH 170, my emphases)

I have emphasized three elements in the passage just cited. I have done so because they

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Northwestern University Press, 1966).

<sup>72</sup> In the endnote (MH 249, n.21) to this sentence, Löwith adduces CG 4.34; 5.12, 18, 21; 16.43; 17.16; and 18.45ff.



illustrate the peculiarity of the Augustinian concept of history and the difference, drawn by Löwith, between Augustine and Hegel. They also demonstrate, with startling clarity, the special significance of the logic of supersession in the history of Christianity and its afterlives. Let us consider them in reverse order.

The theme of history as the experience of—and interpretation of—suffering pervades *Meaning in History*.<sup>73</sup> What is interesting about Löwith's remarks on Augustine is that the idea that history is a history of suffering is formulated as a matter of *pedagogy*. History is construed as the record—indeed, the real process—of the education, or tutelage, of God's people. While Löwith does not, in this instance, refer to St. Paul, we would do well to recall, once again, the passage from the first epistle to the church at Corinth, in which the whole problem of supersession is condensed (see §20), and which Augustine cites as scriptural precedent for the three-fold structure of figural prophecy (see §11). Paul writes: “Now, these things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11, NRSV). The term that the NRSV translates with the verb ‘to instruct’ is the Greek noun *nouthesia*, which denotes an admonition or a warning. The term also appears in the letter to the Ephesians, where it is deployed in an explicitly pedagogical context. Paul is advising the church at Ephesus on matters of economy: “And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction [*paideia kai nouthesia*] of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4, NRSV).<sup>74</sup> In Löwith's gloss of Augustine, the historical pedagogy in question is

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<sup>73</sup> See, again, Styfhals, “Evil in History.”

<sup>74</sup> *Nouthesia* is likely derived from *nous* (mind or intellect), itself likely derived from the base of the verb *ginōskō* (to learn, to know, to perceive).

unquestionably the prerogative of God, whose providence furnishes the faithful with fragments of the meaning of history.

Those fragments of meaning are found pre-eminently in the *figurae* of the Old Testament and their corresponding fulfillments in the New Testament. Here again, 1 Corinthians 10:11 is a key textual lens with which to interpret the exegetical and hermeneutical approach taken by Augustine toward the end of discerning the meaning of history. The word that the NRSV renders as “example” is *typikos*, an adverbial inflection of *typos*, whose Latin theological equivalent is *figura*. As we saw above (§11), Auerbach explains that the figures

point to something that is to be interpreted, and which will of course be fulfilled in the concrete future, but also to something that is also already fulfilled in God’s Providence, where no temporal difference exists. This eternity is already figured in the figures, so to speak. They are thus simultaneously provisional fragments of reality and part of a veiled reality for all time. (SE 101)

The latter half of Book 18 of Augustine’s *City of God* (Chapters 27-46) is devoted to the examination of the various prophecies found in the Hebrew prophets, culminating with the birth of the Christ and the scattering of the Jews. Not just the external unfolding of history but the historicity of the church—the historical mandate of its eternal witness to the truth of the gospel—is dependent on those fragments of meaning, which are providentially gathered together as if by a gravitational field whose principle is prophecy (i.e., the vertical).

The Jewish diaspora, Augustine tells us, is prophesied in the Psalms; its central relevance to the history of salvation is confirmed by Paul in his epistle to the Romans (Psalm 59:10ff; Romans 11:11). This is significant, because *even the diaspora* is not a mere afterthought in the history of salvation, but is rather essential to it.

Even though they have been conquered and oppressed by the Romans, the Jews have not entirely perished: lest they forget the Law of God and so fail to bear witness of the kind of which we are here speaking. [...] For if that testimony of the Scriptures existed only in the Jews' own land, and not everywhere, then, clearly, the Church, which is everywhere, would not have it to bear witness in all nations to the prophecies which were given long ago concerning Christ. (CG 18.46)

Augustine, like Tertullian, is pre-eminently interested in the prophetic matrix generated by the figures Old Testament and their fulfillments in the New Testament. The content of that prophetic matrix is the only real content of sacred history. All else is spurious happenstance. Unlike Joachim, Augustine is reluctant to draw prophetic inferences from scripture about his own time; the church has everything—and is everything—that it needs in order to be what it is.<sup>75</sup> If there are figures in the New Testament, they point not to concrete historical persons and events in the future, but to heavenly realities that will be realized in the eschaton, which will necessarily arrive from outside of history.

Löwith sums up the Augustinian perspective as follows:

Seen in the light of the faith that God revealed in the historical man, Jesus Christ, the profane events before and after Christ are not a solid chain of meaningful successions but spurious happenings whose significance or insignificance is to be judged in the perspective of their possible signification of judgment and salvation. The historical

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<sup>75</sup> McGinn 63: “Convinced as he is that he is living in the last age, he finds no need to try to specify rather subdivisions within this period, nor to draw parallels between the times of the Old and the New Testaments.” McGinn adduces CG 18.52, where Augustine appears to be criticizing his disciple, Orosius.

interest and outlook of the Old and New Testaments is definitely limited by being concentrated upon a few outstanding persons and events, which are related by providence to the dogmatic history of salvation as the only history of relevance and significance. (MH 184-185)

And yet, as we have just seen in *City of God* (18.46), the referent of the *historical destiny of the Jews* (to which Löwith refers in the passage upon which we have been meditating) is not, in fact, limited to the span of time that, beginning with the creation of the world and counting down to the birth of the Christ, is designated as B.C., ‘before Christ.’ The historical perdurance of the Jews, their continued suffering in diaspora, is, for Augustine, not only the proof of the truth of the Christian faith but one of the conditions of possibility for its universal expansion. The *history* of Christianity has no empirical content other than that of the history of the Jews, who, as “living witnesses” to the prophetic character of history, are figures whose fulfillment has already borne its fruit.<sup>76</sup> The history of the Jews *anno Domini* is

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<sup>76</sup> On the Christian tradition of understanding the Jews as “living witnesses,” see Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*.; esp. Chs. 11-12, pp. 260-352. Throughout the work, Fredriksen argues that the Jews appear in Augustine’s work as ‘rhetorical Jews,’ and that Augustine himself had very little contact with living Jews; the upshot is that Augustine’s deployment of Psalm 59:12 (“Slay them not...”) in CG 18.46, and especially in *Contra Faustum*, signals that Augustine’s doctrine of Jewish witness amounts a defense of Jews and Judaism, rather than their condemnation. This assessment seems to be at odds with Augustine’s insistence on the historical reality of the Jews and the supersessionist demands of the figural interpretation of Jewish scripture. On this tension in Fredriksen’s reading, as well as the difficulties involved in aiming to “disengage” Augustine “from the repudiation of the Jews that many have understood as inherent in classical Christianity,” see the critical review essay by Jeremy Cohen, “Revisiting Augustine’s Doctrine of Jewish Witness,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (2009-10), pp. 564-578. In my view, Fredriksen’s book is a fine example of the way that attempts to overcome or dissolve the logic of supersession—by way of a qualified, Christian philosemitism—still make shipwreck on the shores of the conceptual demands of the figural-historical of Jewish scripture and Jewish history, since the Jews are included in the history of salvation but not privy to it. See also Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: The University of California Press, 1999), where the author treats the medieval conception of the ‘hermeneutical Jew,’ a idea closely akin to that pursued in the present study. See also Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and*

an anachronism, pointing backward, rather than forward, to the Christ, who is not (as in Marcion) a superaddition to the history of the Jews, but is the fulfillment of the history of the Jews. The Christ was ever already the ‘point’ of Jewish history. The anachronicity of the Jews is essential for the constitution of Christianity, be it the anachronicity of the *figurae* or the anachronicity of the rabbis who, in and through their denial that Jesus is the Christ, testify to their own supersession, just as the prophets prophesied they would.<sup>77</sup> In other words, from Augustine’s point of view, the history of Christianity is not just inseparable or unthinkable apart from the history of the Jews. It *is* the history of the Jews.

It might be objected that Christianity does—clearly, obviously, and undeniably—have a history of its own. Indeed, it might be objected that its history is the most consequential of all histories, not limited to the history of the West but which, by way of its *mondialatinization*, extends to every corner of the globe. Nevertheless, this is not what Löwith says (nor what he says that Augustine says). That one can write a history of Christianity that recounts its origins, its imperial adoption, its councils, its textual and hermeneutical advances and retreats, its colonial conquests, is only to say that Christianity can be chronicled or historicized. The objection does not touch what is most significant, namely, that, in its own terms, the Christian construal of salvation history is a cure for secular history: all that really matters is the matter of one’s faith in the Christ, who makes secular history what it is, namely, the real, and really historical, symptom of the heart’s turning—the secular sign of a sacred change.

Now that we have worked our way through Löwith’s argument, we are better positioned

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*Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>77</sup> See CG 18:46 and my discussion of the passage above (§6).

to revisit and reinterpret Löwith's claims that "Christians are not a historical people" and that "a 'Christian history' is non-sense" (MH 195, 197). It is worth noting that these claims appear in the conclusion to Löwith's book. By comparison to the regressive, historically indexed chapters that precede it, the conclusion, much like the preface and introduction, is written predominantly in Löwith's own voice.<sup>78</sup> It is significant that he strikes something of a 'historicist' note in his otherwise 'intellectual' history of the secularization of providence in the modern idea of progress. He points to the French revolution and the rapid onset of industrialization in England as a "break with tradition" that produced "the revolutionary character of modern history and of our modern history and of our modern historical thinking" (MH 193-194). The upshot of those events is a distinctively modern mood in which historical changes are "all and everything" (MH 194). Philosophy of history becomes a fundamental concern of the moderns—or late moderns, as it were—because they are fundamentally attuned to history as the substance of their existence. History is no longer limited to its ancient (i.e., political) and Christian (i.e., eschatological) boundaries but has become the material of scientific inquiry. Modern historical consciousness considers Christian ethics and theology as relics of its past; to interpret history (that is, to interpret itself) in Christian (i.e., in 'religious') terms would be anachronistic, retrograde, and out of step with the spirit of the age (MH 194).

Nevertheless, Löwith avers that there is "only one very particular history"—a *political* history, he specifies—that can, and perhaps must, be interpreted 'religiously,' namely, the

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<sup>78</sup> This is not to say that his voice was absent from the chapters on Bossuet, Vico, Joachim, etc. His voice frequently breaks in at the close of those chapters, typically to give voice to his complaint about the modern misappropriation of Jewish-Christian prophecy and Christian eschatology (e.g., MH 30, 59, 114, 142, 158, 172). Yet, as we've seen throughout the present chapter, Löwith's own voice often harmonizes with what he takes to be Augustine's tune.

history of the Jews.<sup>79</sup> Löwith even goes so far as to say that *only* the Jewish prophets were “radical ‘philosophers of history,’” except that they substitute for a concrete philosophy their “unshakeable faith in God’s providential purpose for his chosen people” (MH 194).

The exceptional fact of the Jewish existence could warrant a strictly religious understanding of political history, because only the Jews are a really historical people, constituted *as such* [Löwith’s emphasis] by religion, by the act of Sinaitic revelation. Hence the Jewish people could *and can* [my emphasis] indeed understand their national history and destiny religiously, as a religious-political unity. (MH 194)<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> The question of the political status of Judaism has a lengthy history. For a brief overview of the early modern and Enlightenment debates (i.e., in Spinoza, Mendelssohn, and Kant) on whether or not Judaism even qualifies as a religion, rather than an ensemble of political and legal statutes, see Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews* (University Park, Penn: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1998), 5-20.

<sup>80</sup> Remarkably, Löwith here adduces the authority of Franz Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* (trans. Barbara E. Galli [Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005]), yet Rosenzweig says something rather different than, even opposed to, Löwith’s gloss. See, for example, Rosenzweig’s comments on the eternal destiny of the Jews, whom he calls the ‘eternal’ not the ‘historical’ people: “Since teaching of the Holy Law—for the appellation Torah comprises the two, teaching and law in one—therefore lifts the people out of all temporality and historical relevance of life, it also removes its power over time. The Jewish people does not calculate the years of its own chronology. Neither the memory of its history nor the official times of its lawgivers can become its measure of time; for historical memory is a fixed point in the past that becomes more past every year by one year, but a memory always equally near, really not at all past, but eternally present; every individual is supposed to regard the Exodus out of Egypt as if he himself had also gone out, and there are no lawgivers here who renewed the law in the living course of time; even that which is perhaps a change according to the case must yet always appear as if it were already written in the eternal law and had been revealed in its Revelation. The people’s chronology thus cannot be here the calculation of its own time; for it is valid at all times, it is without time” (ibid., 323). And again: “The fact that the consciousness of the still unattained Redemption again breaks through, and because of that the thought of eternity again foams over the cup of the moment into which it just now seemed decanted and gives to the year the power to begin again from the beginning and place its beginningless and endless link properly into the long chain of times. But the people still remains the eternal people. For its temporality, this fact that the years recur, is considered only as a waiting, perhaps as a wandering, not as a growing. Growing—that would of course mean that the completion would remain still unattained for it in time, and would therefore be a disavowal of its eternity. For eternity is precisely this, that between the present moment and the completion time may no longer claim a place, but as early as in the today every future is graspable. [...] Waiting and wandering are affairs of the soul; only growing falls on

Löwith then offers a brief gloss on the history of the Jews, remarking that what is “most amazing” about that history is the fact that the strength of the faith of the Jews in God’s purposeful direction of their history “rose to a climax just when all empirical evidence was *against* it” (MH 195, emphasis in original), that is, in the ruin of Israel, at the hands of the Assyrians, and the conquest of Judah by the Babylonians.<sup>81</sup> The Jews—and *only* the Jews—are a historical people, and the very possibility of a belief in providence is dependent on their peoplehood, for “only peoples, not individuals, are a proper subject of history and only a holy people is directly related to the Lord as the Lord of history” (MH 195). It on the basis of this distinction between (historical) peoples and (unhistorical) individuals that Löwith stakes his claim that Christians are *not* a historical people. Their “solidarity” is due to their shared faith, not to the vicissitudes of their history (MH 195).<sup>82</sup> Thereupon follows Löwith’s judgment, which seems to be voiced *in his own voice*, and which demands to be analyzed in granular detail.

From the fundamentally unhistorical nature of Christianity,

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the side of the world. And the eternal people forgo precisely this growing” (ibid., 348).

<sup>81</sup> As I wrote above (§18), “prophecy is the literary form that enjoyment assumes when the symptom is maximally symptomatic, when the promise seems most unpromising.” Löwith’s description of the prophetic genre of enjoyment rhymes perfectly with Kotsko’s presentation: “When the Assyrian world power conquered the Near East, the prophets saw in the material ruin of Israel not a proof of the powerlessness of Jahveh but an indirect manifestation of his universal power. To Isaiah it was not Bel but Jehovah who triumphed in the fall of Judah. Assyria itself was but an instrument in the hands of the God of Israel, which would be discarded when his purpose was accomplished” (MH 195).

<sup>82</sup> Löwith: “Christians are not a historical people. Their solidarity all over the world is merely one of faith. In the Christian view the history of salvation is no longer bound up with a particular nation but is internationalized because it is individualized. In Christianity the history of salvation is related to the salvation of each single soul, regardless of racial, social, and political status, and the contribution of the nations to the Kingdom of God is measured by the number of the elect, not by any corporate achievement or failure” (MH 195). Note that Löwith here describes Christians almost exactly as Rosenzweig describes Jews.



it follows that the historical destiny of Christian peoples is no possible subject of a specifically Christian interpretation of political history, while the destiny of the Jews *is* a possible subject of a specifically Jewish interpretation. (MH 195, emphasis in original)

As we saw above (§21, §24), Löwith's intention seems to be to give to Jews what is due to them. They are a historical people and to them belongs the prerogative to interpret their history in the religious terms that are foundational to it. Jewish history is meaningful; it can be interpreted and even demands to be interpreted. Christians, by contrast, have no meaningful history to speak of; their secular, worldly existence is but an interim—albeit an increasingly lengthy and violent interim—between the fulfillment of history (the Christ) and the final consummation of history (the Christ's return). What is striking about this division of labor between Jews (who interpret history) and Christians (who suffer history) is that it is often contradicted outright by Löwith's own argument. For while it is certainly true that Jewish history is subject to Jewish interpretation, it is also the principal—not just 'possible' but necessary—subject of the Christian figural interpretation of history.

Löwith refers obliquely to the logic of supersession in the very next sentence:

Even if we accept the traditional thesis that the Christian church of Jews and Gentiles is *the successor of the chosen people*, the Christian church would yet remain the mystical body of Christ, distinct from the historical character of the chosen people, which is a church in itself. (MH 195-196, my emphasis)

Here, by referring again to the Augustinian distinction between the historically existing church and its true identity as the mystical body of Christ, Löwith seems to wish to distance

his reading from the parameters of the logic of supersession. The effect is rather the opposite of that intended. Löwith's Augustinian distinction highlights one of the central theological tensions in the Christian tradition; namely, that it is torn between, on the one hand, its historical truth and worldly reality and, on the other hand, its transcendent truth and un- or other-worldly destiny. This tension is already apparent in the scandal of the Incarnation. It is 'rationalized,' so to speak, in the hermeneutical enterprise of figural interpretation, which, not content to merely bear witness to the Incarnation, seeks to ground it—to prove it—in the terms provided by that "one particular history." Precisely because what is 'political' in Jewish history is naught but the providential will of the Lord of history, the secular history of the Jews—once it passes through the grindstone of the logic of supersession—is the sacred history of Christianity.<sup>83</sup>

In the sentences that follow immediately thereafter, Löwith writes that

one has to conclude that a Jewish *theology* of secular history is indeed a possibility and even a necessity, while a Christian *philosophy* of history is an artificial compound. In so far as it is really Christian, it is no philosophy but an understanding of historical action and suffering in the light of the cross (without any particular reference to peoples and world-historical individuals), and, in so far as it is a

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<sup>83</sup> The image of this hermeneutical grindstone is captured in stone at the Basilica of St. Mary Magdalene in Vezelay Abee, Burgundy, France. The sculpture depicts Moses pouring the raw grain (the Law) in the 'mystic mill,' and St. Paul harvesting the fresh flour (the Gospel). The sculpture dates to the twelfth century CE. See URL: <https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/m-santini/the-mystic-mill-moses-pouring-grain-into-mill-old-law-and-saint-paul-carefully-collecting-flour-new/nomedium/asset/2573452> See also Taubes's discussion of the sculpture (*The Political Theology of Paul*, 38-39). Taubes recites the text that accompanies sculpture: "By working the mill, thou, Paul, takes the flour out of the bran. / Thou makes known the inmost meaning of the Law of Moses. / From so many grains is made the true bread without bran, / Our and the angels' perpetual food" (ibid., 39).

philosophy, it is not Christian. (MH 196, my emphases)

Tertullian might have penned these lines.<sup>84</sup> Here, again, Löwith cedes to Jews the prerogative to investigate their history theologically. (It is telling that he specifies that this prerogative is extended to Jewish theology, but not Jewish philosophy.) And, as we should expect, given his treatment of Augustine, he also implicitly cedes to Christians their theologies of history. It is only when the history of Christianity is taken up by philosophers—who attempt, with more or less fidelity to the faith itself, to make Christianity a moment of history, rather than its culmination—that the essential boundary is crossed and the “primitive,” “genuine and affirmative” outlook of the New Testament is disfigured (MH 189).<sup>85</sup>

Thus, in the concluding sentence of the paragraph we have been analyzing, Löwith reiterates his judgment of the “perplexing situation” in which modernity finds itself:

The perplexing situation is that the attempt at a philosophy of history *depends on the Hebrew-Christian tradition*, while *this very tradition* obstructs the attempt to ‘work

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<sup>84</sup> See Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, Ch. 7, URL: [https://www.tertullian.org/works/de\\_praescriptione\\_haereticorum.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/works/de_praescriptione_haereticorum.htm). This is the source of Tertullian’s infamous query, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord exists between the Academy and the Church?”

<sup>85</sup> Löwith: “As an eschatological message of the Kingdom of God the theology of the New Testament is essentially unconcerned with the political history of this world. Neither the conflict with paganism nor the later antagonism between church and state characterizes the outlook of the New Testament, which is ‘primitive,’ that is, genuine and affirmative on account of the fact that early Christianity was not yet involved and established in the history of this world. The only antagonism which is not accidental but intrinsic to the message of the New Testament is that to Jewish futurism (expecting the Messiah in the future instead of recognizing him in the presence of Jesus) and to the apocalyptic *calculations* of the last events by Jews as well as by Christians. In comparison with the amazing perseverance of the Jewish expectation, which is a faith of hope and waiting, the Christian hope is almost rational, for it rests on the faith in an accomplished fact. The preliminary fulfillment of God’s purpose in actual history assures the Christian believer of the final outcome” (MH 189, emphases in original). Cf. MH 28-32.

out' the working of God. (MH 196, my emphases)

Here, we have a trenchant example of what we identified above (§21) as Löwith's tendency to gather Jews and Christians together only to hastily reduce the Jewish-Christian pairing to its Christian form. Here, the logic of supersession plays out in plain view, in the span of a single clause ("while *this very tradition...*"). The modern ambition to formulate and defend a robust philosophy of history is, as Löwith never tires of reminding us, essentially dependent on the prophetic tradition shared by Jews and Christians. Löwith claims that what the modern philosophers fail to realize is that the very tradition from which they draw their concept of history as a totality guided by providence is not susceptible to its immanentization or secularization. Yet, when Löwith writes that "this very tradition" obstructs and frustrates the philosophers, he is no longer referring to the "Hebrew-Christian tradition," but rather to the Christian tradition, whose half-measured and half-baked secularization he has been lamenting for nigh on two-hundred pages.

This is the substance of the argument that leads to Löwith's declaration that the term 'Christian history' is "non-sense," an oxymoron: "If we understand, *as we must*, Christianity in the sense of the New Testament and history in our modern sense, i.e., as a continuous process of human action and secular developments, a 'Christian history' is non-sense" (MH 197, my emphasis). To this must be posed the question: *must we, really?* Moreover, does Löwith himself understand Christianity "in the sense of the New Testament"? Does the New Testament, such as it is, understand itself this way? Do its authors understand themselves, and their faith, this way? Do the patristics understand the New Testament's self-understanding—its auto-interpretation—this way? Everything, in fact, points to the contrary conclusion. There *is* a Christian history (the history of the Jews) and a Christian

interpretation of that “Jewish-Christian” history (figural interpretation). Löwith’s characterization of the “sense of the New Testament” elides the fact (which he otherwise thematizes relentlessly) that the New Testament is widely understood by Christian theologians as the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

We saw, at the outset of this section, that Löwith opposes the Augustinian to the Hegelian view of history. Löwith remarks that Hegel *believed* himself to be a faithful expositor, or translator, of the Christian faith. The implication is that Hegel was, in fact, mistaken in this belief, because he ignored or dismissed the central Christian (read: Augustinian) insight that the eschaton is, and must be, imminent rather than immanent.<sup>86</sup> Löwith declines to indict Hegel for the “limitations of his historical vision,” for example, the “oddity” of the fact that the Prussian monarchy is held by Hegel to be the summit of the development of spirit (MH 58). The indictment ultimately issued is much more severe:

More decisive than the material limitations of Hegel’s vision is the inherent weakness of his principle that the Christian religion is realized by reason in the history of the secular world—as if the Christian faith could ever be ‘realized’ at all and yet remain a faith in things unseen! (MH 58-59)

And yet, the “Christian faith” to which Löwith refers is an austere and, frankly, unhistorical abstraction. It is even a bare assertion. Certainly, the simplicity and beauty of the so-called

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<sup>86</sup> Löwith: “The world after Christ has assimilated the Christian perspective toward a goal and fulfillment and, at the same time, has discarded the living faith in an imminent *eschaton*. If the modern mind, concerned with the preservation and advance of the existing society, feels only the impracticability of such an eschatological outlook, it forgets that for the founders of the Christian religion, to whom the collapse of society was certain and imminent, it was, instead, practical good sense which dictated such concentration upon ultimate issues and a corresponding indifference toward intermediate stages of world happenings” (MH 197-198).

primitive Christian faith is rigorously and richly depicted in *City of God*, but even the normative theological force of Augustine's *magnum opus* (which has never, in its sixteen hundred years, lacked for readers) was not enough to prevent the 'decline' of sacred history into profanity. Löwith laments that decline as a tragic mistake and misunderstanding of the originary Christian faith, whose most basic character is its uncompromising unworldliness. He admits that the misunderstanding is itself understandable, for "the history of the world has continued its course of sin and death in spite of the eschatological event, message, and consciousness" (MH 197).

What Löwith will not, and perhaps cannot, countenance is the idea that what Hegel set out to accomplish was not at all a betrayal disguised as fidelity but a true gift from a faithful servant of the faith. Then again, Löwith sometimes hesitates regarding the question of Hegel's fidelity. This should come as no surprise, since what drives Löwith's secularization thesis is the notion that secularization is a basically Christian concern, even a temptation. Secularization is something that happens in and through Christianity (MH 213). Thus, Hegel, in his secularization of the faith, is in one sense working within its historical and theological parameters, but in another sense speaking to the tradition from outside of it. Löwith admits this, too. Hegel "is the last philosopher of history because he is the last philosopher whose immense historical sense was still restrained and disciplined by the Christian tradition" (MH 57). Near the end of his reflections on Hegel, Löwith refers to him as a "priest of the Absolute," "damned by God to be a philosopher" (MH 58).<sup>87</sup> And why not? Seen through the

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<sup>87</sup> The expression appears in quotation marks in *Meaning in History*; it appears to be a 'self-quotation' of a line from Löwith's earlier *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964). The phrase also appears ("...the penetrating glance of this speculative magician, high priest of the absolute") in Richard Kroner's rather colorful introduction to G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 45 (cited hereafter as ETW; for

lens of *Meaning and History*, what Hegel endeavors to do—from his early theological writings to the final lectures on philosophy of religion—is to give to Christians what they must deny themselves, namely, a history of their own. The price of that proper history is, by Christian standards, as steep as can be conceived. For Christians must become what they must not have been in order to be what they will be. They must be superseded; they must, so to speak, become the ‘Jews’ of their own supersession.

It is no wonder that Hegel is scorned by those who claim to remain true Christians, that is, those who refuse to ‘become Jews’ (or refuse to reoccupy the ‘Jewish position’ in the logic of supersession). It is no wonder, either, that Hegel is praised by those who wish to have surpassed Christianity, and who, for that very reason, get to remain (Hegelian) Christians. Hegel realizes what Joachim only prophesied.<sup>88</sup> After Hegel, the history of Christianity *is* the history of its secularization, in which Christianity finds its ultimate—indeed, absolute—fulfillment. Secularization is Christianity’s supersession.

### §26 Jews and Christians

“We of today,” writes Löwith, “are still in the line of prophetic and messianic monotheism; we are still Jews and Christians, however little we may think of ourselves in

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Hegel’s German original, I refer to G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke, Band 1* [Suhrkamp, 1986]; cited hereafter as W 1). Kroner’s use of the term appears without quotation marks and without reference to either Löwith or to Hegel himself. It is not, to my knowledge, among Hegel’s self-descriptions.

<sup>88</sup> Löwith: “The [Joachite] revolution which had been proclaimed within the framework of an eschatological faith and with reference to a perfect monastic life was taken over, five centuries later, by a philosophical priesthood, which interpreted the process of secularization in terms of a ‘spiritual’ realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. As an attempt at realization, the spiritual pattern of Lessing, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel could be transposed into the positivistic and materialistic schemes of Comte and Marx” (MH 159). Löwith goes on to describe National Socialism as the reappearance of the “third dispensation of the Joachites.”

those terms.” We are also, he admits, the heirs of the Greeks, inasmuch as we explore the natural world disinterestedly and without any particular investment in redemption. He reiterates: we are “neither ancient ancients nor ancient Christians.” We are moderns! Yet, as moderns, we are but a pathetic and ultimately incoherent mixture of the two traditions, the Christian and the Greek (MH 19). Here, again, the Jews appear only to disappear. These declarations are found at the end of Löwith’s Introduction to *Meaning in History*. They are mirrored in the final judgment of his Epilogue.

The modern mind is not single-minded: it eliminates from its progressive outlook the Christian implication of creation and consummation, while it assimilates from the ancient world view the idea of an endless and continuous movement, discarding its circular structure. The modern mind has not made up its mind whether it should be Christian or pagan. It sees with one eye of faith and one of reason. Hence its vision is necessarily dim in comparison with either Greek or biblical thinking. (MH 207)

Here, again—yet again—the Jews appear only as disappearing or disappeared. They are ‘there’ in the last word of Löwith’s study, in the invocation of “biblical thinking,” but what of that textual and intellectual tradition belongs to them is effaced by the modern complicity of Christianity and paganism.

Elsewhere in the book, Löwith writes that “the trouble with contemporary Christianity is precisely that there is no genuine paganism, neither in Europe nor in America, against which Christianity could once more become what it was” (MH 158). This, I think, is a very telling moment in Löwith’s criticism of the secularization process. Christianity’s success (its victory over paganism) is here construed as its failure (its abnegation). Christianity seems to have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Let us conclude this chapter by considering the fact



that, for Löwith, “one can hardly deny that Christianity has always been at its best [...] when it was attacked and had to defend itself” (MH 157-158). As we saw above (§2), what is missing from Löwith’s account is the fact that Christianity, the religion that claims to be the true religion, requires internal enemies as much as external ones. The lasting, vexing problem for the historical and doctrinal constitution of Christianity is that the battle with the principal internal enemy (to wit, the Jews) is not a battle that can be won decisively, since the stakes of that battle (unlike those waged against its other, contingently internal, enemies—namely, heretics) is a constitutive element of the truth of the true religion. One ejects a heretic from the faith, bans her, reduces her and her books to ashes. But one cannot eject the Jews from the history of the faith without losing the untruth upon which the truth—the faith itself—depends.

Löwith enumerates the many enemies of Christianity throughout the ages, from St. Paul’s battle “against Jews and pagans,” to the war against the heretics, prosecuted by the patristics (he names Tertullian and Augustine), all the way up to Kierkegaard’s polemic against Christendom’s secular successes (MH 158). As ever in *Meaning in History*, the campaign of authentic, original Christianity is said to be waged against the world and the worldliness of the world, against secularity and secularization. The “genuine,” “constructive,” and “critical” task of the church is to pursue “desecularization instead of secularization, in conformity with all biblical teaching” (MH 158). That the church failed in its campaign of “desecularization” is due to the fact that—because the church became ever more global, every more entangled in political history—the Christian world “became increasingly worldly by the very fact that eschatological thinking about last things was introduced into penultimate matters” (MH 158). The Christian church has forgotten its mandate to bear witness to the transcendence of the

eschaton and the ultimate meaninglessness of world history and its sundry, sordid affairs. What, however, is meant by the term *deseccularization*? Löwith clearly means to indicate a countervailing tendency or project to that of secularization, the latter which seems to mean nothing more than ‘becoming-worldly.’ Then deseccularization simply means ‘becoming-unworldly.’ This, too, is telling. It implies a depiction of the historical vicissitudes of the church as an abstraction, an inverse ratio that borders on circularity: the less unworldly, the more worldly; the more unworldly, the less worldly.

As Blumenberg points out, the Löwithian rubric of worldliness-unworldliness, as applied to early Christianity, obscures more than it reveals.

Let us ask not what was originally ‘unworldly’ about Christianity but what the term ‘unworldly’ could even have meant originally. Definition is necessary here because the Platonic/Neoplatonic concept of transcendence has superimposed on genuine unworldliness the spatial schematism of an extraworldliness. We are bound by this superimposed schematism even in our understanding of the concept of secularization: What can be secularized (made worldly) is only what claims by virtue of its descent or specificity to be extraworldly. (LMA 41-42)

Here, Blumenberg has in view the fact—which he does not dispute—that the eschatological attunement of the ‘original’ Christians was one of “immediate expectation [*Naherwartung*]” (LMA 41-43). The eschaton was genuinely *imminent*; it would occur within their lifetimes, and thus every and any attachment to the world was not only pointless but dangerous. This is the “genuine unworldliness” upon which, Blumenberg avers, a Neoplatonic schematism of transcendence has been superimposed. The unworldliness of immediate expectation is practical, ethical, and apocalyptic. One must divest oneself of all ‘worldly’ things, because

every moment is a moment of truly ultimate decision. The Christ could return at any moment. The church was constituted by a state of emergency.<sup>89</sup> By contrast, the unworldliness derived from extraworldliness is ‘purely’ eschatological (i.e., it is ‘theoretical eschatology,’ rather than ‘practical eschatology’) in that it attempts to rationalize or give an account of the delay of the end of all things, such that one might even reasonably be led to pray for the further delay of the Parousia, because the return of the Christ is not a historical *datum*, is not given in history, and cannot even be anticipated or articulated in terms of historical events—not even vis-à-vis the sack of Rome. When the immediate expectation of the early church was disappointed, its ‘problem space’ was swiftly reoccupied by the temporal indeterminacy of the transcendent eschaton.<sup>90</sup> Ethical unworldliness, for which history is not only an incoherent but a null concept, gave way to extra-unworldliness, for which the idea of history as a static interim is indispensable.

So, which of these two senses of ‘unworldliness’ is at play in Löwith? It seems that Löwith collapses or confuses the two and plays them off of one another to achieve his rhetorical and strategic aims. Indeed, this confusion is evident in the way that Löwith breezily passes back and forth between, on the one hand, declarations about the authentic, “primitive” attitude of the early church and, on the other hand, the elaborate theologies of history that he celebrates as equally authentic. Nonetheless, it seems more likely that the

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<sup>89</sup> See, e.g., Paul’s frustration with the believers at Thessaloniki, who took the imminence of the Christ’s return so seriously that they had stopped going to work (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13).

<sup>90</sup> Blumenberg: “‘Immediate expectation’ negates every type of durability, not only the world’s but also its own, by which it would refute itself. If it survives this self-refutation by means of the unnoticed reestablishment of a more distant expectation, of long-term indeterminacy, then its specific unworldliness is destroyed. In early Christian history another and a heterogeneous unworldliness, of the type of ‘transcendence,’ stood ready to occupy the vacant position” (LMA 42).

confusion is less to do with Löwith and more to do with his sources; the confusion is ‘baked into’ the historical development of Christian theology. As we saw above (§11, §20, §23), a new and more durable eschatological attunement had to be forged out of the profound disappointment of the hopes of the original apocalyptic communities.

Here, too, Blumenberg’s remarks are illuminating.

Thus the tendency in dealing with eschatological disappointment was not to explain away the delay, to reintroduce indefiniteness, but rather to relocate the events that were decisive for salvation in the past and to emphasize (what was now only) an ‘inner’ possession of certainty deriving from that past. The future no longer brings something radically new, the triumphantly intervening victory over evil; rather it provides scope for the artificial transformations and speculative evasions that were needed in order to reconcile the inherited testimony of ‘immediate expectation’ with the unexpected continuance of the world and time. (LMA 43-44)

The idea—apparent already in Paul—is to preserve the urgency and intensity of immediate expectation in the increasingly secular life of the church, whose evangelical mandate demands that it maintain a meaningful intercourse with the world in which it sojourns. As a result of the apocalyptic disappointment, the “basic eschatological attitude of the Christian epoch” (LMA 44) shifts from hopeful expectation of a final liberation to fear and anxiety in the face of a final judgment (which does not make for a winsome sales pitch).

It seems to me that Blumenberg here puts his finger on something essential, but that he makes a very subtle mistake. He writes that

early Christianity found itself in what was, in view of its foundational documents, the

difficult position of having to demonstrate the trustworthiness of its God to an unbelieving surrounding world not by the fulfillment of His promises but by the postponement of this fulfillment. (LMA 44)

Blumenberg is surely correct about the extraordinary difficulty of the Christian position. The Christ has come, but his coming has satisfied only one set of promises contained in the “foundational documents” of the faith. The rest—promised in the New Testament—is yet to come. Blumenberg’s mistake, such as it is, lies in the assertion that, faced with the delay, the church can no longer adduce the fulfillment of prophecy but must prove the truth of the gospel by the fact of the delay. But the two ‘proofs’ are not opposed to one another, for the church is itself the proof of the fulfillment of prophecy. The church is the new, true Israel; its very existence testifies to the trustworthiness of God, and its sacramental activity is the ‘trust’ entrusted to it. The church does not attempt to ‘explain away’ the delay of the return of the Christ, but—as Blumenberg himself observes—avails itself of the “invaluable historical advantage of being able to say that the Messiah has not yet come” (LMA 46).

It is precisely because the Christ has already come *and* has not yet come that the church was—and is—obliged to assert its eschatological significance and to spread its gospel. The contradiction of the Christ who has come and not yet come is reflected in the contradictions that arise between concupiscent worldliness and faithful unworldliness (see above §21). Such contradictions are not fatal flaws but energizing principles.<sup>91</sup> Yet, as a result of these

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<sup>91</sup> Blumenberg: “What has already been can only be disappointing. The chiliastic enthusiasts of both faced and worldly peripeties have always understood that. The Messiah who has already appeared can only be traced dogmatically; one must be able to specify exactly who he was, how he identified himself, what he left behind him. The harmonization of what had already come about with what was still to come was the early Christian way of combining the advantages of unfulfilled messianism with the certainty of faith in an absolution that has already been promulgated” (LMA 46).

contradictions, the eschatological significance of the church necessarily declines (in a grammatical rather than evaluative sense) in its historical activity. The church must, increasingly, define itself in terms of its historical perdurance, and in this way it paves the way for its own secularization, viz., its supersession. “In order to demonstrate its usefulness to the surrounding world,” writes Blumenberg, “the ancient Church ‘secularizes’ itself into (takes on the worldly role of) a stabilizing factor” (LMA 44). This is the line of reasoning that leads Blumenberg to say, as we saw above (§21), that if one wishes to speak of a ‘secularization’ process, then one should speak of a secularization *by* eschatology rather than a secularization *of* eschatology (LMA 45). What Blumenberg is driving at is the fact that the terms ‘world’ and ‘worldliness’ do not give but rather *receive* their lasting Christian significance *from* the ‘secularization’ process of eschatological re-attunement (or ‘reoccupation’) just described. The possibility of a discourse on secularization (e.g., *Meaning in History*) “is conditioned by the process that established ‘worldliness’ in the first place. There was no ‘worldliness’ before there was the opposite of ‘unworldliness’” (LMA 47).

The pagan world into which Christian unworldliness careened was not meaningfully ‘worldly’ or ‘secular’ in the first place. Löwith is well-aware of this. When he laments that there is no longer any “genuine paganism” against which Christianity can define itself, he is pointing to the fact that the paganism of the Roman Empire was, precisely, a religious and not a secular paganism. Christianity could therefore intervene in the ancient world as the *true* religion, but against a non-religious and secular world, such as the so-called modern world, a religion struggles—whatever the status of its claim to truth—haplessly and hopelessly (MH 158, 200-201).<sup>92</sup> And yet, the distinction between what is ‘religious’ or ‘unworldly’ and what

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<sup>92</sup> See my discussion of this problem above (§2).

is ‘secular’ or ‘worldly’ is, as we’ve seen in our discussion of Blumenberg just above, a distinctively Christian distinction. This is not to say that the distinction cannot be made otherwise, or on other grounds, or by other parties. It is only to say that the problem that *Löwith* is concerned with—i.e., the secularization of an originally Christian eschatological image of history—is itself part and parcel of the Christian narration of (its) history. Because the Christian tradition depends on what it is not (historical, worldly, Jewish) to be what it is (eternal, unworldly, not-Jewish), it is often compelled to invent its enemies as often as it encounters them. One could quite easily imagine an effective and illuminating survey course of the history of pre-modern Christianity that consists of nothing but textual records of condemnations of heretics and calumnies against the Jews. One gets the sense that the Christian tradition exists in a state of permanent crisis. Since the exigency of the eschatological crisis has receded into the far horizon, what remains is something like a permanent constitutional emergency, in which the faith is threatened from all corners because—to put it lightly—it has spread, and must spread, its truth to all corners.

That said, the permanence of such an emergency is not to be understood as the ‘substantial identity’ of an ideal substance, continuous over time and in history. It should rather, per Blumenberg, be understood as the modern inheritance of a problem or the stubborn persistence of a question. Indeed, the question is posed by Löwith in the inverted form of a self-assured proposition. “We are still Jews and Christians,” he writes, adding that we are still Greek, too. The modern problem, he thinks, is that we choose not to choose whether to be Christians or Greeks. But this obscures, rather than reveals the true problem, because it obscures the Christian question. The Christian question is not principally a question of the incompatibility of Christian eschatology with Greek cosmism and cyclicity.

The Christian question is upstream (but only just upstream) from the eschatological question. It is posed as follows: *who are the Jews and who are the Christians?* As we'll see in the chapter that follows, a distinctively not-Christian (but not non-Christian) answer to that quintessentially Christian question is offered by a most ambiguous friend-enemy of Christians: Hegel.



## Chapter 5: The True Religion

*But there is an adventure of faith, according to which one is always the clown of one's faith, the comedian of one's ideal.*

— Gilles Deleuze

### §27 The Figure of Golgotha

In the concluding words of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is condensed one of the central problems of Hegel's thought—and, too, its solution—namely, absolute knowledge, the rational unity of history (*Geschichte*) and concept (*Begriff*). The aim of absolute knowledge is itself.<sup>1</sup> The *Phenomenology* is the philosophical description of the aim's self-aiming and of the shapes—or rather, the figures (*Gestalten*)—that describe, in the way an equation 'describes' a curve, the aimful serenity of the peregrinations of spirit (*Geist*) along the way of its journey, in and through itself, to and into itself. The journey, such as it is, ends on a hill just outside the city gates of Jerusalem, where eternity spills still into time. That is to say, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* concludes with a figure: Golgotha.

*The aim, absolute knowing, or spirit knowing itself as spirit, has its path in the recollection [Erinnerung] of spirits as they are in themselves and as they achieve the organization of their realm. Their preservation [Aufbewahrung] according to the free-standing existence appearing in the form of contingency is history [ist die Geschichte], but according to their conceptually grasped organization [begriffnen*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. GW 9: 25: "The aim spirit's insight into what knowing is."

*Organisation*], it is the *science of phenomenal knowing*. Both together are conceptually grasped history [*begriffne Geschichte*]; they form the recollection [*Erinnerung*] and the Golgotha [*Schädelstätte*] of absolute spirit, the actuality, the truth, the certainty of its throne, without which it would be lifeless and alone. (GW 9:433-4)

On the one hand, the “Golgotha of absolute spirit” to which Hegel refers is not—not exactly—the same Golgotha as the one described in the gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, Hegel’s use of the figure of Golgotha gives us to think the relation between the Golgotha near Jerusalem and the Golgotha of Jena, where *Phenomenology of Spirit* was composed. As I’ll argue in this chapter, Hegel’s Golgotha should be conceived as the fulfillment of the Christ’s Golgotha. That the last word of Hegel’s decisive Jena period is given in terms of a figure and its fulfillment gives us to think the meaning of fulfillment, and the movement of figures, in Hegel.

I should make clear at the outset that I do not intend to argue that Hegel is practicing figural interpretation in the strict sense that was developed above (see Chapter 2). Historically real prophecy, such as it is, is out of the question for Hegel and for modern thought in general. If Hegel has any interest in prophecy *per se*, it is only to the extent that the various, historic prophetic discourses, be they Jewish or Christian or otherwise, are forms of religious representation that must be rationally reinterpreted and incorporated into the development and elaboration of the philosophical concept of religion.<sup>2</sup> There is, therefore, a

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<sup>2</sup> Even in the early Hegel’s theological musings, the critique of miracles and prophecy is emphasized; see ETW, 296-301/W 1 413-18. In his mature philosophy of religion, Hegel is still critical of prophecy, but by the time of the Berlin *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion*, he has developed a distinctive appreciation for the significance and necessity of religious representations for

grain of truth in Löwith's acerbic interpretation of the "profound ambiguity" of Hegel's attempt to express philosophically and rationally what Christian theology had expressed in mythic or representational form. Of Hegel, whom he calls the "priest of the Absolute," Löwith writes that "he knew [God's] will and the plan of history. He did not know it as a prophet predicting future catastrophe but as a prophet in reverse, surveying and justifying the ways of the Spirit by its successive successes" (MH 58). Yet, to be a 'prophet in reverse' is to be an interpreter—of history and its 'prophetic' dimensions. While Hegel might object that his philosophical system has little to do with interpretation so construed, I argue, in the following, that figural interpretation has a meaningful, if ambiguous, afterlife in Hegel's philosophy of religion. A preliminary discussion of that afterlife is in order.

Hegel is no Isaiah, no Daniel; his concern is not the messianic or eschatological future but the structure and spiritual activity of the present. On the other hand, Hegel is something of a Tertullian, something of an Augustine; he sees that history can, and must, justify and confirm the truth of the Christian religion. Hegel is something of a Christian, but a Christian for whom the mind of God is not a transcendent, inscrutable object upon which finite intellects make shipwreck but the objectivity—the absolutely true content—of thinking itself.<sup>3</sup> He is something of a Christian, but a Christian for whom history is not the interim

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thought. I return to these themes below (§29, §32).

<sup>3</sup> For Hegel's memorable description of logic as the presentation of the essence of God prior to the moment of creation, see GW 21.34: "Pure science thus presupposes the liberation from the opposition of consciousness. It contains *thought in so far as this thought is equally the fact as it is in itself*; or the *fact in itself* in so far as this is *equally pure thought*. As *science*, truth is pure self-consciousness as it develops itself and has the shape of the self, so that *that which exists in and for itself is the conscious concept and the concept as such is that which exists in and for itself*.

This objective thinking is thus the *content* of pure science. Consequently, far from being formal, far from lacking the matter required for an actual and true cognition, it is its content which alone has absolute truth, or, if one still wanted to make use of the word "matter," which alone is the veritable matter – a matter for which the form is nothing external, because this matter is rather pure

through which the church sojourns temporarily on its pilgrimage to its eschatological hearthstone in another, spiritual world; history is rather the objectivity of God's appearance in the world as spirit and the immanent and ultimate court of justice. Hegel's hostility toward the eschatological understanding of history developed very early on in his career and, as we'll see below (§§30-31), the 'eschatological problem' features prominently in the concluding chapters of *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>4</sup> It is in that context that we will confront the question of the afterlife of figural interpretation in Hegel.

In his study of Hegel's theory of sacrifice, W. Ezekiel Goggin observes that

we may construe Hegel's speculative rendition of Christian kenosis as a redoubling or recursion of figural and supersessionist interpretation of Judaism by Christian theologians. Hegel's interpretation of Christian kenosis as dialectical negativity constitutes the application of figural interpretation to itself; the supersessionist impulse is the theological adumbration of the teleological construction of spiritual forms in Hegelian history."<sup>5</sup>

*Kenosis* ('self-emptying') is the Greek word that appears in the Christic hymn cited by Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Warning the believers to put aside their partisan and individual

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thought and hence the absolute form itself. Accordingly, logic is to be understood as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. *This realm is truth unveiled, truth as it is in and for itself*. It can therefore be said that this content is *the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit*" (emphases in original).

<sup>4</sup> On Hegel's lasting view that eschatology is the prime example of the failure of religion, see Walter Jaeschke, *Reason in Religion: The Foundations of Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, trans. J.M. Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), 183-4, 192; cf. GW 9:264-267ff.

<sup>5</sup> Goggin, "Transcendental Frustration," 393.

interests, Paul exhorts them to inhabit the mind of Christ, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself [*heauton ekenōsen*], taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness [*homoīōmati anthrōpōn*]” (Philippians 2:7, NRSV). I call attention to Goggin’s argument, and to its scriptural and theological basis, for two reasons. First, because, as Goggin has argued elsewhere, Hegel’s technical term *Entäußerung*—central to the concluding arguments of the *Phenomenology*—can be plausibly and profitably read as a philosophical translation of *kenosis*.<sup>6</sup> The figural term with which the *Phenomenology* concludes (viz. Golgotha) is, above all, the climactic fulfillment of the Christ’s *kenosis/Entäußerung*, in which the humiliated God-man “became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross” (Philippians 2:8, NRSV). Second, Goggin has put his finger on the central question of this chapter, namely, the afterlife of figural interpretation and the logic of supersession in Hegel.

In my view, Goggin’s claim that the “supersessionist impulse” is the “theological adumbration” of Hegel’s rational-teleological interpretation of world history is correct. I would only add that Goggin stops short of the claims defended in this study. Namely, that, in the Christian tradition, supersession is not just an impulse but a logic of historical and eschatological truth. My aim is to demonstrate that Hegel’s speculative idealism is a philosophical discourse that seeks to defend the truth of Christianity without thereby confusing itself with Christianity (because it is the truth *of* Christianity), just as Christianity is a theological discourse that seeks to defend the truth of Judaism without thereby confusing itself with Judaism (because it is the truth *of* Judaism). That Christianity and Judaism, respectively, are true in their untruth, and that the historical precedence of the one is the

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<sup>6</sup> See Goggin, “Hegel’s Sacrificial Imagination.”

promise of the truth of the other, is the meaning of the logic of supersession in its Hegelian afterlife.<sup>7</sup> If, as I've argued above (§12), the logic of supersession is tightly bound to the Latin tradition of figural interpretation, then it should come as no surprise that figural interpretation plays a role in Hegel's mature thought, since, for Hegel, the absolute is expressed most adequately in the (Augustinian and Lutheran) tradition to which Hegel is heir. Goggin's claim that Hegel's speculative reading of kenosis is a "recursion or redoubling" of figural interpretation—or an "application of figural interpretation to itself"—is also, in my view, correct, but it requires further elaboration.

In short, Hegel's inheritance, or adoption, of figural interpretation requires that figural interpretation attain its true, conceptual form. Figural interpretation, as we have described it throughout this study, proceeds according to what Hegel calls *Vorstellens*, or a *representative* way of thinking that stops short of the pure, rational simplicity of what Hegel calls the absolute concept. Figural interpretation knits history together with its soteriological and eschatological threads, but it does so by way of representations, myths, legends, and images. In Tertullian and Augustine, and in their theological inheritors, the *figurae* are self-standing, really existing historical persons and events that prophesy other, equally self-standing, really existing historical persons and events. The figures relate to one another externally in their historical succession and are related to their fulfillments internally by the vertical line of

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<sup>7</sup> Emil Fackenheim argues that the subordinate, superseded position of Judaism in Hegel's system is necessary because Judaism affirms that the divine and the human are absolutely distinct. To allow Judaism to serve as the *Grundidee* for the system would cause the system's collapse. By contrast, Christianity is for Hegel the particular, determinate, and historical religion whose universality can and should proliferate throughout the world, because it is in Christian doctrine that the distinction between God and humanity is dissolved. See Emil Fackenheim, "Hegel and Judaism," in *The Legacy of Hegel*, ed. J.J. O'Malley, K.W. Algozin, H.P. Kainz, and L.C. Rice (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 161-185. See also Emil Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

transcendence—that is, by providence, or the eternity of the mind and will of God. In Hegelian terms, figural interpretation struggles to grasp the truth of its content (namely, history comprehended as the objectivity of absolute spirit) because it is bound, or blinded, by its representational form. Nonetheless, as we'll see in what follows, the representational form of figural interpretation will have been an essential and necessary moment in the self-development of the concept.

For Hegel, spirit arrives at its true figure (*Gestalt*) in revealed religion (i.e., in Christianity), but the

very *shape* [*Gestalt*] itself and the *representational thought* [*Vorstellung*] of it are still the aspect which has not been overcome. Spirit must pass over from that aspect into the *concept* [*Begriff*] in order to fully dissolve the form of objectivity in the concept, the concept which likewise includes its opposite within itself. As that point, spirit has grasped the concept of itself as we have just grasped it, and its shape [*Gestalt*], or the element of its existence, is, because it is the concept, spirit itself. (GW 9:368).

As we'll see below (§31), this passing over of spirit's representational form into the true form of the concept occurs at the decisive point in the *Phenomenology* where spirit, having arrived at its absolute concept, beholds the historical figures of its *Bildungsroman* not as they appear, or as they had appeared, diachronically in time and history, but as the synchronic, eternal, logical moments of spirit's becoming (GW 9:415). There, spirit knows itself as the totality of its moments, rather than as the merely external, historical succession of its figures: spirit is, or has become, self-consciousness. What is unveiled in the apocalyptic conclusion of the *Phenomenology* is that, when thought in and through the simplicity of the absolute concept, the figures of spirit *are* the moments of spirit. In 'Auerbachian' terms, the figures are

promises represented, the moments promises spiritually understood—or conceptually grasped. The concept is their fulfillment and actuality. When we turn to Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, we’ll see that the Christian religious community, which Hegel calls the cultus, is the true enjoyment and knowledge of God, in which God’s promises and God’s fulfillments of those promises are not merely understood, but actualized in the self-conscious existence of the community itself.

One of the most peculiar features of Hegel’s thought is his claim that religion and speculative philosophy possess the *same* content and that this same content is the *true* content (GW 9:408), namely, that God is essentially rational, rationality itself (VPR 3:269).<sup>8</sup> In order to understand the constitutive role of Christianity in Hegel’s thought, we need to understand the distinction that he draws between representational and conceptual thought, to which I turn in the next section (§28). I pass thereafter to an overview of Hegel’s early antipathy toward Christianity in the works that he produced (but did not publish) in the period leading up to his decisive years in Jena (§29). I then turn—in the two sections that follow (§§30-31)—to the *Phenomenology* in more detail. In those sections, I argue that, while Hegel maintains his criticism of the eschatological and representation form of Christian thought, he nevertheless affords Christianity a pivotal role in the passage to absolute knowing and the Golgotha of absolute spirit. Having demonstrated the structure and significance of Hegel’s recuperation—and supersession—of religious representation in the *Phenomenology*, I turn to Hegel’s ‘last word’ on religion, in the 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (§32), especially his

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<sup>8</sup> For Hegel’s comments on biblical interpretation and doctrine, and the privileged role of philosophy in the investigation of the forms of thought that arise from scriptural and theological thought, see VPR 3:184-9. See, too, Stephen Houlgate, *Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History*, 2nd Ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 245ff.



theory of the Christian ‘cultus’ as the consummate form of religious life and thought.

### §28 Representation and Concept

Hegel calls the activity and movement of the self-development of the concept in history ‘spirit’ (*Geist*). He calls the particular appearances of the concept in history ‘figures’ (*Gestalten*) or ‘configurations’ (*Gestaltungen*) (VPR 2: 415) of spirit. In Hegel’s thought, Christianity occupies a rather ambiguous position. On the one hand, it is the perfection or fulfillment of the historical development of religious consciousness; on the other hand, it furnishes the pre-eminent historical figure (i.e., the Christ) of the concept. Each ‘inadequate’ form of representation of the true content is, in fact, perfectly adequate for itself. Hinduism, Judaism, and paganism are each, in their particularity, equally adequate representations of the absolute insofar as they are concerned with themselves. But considered as they are in themselves, from the perspective of the concept—that is, from the simple, eternal ‘perspective’ of the mind of God—they are only partial, inadequate representations of God. Only Christianity is truly adequate to the concept of religion in and for itself because it is only Christianity that knows truly that God is truly God. That is to say, the content of Christianity’s knowledge of God is the true content, and this true content is not something other than the true content that concerns philosophy.

That religion and philosophy have the same content, and that this same content is the true content, is the fundamental premise of Hegel’s philosophy of religion. That the movement and development of scientific knowledge is determined neither by inner intuitions, nor by external reflections, but by the nature of the content itself, is the the fundamental—and

novel—claim of Hegel’s thought as a whole.<sup>9</sup> While religion and philosophy share this true content, they differ with regard to the form in which the content is expressed and comprehended. In religion, the true is expressed in the form of representation (*Vorstellung*). In philosophy, the true is expressed in the form of the concept (*Begriff*). Let us dwell on this distinction.

Hegel distinguishes between sensible representations (images) and non-sensible representations (notions like God or world). He draws out several further, and increasingly subtle, distinctions within these types of representation. In the first place, within sensible representations (images), he distinguishes between symbolic/allegorical images and historical images. In both cases, the meaning of the image is represented twice, once to sensible intuition and once to inner intuition. In the case of allegorical images, we intuit that they are simply images (this tree is just this tree; it stands on the lawn of the courthouse), but we are also quite capable of intuiting another, inner meaning from our sensible representations. Hegel gives the example of the Christian doctrine of God’s begetting a son (VPR 1:293). In this case, our representation reaches beyond the sensible schema of ‘father’ and ‘son’ that is immediately familiar to us from experience; we understand that this filial relationship is not meant in its immediate sense but signifies a different, mediated relationship that may be understood by analogy to the immediacy of the ‘natural’ or ‘primitive’ representation. Hegel

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<sup>9</sup> For Hegel’s remarks on the novelty of his conception of philosophy, see SL 9-10/GW 21.8: “The essential point to be kept in mind is that an altogether new concept of scientific procedure is at work here. As I have remarked elsewhere [here he refers to the Preface of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, see GW 9:31, 33-36], inasmuch as philosophy is to be science, it cannot borrow its method from a subordinate science, such as mathematics, any more than it can remain satisfied with categorical assurances of inner intuition, or can make use of argumentation based on external reflection. On the contrary, it can only be *the nature of the content* which is responsible for *movement* in scientific knowledge, for it is the content’s *own reflection* that first posits and *generates what the content is.*”

also refers to the image of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis. When the biblical narrative arrives at the eating of the forbidden fruit, our thinking, as it works in the mode of sensible representation, might have cause to doubt that the fruit is a sensible fruit, and to doubt that the tree itself is to be properly understood as a literal image (VPR 1: 293-4). Sensible representation is already capable of distinguishing between external (sensible) and internal (symbolic) meanings of a given image. Representation has an intuitive—but not yet conceptual—grasp of the difference between literal and figurative significance; it can toggle back and forth between the two meanings (the sensible and the non-sensible representations) but cannot grasp the truth of their relation.

A similar distinction obtains in the representation of historical images. Hegel refers to the mythic character of Homer's epic poems. He remarks that, while we listen to the story and imagine its characters and figures, we do not understand it in the way that we would a historical report (VPR 1:294). However, Hegel goes on to say that the class of images that are manifestly figurative is not limited to our allegorical or symbolic representations, but also concerns what is historical. He even goes so far as to say—in a way that should remind us of Auerbach's distinction between *figura* and *allegoria* (§§9-10) and between history and legend (§§16-17)—that, unlike myth, history bears within it the true content and the object of reason.

There is also something historical that is a divine history—a story, indeed, that is supposed to be history in the proper sense, namely, the story of Jesus. This story does not merely count as a myth, in the mode of images. Instead it involves sensible occurrences; the nativity, passion, and death of Christ count as something completely historical. Of course it therefore exists for representation and in the mode of

representation, but it also has another, intrinsic aspect. The story of Jesus is something twofold, a divine history. Not only is there this outward history, which should only be taken as the ordinary story of a human being, but also it has the divine as its content: a divine happening, a divine deed, an absolutely divine action. This absolute divine action is the inward, the genuine, the substantial dimension of this history, and this is just what is the object of reason. (VPR 1:294)

Histories like the divine history of the man Jesus have a certain universality; they contain outward appearances and events as well as inward, moral content. Hegel remarks that, taken superficially and strictly representationally, one can extract a merely moral lesson from a given history. However, in the moral lessons drawn from historical narratives, a dim recognition of the true, spiritual content of history subsists, awaiting its philosophical or conceptual elaboration (VPR 1:295). Representation can draw out the truth of history, but cannot grasp it, there where it belongs, namely, in the historical event itself.

Representational thought thinks its content as lying somewhere (or somewhen) outside of itself because, in the form of representation, the content is something other than thought. For example, God is represented as an absolutely infinite, transcendent being who lords over the finitude of human beings; true reality is represented as lying beyond the material, temporal world. That said, Hegel's critique of representation should not be understood as an attempt at the delegitimization or repudiation of representation. On the contrary, representation is an essential and necessary, if yet inadequate, form of thought. The relationship between representation and concept maps closely onto the relationship between the understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*). The understanding is a tremendously powerful faculty of thinking; its principle is abstract identity. The understanding takes things as isolated or self-

standing (*für sich bestehend*) images or particular beings: this tree stands next to that tree, this stone lies beside that puddle; this world is temporal, the next world is eternal. Without the understanding, thinking would be stuck with mere sensation, in which objects of experience could not even become proper objects in the first place and would remain mired, unrecognizable, in the manifold of sense data (EL 126). For Hegel, the understanding must take up what is given to it in sensation in order to impart the form of universality to the content of sensation. While the universality thus imparted remains abstract (e.g., ‘this tree is a tree’), it is only by way of the power of the understanding to apprehend its objects “in terms of their determinate differences,” and thus to represent them (EL 126), that thought can achieve its truest and highest vocation—namely, reason, in and through which the truth of the true content is grasped as the activity of thought itself. The truly rational form of thought is the concept.

A concept is the unity of its moments, or its internal differentiations and distinctions.<sup>10</sup> Conceptual thought thinks itself thinking, because in the form of the concept the content is the concept itself. For example, becoming (*Werden*) is the unity (the concept) of being (*Sein*) and nothing (*Nichts*); blue is the unity (the concept) of light and darkness. Becoming is not something other than being and nothing; it is the unity of being and nothing, which are both other-than and the-same-as one another. The color blue appears in the world as a sensible datum, but the concept of blue is the unity of the opacity of darkness and the illumination of light; blue is the darkness we see in the medium of light.<sup>11</sup> God, the true content, is

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<sup>10</sup> See VPR 1:299: “To inquire after the concept of a thing is to inquire after the relationship of the distinct determinations within the thing itself.”

<sup>11</sup> For the concept of becoming, see EL 140-4/W 8:188-193. For Hegel’s reference to Goethe’s theory of colors in his example of the concept of blue, see VPR 1:299-300.

comprehended in the form of the concept as God's knowledge of God, such that God is not something other than the world but is the way, the truth, and the life of the world itself.

On the one hand, with regard to the *form* of the concept, no single example will suffice. An example points away from itself by showing itself; it represents not itself in itself, but circumscribes the set, or category, to which it belongs. Since the form of the concept is something that neither represents nor is represented—since it is that which *is* thought and, for that reason, is *thought*—it resists being figured or indexed by examples. Or, more precisely, the form of the concept admits of no examples except those determined by the concept itself. This means that the concept is the subject of, rather than being subject to, an infinity of figurations and exemplifications. On the other hand, and for the very reason just cited, religious representation is, for Hegel, the privileged example of the form of the concept. The concept determines itself logically out of itself, but it also has—that is, it determines itself in and through—a history. Religion is at once the way that the concept represents its logical determinations to itself (as the absolute Idea, or God) and the true witness to the way that the concept determines its self-development in its historical appearances. As we'll soon see in more detail, for Hegel, the truest witness to the true content that is God is the true religion, namely, Christianity. Because Christianity is not merely one religion among others, but rather the consummation and result of all others, it is the true concept of religion, and it bears witness to the true content of the concept. It lacks but the form of the concept, which only philosophy can furnish, for, as Hegel puts it, “philosophy does nothing but transform our representation into concepts. The content always remains the same” (VPR 1:292).

This brings us to another fundamental feature of Hegel's philosophy of religion: there is no religion ‘in general,’ no generic category of religion. While Hegel does, indeed, argue that

the content of religion is universal among human beings, its universality is not due to its status as a genus in relation to which various species (or forms) of religious expression can be distinguished. It is rather the fact that all human activity arises from “the determination of human being as implicitly spirit” (VPR 1:61-2). As implicit spirit, human beings are thus implicitly free and implicitly conscious of this freedom. Religious knowledge is not something that is mechanically placed within a human being (i.e., neither by positive revelation nor by religious education), but is rather something aroused or stimulated in the human spirit, just as a scent can arouse an old memory in us. Hegel refers to Plato’s doctrine of *anamnesis* (recollection) to make this point: “we learn nothing, but only recollect something that we originally bear within ourselves” (VPR 1:307).<sup>12</sup> Hegel cautions that Plato’s doctrine, understood in a mythical, representational manner (“an external and non-philosophical way”) might lead us to think that we recollect something from a past life, but the truth in Plato that Hegel wishes to thematize is that “religion, right, ethics, and everything spiritual in human beings, is merely aroused [*erregt*].” Human beings are implicitly spirit, and “the truth lies within us and the spiritual content within us must be brought to consciousness” (VPR 1:307). For Hegel, Christianity is the highest and truest form of religious representation because it is in the Christian tradition that the spiritual vocation of human beings is most perfectly realized. In Christianity, “spirit bears witness to spirit. This witness is spirit’s own inner nature” (VPR 1:307).

Throughout this study, we have concerned ourselves with the history of the Christian tradition, especially its development in the Latin West, inasmuch as that tradition constituted

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<sup>12</sup> See Plato, *Meno*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in Plato, *Collected Works*, eds. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 870-897.

itself as the true, historical religion by way of its figural interpretation—and, *ipso facto*, its supersession—of the history of the Jews. We can now add that the distinction between a figure and its fulfillment prefigures, so to speak, the distinction drawn by Hegel between representation and concept. Recall that the patristic defenders of the truth of the gospel often found themselves fighting on multiple fronts. We saw above (§7) that Tertullian, for instance, wielded figural interpretation against both his Jewish and his Marcionite enemies. In both cases, Tertullian insists that the Christian content of the Old Testament is the same as the Jewish content. The disagreement between Christians and Jews over the prophetic character of the Old Testament is not about the content as such; it is a dispute about what the content represents, and thus a question of what form of representation is adequate to the truth of the content. Only a Christian can achieve a true understanding of the figural truth of the Old Testament (construed as historically real prophecy) and can do so only on account of the grace furnished to the faithful by God’s revelation in the Christ. The trouble with Marcion again proves to be an illuminating limit-case for our understanding of the logic of supersession in Christianity. While he affirms the literality of the content of the Old Testament, Marcion insists that the Christ is nowhere prefigured, nor anywhere present, in that content. Marcion’s Christ announces, instead, the radically new content of an absolutely alien God, to which the figural-interpretative form of representation could never gain access, let alone prove itself adequate. In this regard, nothing could be more foreign to Hegel’s thought.<sup>13</sup>

It is tempting—and would not be wholly wrong—to say that, for Hegel, philosophy is to

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<sup>13</sup> For the later Hegel’s theory of revelation and his mature, though qualified, appreciation of positivity see VPR 3: 179-187.



Christianity what Christianity is to Judaism, since the content is said to be the same throughout. Christianity's true content lacks its true philosophical form (of the concept) just as Judaism's true content lacks its true theological form (of representation), such that the history of the concept of religion can be represented as an ascent from the initial (Jewish) position to the intermediate (Christian) position to the final (philosophical) position. But this simple analogy threatens to obscure the stakes of the concept of religion in Hegel's thought. For one thing, Judaism is not the 'initial' position of the concept of religion in Hegel's thought. That (dubious) honor is afforded, instead, to animism. More importantly, there are two reasons that the simple analogy might hinder rather than help our understanding of Hegel. First, Christianity is not simply an improvement on Judaism's form of representation but is its fulfillment—its concept, if yet implicitly. Second, the Christian fulfillment of Judaism is both an historical event and a logical movement, the latter which Hegel describes, slipping into a representational idiom, as God's eternal decree (VPR 1:92). Let us briefly consider the stakes and significance of these two issues.

Regarding the first, we should note that, on the one hand, the distinction drawn by Hegel between the philosophical concept and its religious representation is not at all analogous to a difference of degree between various forms of representation that are more or less adequate to their object. The concept is not a more accurate or adequate representation of the true content in the way that, for instance, Judaism is described by Hegel as being more adequate to the concept than, say, Hinduism, which is, in turn, more adequate than the animist religions that preceded it.<sup>14</sup> The notion of adequacy loses its purchase in the concept, because

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<sup>14</sup> On animism, or the religions of nature and magic, see VPR 2:419-458; on Hinduism, see *ibid.*, 475-499; on Judaism, see *ibid.*, 561-579. We'll see below (§29), that Hegel's philosophical appraisal of Jews and Judaism ranges from his early, venomous antisemitism and anti-Judaism, to his mature appreciation of Judaism as a necessary moment (i.e., the 'religion of sublimity') in the development

the concept is adequate only to itself. The concept is the truth *of* representation; it is the representation superseded and fulfilled, not the representation improved. And yet, the same is true of Christianity, which for Hegel is the consummate or absolute religion. Christianity is not merely a more accurate, most improved, representation of the concept; it is not the religion par excellence but the true religion, from which the relative excellence of every other religion is deduced.

On the other hand, the distinctiveness of Christianity in relation to its religious counterparts is not a difference in kind, for such a difference in kind would imply that supersession has failed, that some new content has been introduced, or that Christianity has transcended religion altogether. The distinction between a difference of degree and a difference in kind is not adequate to the distinction between the true and the untrue, for the true contains and fulfills the untrue. The true, as Hegel famously puts it, “is the whole” (GW 9:19). The true is the truth *of* the untrue. Thus, to say that Christianity is the true religion is not to say that it is the ‘best’ religion, nor to say that it is no longer a religion. The ambiguous position of Christianity in Hegel’s thought is the first ‘knot’ of the problem that needs to be unraveled. Christianity is, or remains, bound, so to speak, by its representational form (GW 9:407-9), but Christianity is itself the slip in its own bonds: its content—namely, the figure (*Gestalt*) of the Christ—gives the form of the concept to be thought (GW 9:405-7; VPR 3:236-9). The Christian community is the thinking of the Christ-thought, in which God’s reconciliation with the world is not simply represented as accomplished (as in scripture), but is itself the true knowledge (*Wissen*) and true enjoyment (*Genuss*) of the truth (VPR 3:250, 260-5).

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of the concept of religion.

The second follows from the first. The content of religion and philosophy is the same, but because the content *is the concept* it cannot stay the same. Rather, in its free activity of self-determination, the concept develops itself in and through itself. In the course of this self-development there arises the immanent demand that the concept leave itself, so as to return to itself. The concept must become finite and determinate in order to be what it is and to know itself as having become what it is. As Hegel puts it in his discussion of Anselm of Canterbury: “To posit itself not only subjectively but also objectively, or even neither subjectively nor objectively—that is what the concept is” (VPR 1:328).<sup>15</sup> For Hegel, religion must exist—and must have existed—in a sequence of determinate, historical figures. The progressive development of such finite, determinate religions is the “outward history [äußerliche Geschichte]” (VPR 3:415) of the inner, conceptual development of spirit (*Geist*), as it seeks to know itself in and through its own activity. Because spirit is something living, it must actively achieve its own existence; because spirit is something conscious (it is consciousness *of* something other than itself and thus has an object), its activity aims to make itself its own object, that is, to become self-conscious. In order to achieve its goal of knowing itself as itself, to find its unity or its concept, spirit must pass outside of itself, externalize itself, or arrange itself (Hegel speaks of the way the concept “spreads itself out [*sich auszulegen*]”) so as to arrange its return to itself (VPR 1:90).<sup>16</sup> This arrangement takes place

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<sup>15</sup> See VPR 1:323-9 for Hegel’s reception and rehabilitation of Anselm’s ontological argument, especially Hegel’s remarks regarding the concept, which, because it “is what is alive, is what mediates itself with itself” (325) is driven—it is a yearning (*Sehnsucht*) or striving (*Streben*)—to satisfy itself. Since the concept is thought, its true satisfaction comes only when it thinks itself as thinking itself (as the pure concept [329]), but in order to know itself as thought thinking itself, it must leave itself and make itself the object of knowledge: i.e., it must exist (327-328).

<sup>16</sup> Significantly, Hegel’s term, *auszulegen*, can also be rendered as ‘interpretation.’ Here, the sense of the reflexive expression *sich auszulegen* would be something along the lines of ‘interpreting oneself out of oneself.’ In order to effect such an auto-interpretation, something must pass from the

in time and history. The various determinations of religion are at once abstract moments (*Momente*) of the concept of religion and particular figures (*besondere Gestalten*) that appear as historical stages of the development of religious consciousness (VPR 1:91). While the history of religion is necessarily bound up with its representational form of thought, it is nonetheless, and necessarily, something real and historically extant (*geschichtlich vorhanden*) (VPR 3:415). Hegel insists on this: religion is ultimately a matter of inner, spiritual truth, but for that very reason it necessarily exists and unfolds in history, else what is inner remain merely inner, void of any expression or reality (see EL 207-211/W 8:274-79; cf. GW 9:35-36). As we'll see below (§§30-31), this historical unfolding is structured by a double movement of remembrance (interiorization) and self-emptying (exteriorization).

Hence the second 'knot' of the problem that needs unraveling: Christianity is the figure (the historically real 'prophecy,' or promise) of God's logical unfolding; the passage from representation to concept is accomplished by philosophy, but it unfolds as the logical fulfillment of an historical—that is, figural—event.<sup>17</sup> As we saw above (§27), this

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interior to the exterior, and vice versa; in other words, spirit needs the external, historical figures of its becoming in order to interpret itself as what it is. What spirit is, is this very freedom of auto-interpretation, in which spirit itself goes out from itself and, recognizing itself, returns to itself.

<sup>17</sup> On the breach between thought and faith, when freedom relates itself to the content (because it is only thought that seeks its freedom in its content), see G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, One-Volume Edition: The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R.F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson, and J.M. Stewart, with H.S. Harris (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), 197, n.181: "Thought is a new relation over against faith. The aspect of form comes into relation specifically as opposed to the substantial aspect of truth. This principle is present in the Christian religion from its outset; Christianity does, indeed, begin on the one hand from an external history that is believed; but at the same time this history has the significance of being the explication of God's nature. In accordance with the distinction that arises here at once, Christ is not only a human being who has undergone this fate, but is also the Son of God. So the *explication* of the story of Christ is its more profound aspect; this explication took place in thought and brought forth dogmatics, the church's doctrine. With it goes the requirement of inwardness or thought. The breach between thought and faith develops further as a result. Thought knows itself to be free not only according to its form but according to its content."

fulfillment, in which the philosophical concept supersedes its religious figure, appears to play out out between two Golgothas: the one in Jerusalem, the other in Jena. And yet, the two are only two when seen from the point of view of religion; in the concept, they are one.

The essential difference (thus the relation) of representation and concept is worked out in relation to the status of the figures and the moments of spirit. Throughout the *Phenomenology*, the figures are on the way to their concept; because they are representations, and thus remain 'positive' (or have a 'positive' correlate in external reality), they tend to act like brakes on the movement of spirit, which is characterized by its negativity. By contrast, in Hegel's mature philosophy of religion, the positivity of the figures is a necessary and essential moment of the unfolding of the absolute concept. In the *Lectures*, the figures are just the moments seen from the side of representation, whereas the moments are the figures conceptually comprehended (*begriffen*). While it is true that the composition and publication of the *Logic* intervenes between the *Phenomenology* and the *Lectures*, the pivotal transformation of the structure and significance of history is already accomplished in the concluding chapters of the *Phenomenology*.<sup>18</sup>

Before we turn to the *Phenomenology* in earnest, we should pause to consider the young Hegel's antipathy, during his time in Berne, toward the history and positivity of the Christian tradition ("The Positivity of the Christian Religion"), his mixed feelings regarding Christianity in Frankfurt ("The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate"), and the significance, for his understanding of Christianity, of the philosophical breakthrough of the Jena years (*Phenomenology of Spirit*).

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<sup>18</sup> Hegel summarizes this transformation at GW 9:29-30. See also SL 28-29/GW 21.32-33 for Hegel's commentary on the place of the 'deduction' of the *Phenomenology* in relation to the system as a whole.

### §29 What Has Jena to Do with Jerusalem?

The fragmentary draft, “The Positivity of the Christian Religion” (composed 1795-6, but unpublished in Hegel’s lifetime), gives us a picture of Hegel’s thought at its most vehemently anti-Judaic stage. Judaism was, for Hegel, a religion of “statutory commands,” “dead formulas,” and “slavish obedience (ETW 68-69/W 1:105-6), in which morality could appear only as heteronomy, commanded by God, and thus positive. By ‘positive,’ Hegel means everything that is heteronomous, namely, everything that is given to the rational subject from outside: for example, statutory laws, rules and regulations; but also the accidents of history, even institutions themselves. At this point in the development of his thought, Hegel was convinced of the Kantian principle of morality as autonomy, or self-legislation. In the opening passage of the fragment, Hegel writes that “the aim and essence of all true religion, our religion included, is human morality,” and that whatever is worthy of the name ‘true religion’ must be appraised according to its proximity to the development of practical reason (ETW 68/W 1:105). Thus, his interest in Christianity is not to discover whether or not its various doctrines and rituals are positive (for they obviously are), but to inquire whether or not Christianity is a “positive religion as a whole” (ETW 173/W 1:222). As we’ll see in a moment, Hegel argues that Christianity was originally a religion of pure morality and virtue, but that this origin—condensed in the teachings of Jesus—was inevitably obscured and distorted by its historical development as a sect (ETW 86/W 1:124), and especially because the original moral genius of Jesus was “adopted by Jewish intellects [*von Judenköpfen aufgenommen*]” (ETW 181/W 1:229).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In the later essay, “The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate,” Hegel remarks that the Jewish rejection of the divinity of Jesus was due to their intellectual point of view. Namely, Hegel argues

“The Positivity of the Christian Religion” is also a record of Hegel at his most vehemently anti-Christian stage. Because Christianity emerges in and through a Jewish context, it runs the risk of regressing to the ‘slavish’ positivity of the Jewish religion and nation. But, in fact, on Hegel’s account, Christianity not only tends to backslide into Jewish heteronomy, but actually deepens and worsens the bondage of Judaism inasmuch as the positivity of Christianity penetrates into the very heart of the believer, commanding their will and their feelings.<sup>20</sup> Judaism, Hegel thinks, was concerned only with the external actions and ceremonies of its subjects (ETW 139-141/W 1:183-86). What Hegel finds distasteful in the development of Christianity is its perversion of the original teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, whom Hegel depicts as a teacher of Kantian morality. Jesus, Hegel writes, was eminently concerned with his “own personal development [*eigenen Bildung*],” and “undertook to raise [Jewish] religion and virtue to morality and to restore to morality the freedom which is its essence” (ETW 69/W 1:106).<sup>21</sup> While Hegel finds much to admire in Jesus, the bulk of the essay is concerned with how and why Jesus was failed by his followers.

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that the Jews understood Jesus’s claim to be the son of God according to the categories of the understanding, which “saves the intellect,” but loses the truth of the unity of the divine and human essence. Since the Jews led an intellectual, rather than spiritual, life, they could not recognize the spirit of God in the humanity of Jesus, for “spirit alone recognizes spirit.” See ETW 264-65/W 1:382-83.

<sup>20</sup> As we will see in a moment, Hegel takes up this criticism again in “The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate,” but in that text he wields it against his erstwhile master, Kant.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Hegel’s later revision of the passage on Jesus, where he—unfortunately and, frankly, unfairly—spares the Jews no blow: “Jesus attacked the evil of his nation at its roots, i.e., their arrogant and hostile segregation from all other peoples. He wished to lead them to the God of all mankind, to the love of all men, to the renunciation of their lifeless, spiritless, and mechanical worship. For this reason his new teaching led to a religion for the world rather than for his nation alone, and this is a proof of how deeply he had seized the needs of his age and how far the Jews were sunk in their frenzied slavery of spirit, in a situation from which goodness was irretrievably absent” (ETW 179/W 1:227).

The reasons Hegel gives for this failure are various, but they all fall under the heading of the failure of the Christian religion to reckon with what Hegel takes to be the central message of Jesus: that true religion “requires an unconditional and disinterested obedience to the will of God and the moral law.” Hegel goes on to note that Jesus himself makes such obedience a “condition of God’s favor and the hope of salvation” (ETW 85/W 1:123), but Hegel is convinced that these expressions (much like Jesus’s appropriation of the messianic idea and his recourse to miracles; see ETW 77-81/W 1:115-18) were deployed by Jesus only as means to the end of establishing the inner, necessary criteria for practical reason (ETW 71/W 1:108). Instead, the followers of Jesus interpreted his teaching positively, grounding the injunctions to obey the law in the authority of Jesus himself. Hegel notes with dismay that the result of this positive reception

was to make reason a purely receptive faculty, instead of a legislative one, to make whatever could be proved to be the teaching of Jesus or, later, of his vicars, an object of reverence purely and simply because it was the teaching of Jesus or God’s will, and something bound up with salvation or damnation. (ETW 85/W 1:123-24)

The hopes and fears that arise in relation to the prospects of salvation and damnation undermine morality; nothing could be more heteronomous than the idea that one’s destiny lies ultimately outside of the sphere of reasoning moral action. The religion of Jesus was thus reduced from a true, moral, and rational religion of duty, to a “*positive* doctrine about *virtue*” (ETW 86/W 1:124). The young Hegel’s quest for a civil religion (*Volksreligion*) that could be both universal and rational is, here, stymied by the apparently inevitable positivity of



Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

Upon his move from Berne to Frankfurt in 1797, Hegel's fidelity to Kantian morality began to wane, resulting in the rather different description of Christianity that he recorded (but did not publish) in "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate." In that text, Hegel adopts a considerably more conciliatory attitude toward Christianity itself, embracing various elements of mysticism and, most notably, the Christian concept of love, which led one recent commentator to remark that "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate" is "the stumbling block to all anti-metaphysical, atheistic and humanist interpretations of Hegel."<sup>23</sup> While there are many features of this work that warrant close attention, I limit myself to a brief investigation of (1) Hegel's shift in attitude toward Jesus and Kantian morality, (2) Hegel's conception of Christian love, and (3) the ultimate inadequacy of love for the reconciliation of the religious community with the world. First, however, we should pause to consider Hegel's (still vexed and deeply antagonistic) relation to the Jews.

For their part, the Jews still arouse Hegel's horror and disapprobation in "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate." He compares the "fate of the Jewish people" to "the fate of Macbeth, who stepped out of nature itself, clung to alien Beings, and so in their service had to trample and slay everything holy in human nature" (ETW 205/W 1:297). Hegel

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<sup>22</sup> On the young Hegel's search for such a civil religion, see Thomas A. Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 16-56.

<sup>23</sup> Beiser, *Hegel*, 132. Beiser continues: "This manuscript is fundamentally the work of a religious mystic, of a repentant rationalist who has been newly converted to the higher realms of religious experience, and to some traditional religious dogmas that articulate it. A defense of mysticism pervades the whole work: Hegel stresses that the infinite consists in a divine love that transcends demonstration; and he maintains that the infinite is accessible only to faith, which consists in an inner experience. To be sure, Hegel will later break with this mysticism, insisting that the infinite can be known only through reason; but he will not change his more sympathetic attitude toward Christianity that he acquired during the Frankfurt years" (ibid., 132-3).

understands the principle of Jewish subjectivity to be that of total dependence on God, thus a state of “total passivity, total ugliness” (ETW 202/W 1:294). Hegel laments that the political corollary of the alienation of their subjectivity in God is that the Jews had no proper sense of citizenship, no sense of property, and therefore no freedom and no rights (ETW 197/W 1:289-90). The spiritual and political condition of the Jews, Hegel claims, has persisted, in principle unchanged, since the death of Moses. All of the vicissitudes of Jewish history

have been simply consequences and elaborations of their original fate. By this fate—  
an infinite power which they set over against themselves and could never conquer—  
they have been maltreated and will be continually maltreated until they appease it by  
the spirit of beauty and so annul it by reconciliation. (ETW 199-200/W 1:292)<sup>24</sup>

It is worth noting that the term ‘fate’ (*Schicksal*) is used by Hegel to express the contradictory and alienated character of a people who do not make their life and history for themselves. While, at the conclusion of the essay, Hegel will ultimately judge Christianity to be similarly ‘fated’ to a debilitating contradiction (because its ethic of love binds the community together but sets it over against the world), the Jews serve as a privileged figure or example of fate and alienation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For Hegel, the Jews suffer from what makes them Jews, namely, their radical monotheism and what he takes to be the nationalism that necessarily attends monotheism. Thus, in order to overcome their suffering, they would have to cease to be what they are by either becoming Greeks (in whose culture the spirit of beauty predominates) or Christians (in whose faith reconciliation with God is promised). In other words, the Jewish God would have to die, perhaps to be resurrected as the ethical life of a truly universal community and world history. As we’ll see below when we turn to the *Phenomenology*, this is more or less the path to redemption offered by Hegel.

<sup>25</sup> It is worth pointing out that, decades later, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel offers a more conciliatory judgment of Jewish monotheism, seeing it not as an inexorable contradiction or ‘fate,’ but as a necessary moment—“the religion of sublimity”—in the self-development of the concept of religion, which culminates in the Christian cultus. See VPR 2:561-579. On this significance of this shift, especially the ‘swapping’ of Greek and Jewish religion in the

Into what he takes as the spiritually alienated, propertyless, and politically inchoate world of the Jews, Hegel introduces another, new, figure of Jesus. The Jesus of “The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate” is no longer a Kantian moral teacher, but a preacher of love and the founder of the religious community that practices that love (i.e., the Kingdom of God). It is worth noting that, in this manuscript, Hegel strips Jesus of virtually every last vestige of Jewishness; Jesus is not involved with Judaism whatsoever, does not struggle against this or that Jewish law, nor this or that Jewish custom, but sets himself “against the whole,” that is, against the totality of the Jewish fate as Hegel conceives it (ETW 205/W 1:317). Moreover, Jesus is stripped of all the Kantian baggage he had acquired in Hegel’s previous writings on the subject. The “spirit of Jesus, a spirit raised above [Kantian] morality,” appears in the Sermon on the Mount as the proponent of a direct attack on the legal form of the law itself. “The Sermon,” Hegel insists, “does not teach reverence for the laws,” as the demands of Kantian practical reason would have it, but, “on the contrary, [the Sermon] exhibits that which fulfills the law but annuls it as law [*sondern, dasjenige aufzeigt, was sie erfüllt, aber als Gesetze aufhebt*] and so is something higher than obedience to law and makes law superfluous” (ETW 212/W 1:324). What rises above the law and obedience to the law is love (*Liebe*), in which “all thought of duty vanishes [*wegfällt*]” (ETW 213/W 1:325).

Here, Hegel has in view one of the central problems in Kant’s account of morality: the split or divergence between one’s inclinations and one’s respect for one’s moral duty. Inclinations, needs, and particular desires must be suppressed for duty to do its due. The moral subject is thus split (Hegel speaks of the “distraction of the soul [*Zerrissensein des*

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ordering of determinate religion in the 1821, 1824, and 1827 lecture series, see Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, esp. 70-82.

*Gemüts]*”) and set against itself (ETW 212/W 1:325). Moreover, the law appears to the subject as something objective and positive, something set against it or given it by something outside of its own sphere of subjectivity. The subject is thus split externally and internally, on the one hand alienated from the source of the command, on the other hand alienated within itself by the mismatch between the force of the objective command and the desires or needs that arise subjectively. Hegel observes that Jesus does not simply furnish an alternative set of objective commands, but refers to purity of heart, thus opening up the sphere of the “subjective in general” (ETW 209/W 1:321). Hegel notes that the concept of a law is typically subject to the common distinction between moral commands and civil commands. The former are considered according to their form; they concern the moral action of a single individual. Such a moral command should lack objectivity and positivity because, due to the fact that it is a concept that belongs, by definition, to the rational subject, it is unenforceable. If a moral command were to be enforced by an external power it would become, instead, a civil command. Civil commands, for their part, are considered according to their content and concern the intercourse of individuals; they are objective and positive inasmuch as they must be enforced. If the ‘ought’ implied by a civil command were to be followed or actualized without the impingement of an external power, they would lose their ‘civil’ form and become moral (ETW 210/W 1:321-22).

However, Hegel argues that even moral commands, regardless of whether they take a civil, enforceable form, can and do become objective and positive if their concept appears as the command of an alien power (e.g., if the moral law is the command of a transcendent God). The moral command remains something subjective, but the consistency of the command is torn asunder by the exteriority and heteronomy of the form of the command

itself. Hegel remarks that we might expect Jesus to have pitched his criticism of the law on exactly these lines, emphasizing that the objectivity of the moral command (God's sovereign decree) must give way to the subjective capacity of reason for universality (ETW 210-11/W 1:322-23). Yet, Hegel, in a remarkable anticipation of Nietzsche's concept of the bad conscience and Freud's concept of the superego, argues that this line of argument leaves positivity and heteronomy partially intact. Hegel compares the Puritans (for whom the moral law is objective, given by God) and the Kantian moral subject (for whom the moral law is subjective and autonomous), and concludes that the difference between them is not as stark as Kantian thought supposes:

The difference is not that the former [i.e., the Puritans] make themselves slaves, while the latter [i.e., the Kantian] is free, but that the former have their lord outside themselves, while the latter carries his lord in himself, yet at the same time is his own slave. (ETW 211/W 1:323; cf. GW 9:121)

For the particular inclinations or drives of the moral subject, the universal law is "necessarily and always something alien and objective," which means that a "residuum of indestructible positivity" remains in every moral system or subject (religious or Kantian) that admits of an absolute distinction between inclination and duty, particularity and universality, civil and moral command (ETW 211-12/W 1:323). This is a striking reversal of Hegel's fidelity to Kant; it is all the more striking that it also marks a reversal of Hegel's critical attitude toward Christianity, or at least toward the religion of love preached by Jesus.

This episode is of interest for two principal reasons. First, because we see in Hegel's discussion of the concept of law that he has not, or not yet, arrived at a philosophical position in which the concept is capable of uniting the subjective and the objective, the real

inclination and the abstract duty. “Since laws,” he writes, “are unifications of opposites in a concept [*einem Begriff*], which thus leaves them as opposites while it exists itself in opposition to reality [*gegen Wirkliches besteht*], it follows that the concept expresses an ought [*so drückt er ein Sollen aus*]” (ETW 209/W 1:321). The concept (of law) is not yet the absolute concept; it dominates or lords over the cleavage between inclination and reason in the moral subject, whose subjective experience of reality is distorted by heteronomy, even if this heteronomy is internal to the rationality of the subject. The second reason has to do with the way that Hegel attempts to overcome the double heteronomy of morality. We have already glimpsed it above: Jesus preaches love, which at once fulfills the law and annuls the form of the law—that is, annuls the ‘ought.’ Where once the law appeared as an ‘ought,’ it now appears as an ‘is’ (*ein Sein*), as something living and existing (ETW 212/W 1:324). Love is a modification of life in which the universality of the law and the particularity of the inclinations and desires of the subject achieve a perfect correspondence (ETW 214-5/W 1:326-27). Love is most properly realized in a modification of life that Hegel, following Jesus, calls the “Kingdom of God,” where what is common to all is life in God” (ETW 278/W 1:394).

Importantly, the ‘commonality’ that Hegel has in view here is not the universality that is expressed by a concept, but is rather love itself, which Hegel describes as “a living bond which unites the believers; it is this feeling of unity of life, a feeling in which all oppositions, as pure enmities, and also rights, as unifications of still subsisting oppositions, are annulled” (ETW 278/W 1:394). Hegel cites the words of the Christ as reported in John’s gospel (John 13:34), where Jesus commands his disciples to love one another. Jesus advises them that they will be known and recognized as disciples of the Christ by this—their—love. Hegel writes,

with obvious enthusiasm, that idea of the Kingdom of God “completes and comprises the whole of religion [*vollendet und umfaßt das Ganze der Religion*],” but in the same breath signals his hesitation and mounting frustration, for while love lived as the unification of life presupposes division and the development of the many-sidedness of life, it increasingly—and seemingly inevitably—shrinks away from, and even anathematizes, individuality and its political correlates (e.g., property, right), to say nothing of love’s hatred for everything it deems ‘worldly.’

The love of the Christian community, which Hegel recognizes as a sort of primitive communism, not only suffers from the problem of scaling its love from its humble beginnings to a wider social movement but, because the essential activity of the Christian community is evangelizing and proselytizing, actively encourages and generates this problem for itself (ETW 278-281/W 1:394-97).<sup>26</sup> Christians eat and drink and pray together, but there remains a “prodigious field of objectivity, which claims activity of many kinds and sets up a kind of fate whose scope extends in all directions and whose power is mighty” (ETW 280/W 1:396). In other words, there is still a world out there; moreover, it is a world that is *out there*. It is, for Christians, an objective world to be converted, not a world of love in which to find themselves in the unity of individuality and community. So, fate rears its head, there where love had overcome it. The community “cannot go beyond love itself,” and this “restriction of love to itself [*Beschränkung der Liebe auk sich selbst*]” results in a flight

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<sup>26</sup> Remarkably, the first instance of the word ‘communism’ in any language may well have been penned in the 1790s by Hegel’s schoolmate, Friedrich Hölderlin, whose fragment, *Communismus der Geister*, has recently become the subject of renewed scholarly interest. See Friedrich Hölderlin, “Communism of Spirits,” *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 97, no. 1 (2022): 5-6. For a summary of the scholarly debate, along with a commentary on the fragment, see Joseph Albernaz, “The Missing Word of History: Hölderlin and ‘Communism,’” *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 97, no. 1 (2022): 7-29.

from all determinate modes of living even if its spirit breathed in them, or even if they sprang from its spirit, [thus] this removal of itself from all fate, is just its greatest fate; and here is the point where Jesus is linked with fate, linked indeed in the most sublime way, but where he suffers under it. (ETW 281/W 1:397)

As we might expect, given his virulent anti-Judaism, Hegel attributes the fate suffered by Jesus to the fact that Jesus had appeared in a Jewish world. Due to the impurity of that world, Jesus “could only carry the Kingdom of God in his heart.” Jesus could attempt to develop the spirit of love in his disciples and followers, but “in his everyday world he had to flee all living relationships because they all lay under the law of death, because men were imprisoned under the power of Judaism [*alle unter dem Gesetze des Todes lagen, die Menschen unter der Gewalt des Jüdischen gefangen waren*] ” (ETW 285/W 1:401). In order to avoid entrapment in Jewish law, Jesus took no wife, begot no children, enjoyed no proper citizenship, and demanded the same of his friends and disciples (see Luke 14:25-27; Matthew 19:29). He declared that he brought not peace but a sword, and promised enmity in and among families (see Matthew 10:34-36). He could “find freedom only in the void” (ETW 285/W 1:401). The paradox of Jesus, on Hegel’s account, is that the love he preached and brought to fruit was fated to fail inasmuch as, and to the extent that, it succeeded. The more love, the less world; the more faith, the less life.<sup>27</sup> The essence of the early Christian

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<sup>27</sup> Hegel: “This is the point at which the group is caught in the toils of fate, even though, on the strength of the love which maintained itself in its purity outside every tie with the world, it seemed to have evaded fate altogether. Its fate, however, was centered in the fact that the love which shunned all ties was extended over a group; and this fate was all the more developed the more the group expanded and, owing to this expansion, continually coincided more and more with the world’s fate both by unconsciously adopting many of that fate’s aspects and also by continually becoming sullied itself in the course of its struggle against that fate” (ETW 295/W 1:412).



community was

(a) separation from men and (b) love for one another; (a) and (b) are necessarily bound together. Love in this context could not and was not supposed to be a union of individualities; it was a union in God and in God only. Faith can only unify a group if the group sets an actual world over against itself and sunders itself from it. Hence the opposition became fixed and an essential part of the principle of the group, while the group's love must always have retained the form of love, of faith in God, without becoming alive, without exhibiting itself in specific forms of life [*Gestalten des Lebens*]. (ETW 287/W 1:403)

The Christian community, in the end, and in spite of the singularity of its founder and the universality of its gospel, is but a particular community. While Christianity does achieve something that, for Hegel, Judaism cannot possibly achieve (namely, love), the nascent Christian church ends up in much the same position as had Abraham in the first section of "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," for Abraham regarded the whole world as standing opposite him (ETW 187/W 1:279). Christianity repeats, albeit at a higher level of spiritual development, the 'original fate' of the Jews. Christianity, for Hegel, in its very opposition to Judaism, is still too Jewish, still too positive. Objectivity (i.e., the world out there, its worldliness) is the greatest and most dreadful enemy of Christianity, and for this reason the unity and simplicity of their love is reduced to an experience—later a memory—of mastery.

Christian love devolves into an experience of discipleship and mastery as a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus. When Hegel turns to the subject of the resurrection, he treats it as an attempt to address a most serious crisis in the life of the community. Love unites the faithful, but they have no proper knowledge of this union, because in the wake of the

disappearance of Jesus the union appears as something cut off or severed: “With [Jesus’s] death, they were thrown back on the separation of visible and invisible, reality and spirit,” like “sheep without a shepherd” (ETW 291/W 1:407-8). The community needs, because it now lacks, a visible image and figure (*Bild und Gestalt*) in which to forge their unity and their faith. This figure is provided in the risen Jesus:

Love’s longing has found itself as a living being and can now enjoy itself, and worship of this being is now the religion of the group. The need for religion finds its satisfaction in the risen Jesus, in love thus given shape [*in dieser gestalteten Liebe*]. (ETW 292/W 1:408)

Nonetheless, even this figure of love—“the image of the unification which has now become a living being”—is attended by positivity, for the risen Christ also remains the individual man Jesus; the community worships both (ETW 293/W 1:409). As a result, the community can recognize itself only in terms of its shared faith in the facts of Jesus’s life and death and the memorial figure of the risen Christ, who swiftly becomes the risen Lord. Hegel writes that the unifying principle of the group “has the form of something positive, or given [*die Form eines Gegeben für sie hat*],” and remarks on the deficiency of this givenness, for “nothing is given [*nichts gegeben*]” to spirit and to life; rather, what spirit has acquired is only what it itself has become; and what life is, is just what life has modified itself to be (ETW 294/W 1:411).

Hence the “lifelessness of the group’s love [*der Lebenslosigkeit der Liebe der Gemeinde*],” which, precisely because it thirsts for its own spirit, which had departed with Jesus, fails to recognize that the community itself is this very living spirit, victorious over death because raised from death, and thus remains a stranger to itself and a stranger sojourning on the earth,

in time and history (ETW 294/W 1:411). This estrangement is still a relation, but a relation with something alien, and thus something positive:

To be connected with an alien spirit, felt as alien, is to be conscious of dependence on it. Since the love of the group had overreached itself by being spread over a whole assembly of people and therefore was now filled with an ideal content but was deficient in life, the bare ideal of love was something 'positive' for it; it recognized it as set over against itself and itself as dependent on it. In its spirit lay the consciousness of discipleship and of a lord and master. Its spirit was not completely manifested in love configured [*ihr Geist war nicht in der gestalteten Liebe vollständig dargestellt*]. (ETW 294/W 1:411)

This is where, and why, the Christian community is "caught in the toils of fate." The community expands, becoming more and more worldly and more and more frustrated in its love, which increasingly appears as a command impossible to fulfill. Its secular success is its spiritual failure. Its fate, Hegel concludes, is that "church and state, worship and life, piety and virtue, spiritual and worldly action, can never dissolve into one" (ETW 301/W 1:418). Here, again, Christianity fails to provide the religious form of life that could serve as a civil religion for the modern age.

Significantly, Hegel attributes the failure of the community to recognize itself as the resurrected spirit to the peculiar spiritual structure of the very thing that constituted it in the first place: the Incarnation. To make this point, Hegel refers to the notion of kenosis, which, while it furnishes the community with the principle of its subjectivity (Jesus's doctrine of love beyond the law), ultimately steals away and becomes an objective figure of love, which can only, and merely, be recollected and represented. Hegel even speculates that had the

doctrine of the Incarnation been interpreted in the Docetic fashion (in which the Christ only appears to be a human being), things might not have gone so badly for the Christian community.

The form of the servant [*Knechtsgestalt*], the humiliation in itself, as the veil of divine nature [*der Hülle des Göttlichen*], would present no obstacle to the urge for religion if only the real human form [*Wirklichkeit*] had been satisfied to be a mere veil and to pass away. But this real human form is supposed to remain fixed and permanent in God, belonging to his essence, and it is to the individual [*die Individualität* *Gegenstand*] that this prayer is offered. The veil stripped off in the grave, the real human form, has risen again out of the grave and attached itself as the one who is risen to God. This sad need which the Christian group felt for a mundane reality [*eines Wirklichen*] is deeply connected with its spirit and its fate. (ETW 293-94/W 1:410).

The kenotic self-emptying, in which God becomes human by way of humiliation, is not enough to reconcile the Christian community to its world. At this point in Hegel's appraisal of the Christian religion, Golgotha can only lead to the objectification of the risen Jesus, not yet to the spiritual identification of the community itself with the risen God. What the community really needs—that is to say, what the concept of religion needs—is to have no more need of an object, but to know itself as its own object. What is needed is a kenosis of kenosis itself, such that the concept, rather than an objective figure or the mere recollection of the figure, can grasp itself as the truth of the community. This is what will have been grasped in the Golgotha of absolute spirit, in Jena in 1807 (see below, §31).

The problem is reflected even more clearly in Hegel's critical discussion of the Eucharist

(*Mahl der Liebe, Nachtessen*), which, in the Frankfurt period, he still regards as inadequate. As throughout his career, Hegel's reading of the Eucharist is Lutheran, but in this early manuscript he detects—and still detests—the inescapable positivity of the ritual act. In “The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate,” Hegel regards the Eucharist as a profoundly mystical action (*eine mystische Handlung*), but—strikingly—criticizes the supper on the grounds that it is not properly religious! As we'll see below (§32), Hegel, having come to grips with the necessity of positivity in the self-development of spirit and the concept of religion, will eventually elevate the Eucharist—which he, in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, calls “enjoyment” (*Genuß*)—to the highest register of the spiritual acts and self-understanding proper to the Christian cultus. Here, however, the status of the Eucharist hovers somewhere between a friendly meal and a religious ritual (ETW 248/W 1:365). The mystical element of the Eucharist derives from the fact that Jesus calls the bread and wine, offered to his friends, his body and blood. The influence of the Lutheran doctrine of the real presence of the Christ in the host is evident. The meal is “not merely represented in an image, an allegorical figure [*einer allegorischen Figur vorgestellt*], but linked to a reality [*an ein Wirkliches angeknüpft*], eaten and enjoyed in a reality, the bread” (ETW 249/W 1:365).<sup>28</sup> The bread and wine are not purely objective things, but are something more than what they appear to the understanding to be. “Things heterogeneous are here most intimately connected [*Die Heterogenen sind aufs innigste verknüpft*]” (ETW249/W 1:367). The bread and the wine are “not just an object, something for the intellect [*nicht bloß für den Verstand ein Object*];” rather, the spirit of Jesus, in which the disciples find their unity, “has become a present

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. VPR 3:260-62, and see below (§32). Hegel contrasts the ‘externalist’ Roman Catholic view of the Eucharist to the “internal” or “memorialist” Reformed (i.e., Zwinglian) view; Hegel prefers the Lutheran doctrine of real presence as a mediating position between the two extremes.

object, a reality, for external feeling [*ist für das äußere Gefühl als Object gegenwärtig*]” (ETW 250-51/W 1:367).

Yet, Hegel remarks that the bread-body and wine-blood are subject to a vacillation between objectivity (reality) and subjectivity (action). The subjective love (the spirit of Jesus) has become objective, a thing (the bread, the wine), but in the very act of partaking or enjoying the supper, the thing becomes subjective once again: the bodily thing disappears and only the feeling remains (ETW 251/W 1:368). The subjective side and the objective side are not truly unified but only confused, since love has become visible in something that is going to be destroyed and consumed. “The intellect contradicts feeling, and vice versa [*Der Verstand widerspricht der Empfindung, die Empfindung dem Verstande*]” (ETW 252/W 1:369). Hegel sums up his early pessimism regarding the Eucharist by comparing it to the worship of a statue of Apollo, which, when ground to dust, leaves one’s devotion in tatters and one’s feelings cut off from the divine form that had obtained in the statue. The fragments of a statue can arouse no more wonder or worship in us than can a corpse, devoid of spirit, entertain us (to say nothing of sharing a meal with friends). Similarly,

after the supper the disciples began be sorrowful because of the impending loss of their master, but after a genuinely religious action the whole soul is at peace [*die ganze Seele befriedigt*]. And, after enjoying the supper, Christians today feel reverent wonder either without serenity or else with a melancholy serenity, because feeling’s intensity was separate from the intellect and both were one-sided, because worship was incomplete, since something divine was promised and it melted away in the mouth. (ETW 252-53/W 1:369)

The existing reality of the God-man—Jesus the Christ—can only be experienced as a loss. In

‘having’ Jesus in the bread and wine, the believers lose him; God disappears down their gullets, good as dead.

Hegel’s arrival in Jena in 1800 marked the beginning of a decisive phase of his thought, culminating in his 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In that work, he reiterates the sorry position of the believers in terms of what he calls the unhappy consciousness (*unglücklich Bewußtseyn*). The unhappy consciousness is characterized by the way that what it perceives as external to it (the other-worldly beyond, or the unchangeable) is also internal to its consciousness, thereby estranging it from itself (GW 9:121-122). This self-estrangement is redoubled and intensified by the death of the Christ, since the Christian community is beset by “the agonized feeling of the unhappy consciousness that *God himself is dead* [*das schmerzliche Gefühl des unglücklichen Bewußtseyns, daß Gott selbst gestorben ist*]” (GW 9:419). Yet, in the *Phenomenology*, this agony and melancholy is what paves the way to the spiritual realization of the religious community, in which it recognizes itself as the resurrected God. Hegel has in view here what, in *Faith and Knowledge* (another work from the Jena period, though unpublished in Hegel’s lifetime), he had called a “speculative Good Friday.”<sup>29</sup> On such a speculative Good Friday, at the Golgotha of absolute spirit, it is not only the man Jesus (the reality or *Wirklichkeit*), nor only the divine essence (*Gott selbst*), that dies, but spirit itself that, dying unto itself, pours itself out into itself, so as to recover itself—to recollect *itself* rather than recollecting the figure of love—as absolute spirit in the absolute knowledge of the concept.

Apropos of Hegel’s increasingly radical recuperations of Christianity during his years in

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<sup>29</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 191.

Jena, Frederick Beiser remarks that

it would be a complete misunderstanding of Hegel to think that he now regards himself, in any orthodox sense, as a Christian philosopher. His new sympathy toward Christianity never amounts to a Christian conversion. It is indeed telling that, although Hegel uses Christian metaphors to describe his philosophy, he refuses to call it Christian; indeed, he is explicit that it involves *transcending* Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

While we might have cause to quibble with Beiser's claim that Hegel's references to Christianity are only metaphorical (they seem, on the contrary, to be historically and really correlative to the unfolding of the whole), Beiser is surely correct that Hegel intended to effect something like a transcendence of Christianity by means of the philosophical concept. We should add that what is meant by such a 'transcendence' is not to be understood as positioning the concept outside of, or beyond, Christianity, but rather the transformation or conversion of Christianity into what it already is, but fails to recognize itself to be. That is to say, Hegel's aim is not the bare transcendence of Christianity but its supersession.

This, then, is what Jena has to do with Jerusalem. What was *accomplished for faith* at Golgotha near Jerusalem is, in Jena, *known as spirit*. As we will see in the following sections (§§30-31), the figures, representations, and positivities of history must themselves be poured out, so as to be resurrected and known as moments of the concept's immanent self-development and spirit's universal self-consciousness.

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<sup>30</sup> Beiser, *Hegel*, 135. Emphasis in original.



### §30 The Figures and the Moments

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is notoriously difficult to interpret, both in terms of its own content and its position in his system as a whole. It would take us too far afield to consider all of the debates and controversies surrounding the proper reading of the *Phenomenology*. Instead, I offer a brief gloss on its structure and meaning, inspired by Hegel's infamous declaration, in the Preface to the work, that "the true is the whole." I propose to read Hegel's dictum according to a different grammatical construction, namely, the future anterior or the future perfect. The true will have been the whole. To say that the true *will have been* the whole is not to say that the true *was* the whole all along, for this would be to posit an original unity or an absolute beginning, toward which thought is constantly trying to regress. Hegel, on the contrary, repeatedly and consistently emphasizes that what is true is a result, rather than an origin. "The true is the whole," he writes, "however, the whole is only the essence completing itself through its development. This much must be said of the absolute: It is essentially a *result*, and only at the *end* is it what it is in truth. Its nature consists just in this: to be actual, to be subject, or to be the becoming-of-itself" (GW 9:19). What needs to be illuminated is how the result—the true, the absolute—is discovered, uncovered, and known.

It seems to me that Hegel's methodological reflections in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* can give us a footing from which to grasp the true as a result (and from which to scale the hill to Golgotha). In fact, Hegel's methodology is not a methodology in the usual sense. One of the peculiarities of Hegel's thought, which he makes quite explicit in the text at hand, is that philosophical method is not only inseparable from the systematic outworking of scientific cognition, but is, in fact, identical to the system itself. Because the

“absolute alone is true,” any attempt to formulate a method that would serve as an instrument or medium with which to approach the absolute could only result in approximations. The instrument or the medium would always remain interposed—along with whatever external criteria make up their respective structures—between the absolute and the consciousness that wishes to comprehend it (GW 9:53-55). Instead, Hegel’s ‘deduction’ of the absolute proceeds according to the strictly internal criteria of consciousness itself. That is to say, Hegel’s method is not something other than the progressive unfolding of absolute knowledge; it is only the system following its own course, which Hegel memorably describes as

the path of natural consciousness pressing towards true knowing, or [...] the path of the soul wandering through the series of ways it takes shape [*die Reihe ihrer Gestaltungen*], as if these were stations put forward in advance to it by its own nature, so that it purifies itself into spirit by arriving at a cognition of what it is in itself through the complete experience of its own self. (GW 9:55).

This, incidentally, is the reason for the title of the work. The *Phenomenology* is, as Hegel himself says, “the exposition of knowing *as it appears*” (GW 9:55, my emphasis).

While it does not know itself as such as the outset, the protagonist of the *Phenomenology* is spirit. Hegel characterizes spirit’s journey to its absolute self-knowledge as a “path of doubt” or a “path of despair” (GW 9:56), because the natural consciousness with which spirit ‘begins’ is destined to suffer the negativity of a kenotic existence as it traverses its stages—a spiritual education (*Bildung*) where one must lose oneself so as to find oneself. Natural consciousness is a sort of baseline or common figure of consciousness, with which Hegel begins the *Phenomenology*. This is a perfectly natural place to begin, for natural consciousness mistakes itself straightaway for real knowledge and is thereby destined to be

disabused of this mistake. Hegel's gospel—his Good News for the fledgling consciousness—is that, while it is certainly not the real knowledge it thinks itself to be, it is nonetheless not nothing.

That is to say, the negativity that characterizes the lonely road where consciousness will discover itself as Spirit is not negative in the usual sense. There is a positive moment, a result of contradiction, that countersigns the power of contradiction. The movement of consciousness from station to station on the path of despair is characterized by negativity inasmuch as consciousness discovers its untruth, or discovers an in-itself outside of itself. Hegel inveighs against the skepticism of his day, which, in the results of its inquiries, always, according to the law of non-contradiction, sees such untruth as a “pure nothing” (GW 9:57). Against this, Hegel insists that such skepticism misses “the fact that this nothing is determinately the nothing *of that from which it results,*” for “only when taken as the nothing of that from which it emerges is the nothing in fact the true result; thus it is itself a *determinate* nothing and it has a *content*” (GW 9:57).

The result of a such contradiction, according to Hegel, is not a pure nothingness, but is in fact a novel determination of consciousness—a determinate negation. Jon Stewart observes that, “in the *Phenomenology*, after any given position has been rendered inconsistent, we are not left to start over again at the beginning, but rather somehow from the inconsistent view something remains or is preserved.”<sup>31</sup> The *Phenomenology* is, in the first place, a record of the transformations of consciousness. Consciousness is riven by internal contradictions that, in their resolution, produce a new content that signals the arrival of a new figure of

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<sup>31</sup> Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Systematic Interpretation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 41.

consciousness itself.<sup>32</sup> Consciousness discovers an in-itself or a truth that it takes to be outside of itself, and therefore beholds itself as untrue. Hegel's innovation is to have shown that the in-itself, and the contradiction that arises 'between' the in-itself and consciousness is, in fact, internal to consciousness itself. "Consciousness," Hegel writes, "is for its own self its *concept*; as a result it is immediately the going beyond the restricted, and, since this restriction belongs to consciousness, consciousness is the going beyond its own self" (GW 9:57). It is this singular power of consciousness—the power of the negative, of contradiction—that subjects consciousness to its self-imposed self-diremption, which results in a determinate negation, such that consciousness can take itself as an object of knowledge.

Hegel's argument thus proceeds according to internal criteria, provided to consciousness from within itself, such that the investigation of the object conducted by consciousness becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself (GW 9:59). It is not Hegel who conducts the comparison, nor is it Hegel who erects a standard of comparison (say, the correspondence of the knowing, or the concept, and the object) to which consciousness is beholden. It is consciousness itself that sets its own standard of knowing, and this standard is itself. Here, we see Hegel's 'non-method' in action, for Hegel himself (and the reader, or the philosophical 'we' that follows along) does not need to import any standards or received ideas to the investigation of the relation of consciousness to its object. Consciousness investigates the problem "as it is *in* and *for* itself" (GW 9:59). Moreover, Hegel says explicitly that by allowing the issue to be investigated by consciousness, "we are lifted above

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<sup>32</sup> GW 9:57: "While the result is grasped as it is in truth, a *determinate* negation, a new form has thereby immediately arisen, and in the negation, the transition is made whereby the progression through the complete series of shapes comes about on its own accord [*wodurch sich der Fortgang durch die vollständige Reihe der Gestalten von selbst ergibt*]."

comparing the two and, instead, conduct a genuine examination such that, while consciousness examines its own self, the only thing that remains to us is to look on” (GW 9:59, trans. modified). This is an extremely significant moment in Hegel’s exposition, for it is here that the reader is given to understand that the *Phenomenology* proceeds, as it were, on two tracks. On the first track, consciousness conducts its self-comparisons, discovering that its untruth is its truth, only inadequately expressed. On the second track, the reader-philosopher observes (or, at most, reconstructs) the transformations and transitions that consciousness undergoes along the way of its self-recognition as self-conscious spirit, reason, and, ultimately, absolute knowing. Only at the end, where the true will have been the whole, does spirit understand that it has become what it is; so, too, at the end, does the reader-philosopher recognize that they, too, are spirit. From the point of view of the absolute concept, the two tracks will have been one.

The only thing that is ‘added’ by the reader-philosopher on the second track is the observation and reconstruction of the first track, “whereby the series of experiences traversed by consciousness is elevated into a scientific progression, and which is not there for the consciousness we are observing” (GW 9:61). The reader-philosopher bears witness to what goes on “behind the back of consciousness” (GW 9:61), for what is, for the time being, ‘behind’ consciousness, just out of its ken, is the absolute concept.<sup>33</sup> What is for

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<sup>33</sup> GW 9:61: “While what at first appeared as the object degenerating for consciousness into a knowing of the object, and the *in-itself* becomes becomes a *being-for-consciousness of the in-itself*, this latter is the new object. As a result a new shape [*Gestalt*] of consciousness comes on the scene for which the essence is something different from what was the essence for the preceding shape [*Gestalt*]. It is this circumstance which guides the whole series of shapes of consciousness in their necessity. However, it is just this necessity itself, or the *emergence* of the new object, which presents itself to consciousness without consciousness knowing why this happens to it. It takes place for us, as it were, behind the back of consciousness.”

consciousness an object (or an ‘in-itself’) of investigation is, for us (*für uns*, the reader-philosophers), a “movement and coming to be [*als Bewegung und Werden*]” (GW 9:61).

What consciousness undergoes on the path of its figures is what spirit will have undertaken in its becoming-absolute. The *Phenomenology* will have been the science of the experience of consciousness, in which the moments of the whole will have appeared as figures of consciousness that spirit is.<sup>34</sup> That is to say, spirit has a history; or, rather, spirit will have been history.

In her 2012 *Memory, History, Justice in Hegel*, Angelica Nuzzo argues that there are not one but two models for thinking history in Hegel’s work. The first model is developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where, as we have just seen, spirit develops itself phenomenologically, appearing in a logico-historical series of figures (*Gestalten*). Nuzzo draws our attention to the fact that spirit consummates itself through a form of collective memory—or, in her verbiage, “ethical memory.”<sup>35</sup> The second model of Hegelian history, developed in the *Logic* and in the *Philosophy of Right*, Nuzzo calls the ‘justice-model.’ This second model is based on the principle of justice and the logical power of contradiction and judgment, typified by Hegel’s famous dictum, *Weltgeschichte* is *Weltgericht*. Here, I limit myself to drawing out the stakes and significance of Nuzzo’s reconstruction of the memory-

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<sup>34</sup> GW 9:61: “The experience through which consciousness learns about itself can, according to its concept, comprehend within itself nothing less than the whole system of consciousness, or the whole realm of the truth of spirit, so that the moments of truth present themselves in this their proper determinateness, not as being abstract, pure moments, but rather in the way that they are for consciousness, or in the way that consciousness itself comes on the scene in its relation to them. In this way, the moments of the whole are *shapes of consciousness* [*die Momente des Ganzen*, *Gestalten des Bewußtseyns sind*].”

<sup>35</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 2. By ‘ethical,’ Nuzzo means the collective, cultural, national, and ‘memorial’ self-understanding of a given historical people.

model in the *Phenomenology*, as it has important consequences for our inquiry into figural interpretation and the logic of supersession.

While I follow Nuzzo more or less to the end of her argument, I draw a rather different conclusion than she does. In short, I am not convinced by Nuzzo's claim that the result of the final recollection (*Erinnerung*) of the *Phenomenology* consists in the definitive elimination of "all meaning of (and all need for) figurative history."<sup>36</sup> It seems to me that, while the representational form, in which the figures of spirit (*Geistesgestalten*) appear, is superseded in and through the concept, the figural-representational history exhibited by the *Phenomenology* plays a pivotal role in the later Hegel, because religious representation is necessary for the ongoing work of philosophical thinking. Specifically, it seems to me that, while what Nuzzo calls the "structural difference" between the figures and the moments of spirit is, indeed, abolished in the concept, what results is not the final and decisive jettisoning of the figures from history, but the revelation of their unity (their concept), thus their ultimate convertibility or identity with the moments. That this unity can be grasped only conceptually (i.e., in the mind of God) is no argument against the reality of figural-representational history. The structural distinction is sublated or superseded, but not discarded in a one-sided way. What is 'eliminated' is the abstract positivity of the figures, such that the structural distinction between the figures and the moments give way to their convertibility in the

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<sup>36</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 47-48: "Recollection, however, being the self-comprehension of spirit in its concept, eliminates time, eliminates the exteriority of intuition, and eliminates all meaning of (and all need for) figurative history. Memory stops time, immortalizes death, freezes the flow of history's manifold figures in a still, collective snapshot. It follows that at this point, as memory intervenes, history (at least figurative or phenomenological history) reaches its end. And this is the true conclusion of the *Phenomenology*. History and memory part ways once and for all—and part ways on *conceptual* grounds."

concept.<sup>37</sup> In the ‘Auerbachian’ terms that we’ve developed above (see §8-11), the figures are promises represented; the moments are promises spiritually understood—or conceptually grasped.

Nuzzo argues that “the *Phenomenology* works on the basis of its textual ‘internal memory,’ namely, on the basis of a web of internal recollections and cross references that are responsible for the advancement of the process.”<sup>38</sup> As we saw above, the exposition offered by the *Phenomenology* plays out on ‘two tracks.’ The first ‘track’ is followed—and peopled, so to speak—by spirit itself as it undergoes and undertakes its *Bildungsroman*. The second ‘track’ is followed by the narrator/reader (or the philosophical ‘we’) who bears witness to spirit’s development from the simple self-certainty of consciousness, through the various stages of spirit’s development, up to its triumphant return to consciousness and sense-certainty in the simple concept of absolute knowing. The ‘internal memory’ highlighted by Nuzzo is an elegant way of describing both tracks at once. On the one hand, it is a way of describing the structure (and, too, the power) of spirit as it becomes what it is. Recollection is something that spirit *does*, and thus something that spirit *is*. On the other hand, the *Phenomenology* itself is interpreted by Nuzzo as “the work of memory” itself, inasmuch as it is the exposition not of a process that spirit will, someday, undergo and undertake, but a process that spirit *has gone through*. That spirit is a historical reality “is not the assumption on which the *Phenomenology* is based, but rather its demonstrative outcome.”<sup>39</sup> History is

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<sup>37</sup> See VPR 3:179-189 for Hegel’s distinction between ‘bad’ abstract positivity and ‘good’ Christian positivity.

<sup>38</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 20-21.

<sup>39</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 21.



what spirit is when spirit does what it does, namely, when it transforms the figures of its past into the fulfillment of its future, or when substance becomes subject.

Nuzzo poses two central questions about the *Phenomenology*. First, how does the *Phenomenology* integrate history into the movement of self-consciousness (or, to what extent is the *Phenomenology* a philosophy of history)? Second, what role does memory play in the transformation of substance into subject (or, to what extent is spirit structured in and through its acts of memory)?<sup>40</sup> Nuzzo argues that

the key to both questions is the concept of 'figure' (*Gestalt*) and the process of 'figuration' (*Gestaltung*) and the use that the *Phenomenology* makes of them. The idea of 'figure' is both the means that Hegel employs in order to channel history into the development of consciousness and the mediating structure that allows substance to become subject.<sup>41</sup>

Nuzzo's interest in the figures stems from the fact that *Gestalt* is the "concrete manifestation" of the internal memory of the *Phenomenology*.<sup>42</sup> It is also the term that mediates the transition from Hegel's phenomenological investigation of consciousness to his phenomenological investigation of spirit and spirit's historical reality. As we noted just above, the *Phenomenology* is replete with figures. In the 'first part' of the work (i.e., the first five chapters that comprise the sections "Consciousness," "Self-Consciousness," and

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<sup>40</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 21-22.

<sup>41</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 22.

“Reason”), these figures are figures of consciousness (*Gestalten des Bewusstseins*).<sup>43</sup> The ‘second part’ of the work commences when spirit, having achieved its abstract and immediate form of self-consciousness, realizes that it is the result of the preceding series of figures of consciousness and that those figures are, therefore, moments of its own totality (GW 9:239). This is the first “*locus memoriae*” identified by Nuzzo and it is only at this point that history emerges explicitly and thematically in the *Phenomenology*.<sup>44</sup>

Spirit is the power of recollection (*Erinnerung*), but such recollection changes the structure of what is recollected. Apropos of spirit’s first, decisive recollection of itself, Nuzzo writes that

what until now appeared as the progression of consciousness’s figures, is in truth the act of spirit’s recollection of itself into itself. An act of collective memory retrospectively analyzing the whole, abstracting from specific contexts, and dwelling on its single stations, reveals that the ‘figures of consciousness’ are ‘moments’ of spirit’s own reality. In the figural history staged by the *Phenomenology*, spirit is the

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<sup>43</sup> See Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 36ff, on the ‘two parts’ of the *Phenomenology*. Hyppolite points out that the ‘first part’ of the *Phenomenology* (i.e., the first five chapters that comprise the sections ‘Consciousness,’ ‘Self-Consciousness,’ and ‘Reason’) is concerned with history only in the sense that it refers to certain philosophical epochs as examples or illustrations of the corresponding abstract moment of the immanent development of spirit (e.g., Stoicism and Skepticism correspond to the moment of the unhappy consciousness). The three major moments—consciousness, self-consciousness, and reason—are not even to be considered as a succession: “They are not in time; they are abstractions contrived from within the whole of spirit and studied in their separate development.” He notes, on the other hand, that the specific forms of the moments, for example, sense-certainty, perception, and understanding in consciousness, “can be considered as successive moments within the moment of which they are a part” (37). He hesitates to declare whether or not the phenomenological development of these moments “coincides with a passage of time” or is merely “susceptible to being represented temporally” (ibid.).

<sup>44</sup> The second “*locus memoriae*,” to which we will turn below, is the final recollection described in the Absolute Knowing chapter.

*fulfillment* of consciousness's figures—not a transcendent fulfillment but their true historical realization. Figures have reality and indeed 'existence' only to the extent that they belong to spirit as its moments.<sup>45</sup>

When spirit, so to speak, arrives on the scene, it appears as the comprehension of itself as the actuality of self-conscious reason. It is, as Hegel puts it, "the *ethical life* of a *people* to the extent that it *is* the *immediate truth*; it is the individual who is a world" (GW 9:240). Yet, because its truth is only immediate and abstract, spirit must 'figure' a future for itself, into which it must—in the 'second part' of the *Phenomenology*—advance and from which it must draw its concept (i.e., spirit must become subject, the actor, rather than the patient, of its historical destiny). The future is given in the form of "a series of shapes [*Reihe von Gestalten*]" through which spirit must pass, but these new *Gestalten* are figures of spirit (*Geistesgestalten*). They are distinguished from the preceding series of figures—which were figures of consciousness (*Geistesbewußteins*)—by their actuality or reality: "they are real spirits, genuine actualities, and, instead of being shapes only of consciousness, they are shapes of a world [*Gestalten einer Welt*]" (GW 9:240).

History 'begins' when a people comprehends itself as a world with a real, recollected past and a collective, recollecting, future. Hence Nuzzo's designation of the 'memory-model' of the *Phenomenology* as 'ethical' or 'collective' memory. While spirit is the result of the moments it has recollected, it is also the "self-supporting, absolute, real essence [*das sich selbst tragende, absolute reale Wesen*]" (GW 9:239) that has supported the development of the figures-cum-moments 'all along.' What must be kept in mind is that this (temporal and

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<sup>45</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 27.

historical) ‘all along’ is only intelligible from the new point of view that has been achieved by spirit, which, because it is the fulfillment and realization of its figures, is itself the time and history in which the moments can be recollected as the timeless constituents of spirit’s reality and therefore figured (or refigured) as spirit’s history. Hegel refers to this process, in which spirit converts its moments into the new figures of its history, as ‘figuration’ (*Gestaltung*) (GW 9:15).

Nuzzo theorizes a “structural distinction” between the figures and the moments that functions as the ‘motor’ of the phenomenological development of spirit’s self-consciousness. Whereas the moments are universal, synchronic, atemporal, and properly structural moments or elements of spirit, the figures are, by contrast, determinate, diachronic and historical. The figures are the forms or figures of spirit that appear in succession.<sup>46</sup> Hegel makes this distinction in the introduction to the Religion chapter, where it turns out that religion is the figure in which spirit represents itself to itself; religion is the “garment” or “clothing” of spirit’s representation (*Kleid seiner Vorstellung*) (GW 9:365). Religion is the “whole of spirit [*Ganzen des Geistes*],” the simple totality or absolute self of the moments of spirit, inasmuch as it presupposes the course of the development of its moments. Hegel explicitly identifies the moments of spirit as consciousness, self-consciousness, reason and the *immediate* figure of spirit as it appeared in the ethical shape of a world (GW 9:365-6). Taken all together, the totality of the moments of spirit “constitutes the worldly, secular existence of spirit per se [*macht den Geist in seiner weltlichen Daseyn überhaupt aus*]” (GW 9:365). That is to say, religion is the representation of the worldly existence of spirit.

Here, Hegel has in view the consequences, for the concept of history, that flow from the

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<sup>46</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 36-37.

theological distinction between time and eternity that I discussed above (§24). Religion—Christianity in particular—is a unique figure of spirit in that it is the representation of spirit as a historical totality, bounded on one side by creation and on the other side by the eschaton. This representation is both the strength and the weakness of religion: it represents reality, but it only *represents* reality, and represents it as fundamentally dependent on what lies beyond it.

To the extent that spirit in religion *thinks* of itself *representationally*, it is indeed consciousness, and the actuality implicit within religion is the shape and the garment of its representation. However, in this kind of representational thought [*Vorstellung*], actuality does not receive its full due [*ihr vollkommnes Recht*], namely, that it is not only a garment, it is also a free-standing self-sufficient existence. Conversely, because actuality lacks consummation within itself [*ihr die Vollendung in ihr selbst mangelt*], it is a *determinate* shape [*bestimmte Gestalt*] that does not attain what it is supposed to exhibit, namely, spirit conscious of itself. (GW 9: 365)

When, at the end of the Religion chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel turns explicitly to revealed religion (i.e., to Christianity), it becomes clear that religious representation is a pivotal, if still incomplete, form of thought. Its incompleteness is due to a specific function of transcendence in Christianity—namely, eschatology. Hegel refers to the doctrine of the Incarnation, noting that, in the Christ, spirit is God-in-person: the “immediate self of actuality.” While the Christ is “the *immediately* present God,” the Christ’s ascension results in his being passing over “into *having-been*” (GW 9: 407). This absence means that the immediacy acquires its negative moment, namely, the universal self-consciousness of a religious community. In that moment of negativity, spirit is a synthesis of the singular

individual (the absent God-man) and the consciousness of this presence-cum-absence in the community—“and what the singular individual is for this community is the complete whole of spirit” (GW 9:408).

The problem with this religious self-consciousness is that it is structured by the pastness (the Incarnation) and the remoteness (the Parousia) of the universality of this immediate experience of God. It is merely representational; it exists and perdures in time and history, remembering the first event and awaiting the second event.

This *form of representing* constitutes the determinateness in which spirit is conscious of itself in this, its religious community. This form is not yet the self-consciousness of spirit which has advanced to its concept as concept; the mediation is still incomplete. Therefore, in this combination of being and thinking, there is a defect present, that the spiritual essence is still burdened by an unreconciled estrangement into a this-worldliness and an other-worldly beyond. The *content* is the true content, but all of its moments, posited as lying in the element of representational thinking, have the character of not being conceptually comprehended. Rather, they appear as completely self-sufficient aspects which are *externally* related to each other. (GW 9:408)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. GW 9:406-7. “God is therefore here *revealed* as *He is*; *He is there* in the way that He is *in itself*; He is there as spirit. God is solely attainable in pure speculative knowing, He is only in that knowing, and he is only that knowing itself, for He is spirit, and this speculative knowing is revealed religion’s knowing. That knowing knows Him as *thinking*, or pure essence, and it knows this thinking as being and existence, and knows existence as the negativity of itself, and hence as the self, as *this self* and a universal self. This is precisely what revealed religion knows. — The hopes and expectations of the preceding world pushed their way towards this revelation, towards the intuition of what the absolute essence is, and towards finding themselves in that revelation. This joy comes to be to self-consciousness, and it takes up the whole world, this joy in viewing oneself in the absolute essence, for it is spirit, it is the simple movement of those pure moments, which it itself expresses: The essence is known as spirit as a result, at first, of its being intuited as *immediate self-consciousness*.” And yet, this immediate self-consciousness is still found in the *person* of a “sensuous other,” namely, the Christ, and thus the figure of revealed religion “does not yet have the form of the

That is to say, the moments of spirit remain represented; they are figures. While Christianity achieves an immediate universal self-consciousness, its satisfaction is still figured and represented as lying in something alien and other. Salvation and spiritual reconciliation, which are found in the heart of religious consciousness, are ultimately something that lies beyond the present world:

What enters into [the religious community's] consciousness as the *in-itself*, or the aspect of *pure mediation*, is the reconciliation which lies in the other-worldly beyond, but what appears as *current* [*gegenwärtig*; 'present'], as the aspect of *immediacy* and *existence*, is the world, which still has to await its transfiguration. (GW 9:420-1)

The religious community has not—not yet—grasped itself as a moment of spirit's—God's—self-consciousness. Religion gives, or rather is, the content of the concept, but not yet its form. As Hegel puts it in the Absolute Knowing chapter, the unification of consciousness with self-consciousness “has already come to pass” in Christianity, but “it has not come to pass according to its genuine form, for the religious aspect is the aspect of the *in-itself* which stands in contrast to that of self-consciousness” (GW 9:425-6).<sup>48</sup> The concept still has the

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concept.” This preliminary form of universality is not yet “the form of *thinking itself, of the concept as concept*; it is rather the universality of actuality, the all-ness of the self and is the elevation of existence into representational thought.” In other words, Christianity is what makes history what it is, namely, actual and real, but it remains temporal, with eternity in view, and thus not yet fully fulfilled or conceptual: Christianity itself must be superseded, reconciled with the world.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. GW 9:368: “However, although spirit indeed arrives at its true shape in revealed religion, the very shape itself and the representational thought of it are still the aspect which has not been overcome. Spirit must pass over from that aspect into the concept in order to fully dissolve the form of objectivity in the concept, the concept which likewise includes its opposite within itself. At that point, spirit has grasped the concept of itself as we have just grasped it [i.e., as the reader will have seen at the end of the Spirit chapter: “the God that appears in the midst of those who know themselves as pure knowing” (GW 9:362)], and its shape, or the element of its existence, is, because it is the concept, spirit itself.”

form of an ‘already ... not yet.’ The concept still appears in determinate, figural form; it appears in time and history—even as time and history. Its fulfillment will require that time itself be abolished.

This religious-representational form of spirit’s self-consciousness is particularly suited to revealing the structural distinction between the figures and the moments. When the moments of spirit are viewed from the vantage point of religion,

the course those moments travel is not to be represented as taking place in time. Only the whole spirit is in time, and the shapes [*Gestalten*], which are shapes of the whole *spirit* as such [*Gestalten des hansen Geistes als solchen*], exhibit themselves in a sequence, one after the other, for only the whole has genuine actuality, and the whole thus has the form of pure freedom with regard to others, which expresses itself as time. However, the *moments* of spirit as a whole (consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit) have, because they are moments, no existence distinct from each other. (GW 9:365)

Hegel notes that, while each of the moments of spirit in question has differentiated itself into different figures (e.g., sense-certainty and perception in consciousness), spirit is inevitably called or determined (*durch die Bestimmung*) to descend from the timeless universality (*Allgemeinheit*) of its self-differentiating moments into time, where its moments assume their figures and thus appear as singular individuality (*Einzelheit*). The moments of spirit are themselves the “determination” or “mediating middle” between spirit’s totality and its incarnation in its figures, but the figures themselves are the singular individuals (e.g., a world, or a person or a name who expresses a world, as with, for instance, ‘Napoleon,’ ‘Socrates,’ or ‘Jesus’). Unlike the moments, which are differentiated logically and have no



independent existence, these figures are temporally differentiated; they are the exhibition (*Darstellung*) of reality (*Wirklichkeit*) in a temporal sequence and, as Hegel makes clear, “the succeeding shapes [*Gestalten*] retain in themselves the preceding shapes” (GW 9:366).

The structural difference of the figures and the moments is the motor of phenomenological development because the figures cannot refer to themselves; they find their fulfillment in something other than themselves. Nuzzo observes that “religious representation aims at capturing the eternal; its figure, instead, is inexorably anchored in time.”<sup>49</sup> The trouble is that, on the one hand, the structural distinction is itself one-sided: it is on the side of the moments. On the other hand, the temporal distinction is also one-sided: it is on the side of the figures. As such, the figures appear to have an independent historical reality. As Nuzzo notes, with some dismay, they even seem to exert a determining influence on spirit’s reality.<sup>50</sup> This concern echoes Paul Ricoeur’s interpretation of the conceptual ‘status’ of the *Vorstellungen* (representations, ‘picture-thoughts’) in Hegel’s thought, since, as Hegel observes in the Preface, spirit’s unfolding is subject to the determinateness (*Bestimmtheit*) of the process, namely, “the constraint of proceeding from one ‘shape [or figure]’ to another.”<sup>51</sup> Hegel even remarks, near the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*, that

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<sup>49</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 34.

<sup>50</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 36-37. “Since time is the cipher of true actual existence, only what is actual is in time. And only spirit in its totality has actuality and is in time. Since the moments express neither the reality nor the totality of spirit, they do not occur in time; their linear progression only a systematic and logical progression. The figures instead, despite their partiality, directly shape the reality of spirit. [...] Since the figures are *real* and are representative of the *reality* of spirit they participate in its history; their linear succession (in the chapter *Geist*) is a historical sequence.”

<sup>51</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Status of *Vorstellung* in Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion,” in *Meaning, Truth, and God*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 80-81. Ricoeur even says that *Vorstellung*, in the context of the Preface, “becomes the focus of the resistance to the process of ‘sublation’ (*Aufhebung*) as the ‘tremendous power for the negative,’ and “tends to be equated with aborted *Aufhebung*” (81).

spirit's achievement of absolute knowledge closes the series of its figures (*hat ... die Bewegung seines Gestaltens beschlossen*), and that the movement of its figures had constituted an insurmountable (*unüberwundenen*) burden for it (GW 9:431). The burden is—or was—due to the differences that obtain in consciousness, or the abstract positivity of its figures. Again, one gets the impression that the figures act like brakes on the movement of spirit, yet it seems that spirit cannot do without them, else it remain abstract and lifeless.<sup>52</sup>

Significantly, Nuzzo cites Auerbach's theory of *figura* as a way to understand what is at stake in Hegel, as well as a way to understand the influence of Hegel's thought on Auerbach, though she does not develop a reading of Auerbach himself at any length.<sup>53</sup> When she pauses to reflect on Hegel's use of *Gestalt* (the one side of the structural difference), Nuzzo first points out the influence of Goethe's philosophy of nature, as well as Kant's and Schiller's respective deployments of *Gestalt* in aesthetics. For Goethe, *Gestalt* "expresses the *dynamic* character of a natural structure" and its close connection to the process of natural formation (*Bildung*). But, Nuzzo writes, inasmuch as it renders "the Latin *figura*, *Gestalt* bears a meaning connected to the eschatological interpretation of history."<sup>54</sup> Here, her reference is two-fold. She cites Auerbach's "Figura," but she also cites Luther, who, in his defense of the real presence of the Christ in the Eucharist, translates Tertullian's *figura* with the (archaic)

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<sup>52</sup> Hegel's task (*die Arbeit*), as he puts it in the Preface, is not to purify the individual thinker of all that is sensuous and immediate (i.e., purify her of her figures), but, because the modern individual finds abstractions ready made for her, consists in "actualizing and spiritually animating the universal through the sublation of fixed and determinate thought" (GW 9:28). That is, Hegel aims not to freeze the figures so as to cut them out or away, but to give them the principle of their fluid movement in thought, namely, their identity with the moments.

<sup>53</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 25.

<sup>54</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 25.

German *gestallt*.<sup>55</sup>

Nuzzo writes:

As Erich Auerbach shows in his fundamental work on Dante (significantly mentioning Hegel in his discussion), a ‘figural interpretation’ of history directly refers every earthly event or phenomenon as earthly ‘figure’ to the divine plan that finally fulfills (or ‘realizes’) this figure in the overall providential order. Although the earthly ‘figure’ has its meaning only its heavenly ‘fulfillment,’ it is nonetheless historically real: its reality is not lost in the abstraction or allegory or symbolism.<sup>56</sup>

Certainly, there is something different about Hegel’s presentation of the figures and their fulfillments, namely, that the transcendence of the vertical line is interiorized (by way of recollection, *Erinnerung*) and poured out (by way of kenosis, *Entäußerung*) on the immanent plane of history. Eternity must be known in and through time, not opposed to time. As Nuzzo puts it:

Religious recollection does bring spirit to its ‘*Vollendung*.’ And, yet, in an important reversal, this occurs not through the elimination of history in the representation of the eternal, but through the historicization of religion and of religious memory. Thereby the *Aufhebung* of representation, and with it the *Aufhebung* of the figural interpretation of history, is achieved, and the *Phenomenology* is brought to the

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<sup>55</sup> See Martin Luther, *Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar, 1883 ff., Vol. 23, 219ff; Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 37: Word and Sacrament III, ed. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 108-115. Luther writes: “Exactly that which we call *gestallt*, ‘form,’ Tertullian calls in Latin *figura*” (110). I return to the significance of Luther—and to Hegel’s Lutheran interpretation of the Eucharist—below (§32).

<sup>56</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 25.

threshold of its conclusion. Only ‘absolute knowing’ and the ‘concept’ will eventually ‘eliminate’ time. [...] We discover that history is not eliminated but rather repeated in religious representation. Thus the ‘becoming’ of religion is ultimately the story of its entering world history—of the figuration or incarnation of the absolute essence in revealed religion.<sup>57</sup>

That is to say, what Hegel accomplishes in the *Phenomenology* is not a destruction of religious representation but its fulfillment. Hegel gives Christianity what, because of its eschatological and figural form of representation, it could grasp in itself but never for itself: its own history.

We saw above (§24) that the radical distinction between time and eternity is analogous to the gulf between sacred and secular history. In Augustine, temporal, secular history is the result of the distention of the human mind and the distortions of its desires. The history of salvation plays out in the registration of the decisions and conversions of the human heart in the eternity of the mind of God. Secular history obscures eternity. Nevertheless, eternity was once visible in history: in the Incarnation. We can now add that the unification of history and eternity (i.e., the absolute concept) that is begun by the Incarnation requires—as Christian doctrine holds, and as Hegel himself recognizes—that the appearance of eternity in time in the person of the Christ, the emptying-out of God into human form, must itself be emptied. There must be a kenosis of the kenosis, or the negation of the negativity of God’s remove from the world. This brings us back to Golgotha.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Nuzzo, *Memory*, 39.

<sup>58</sup> It is worth pointing out that Nuzzo tends to ignore the religious (or theological) content of the *Phenomenology*. Where religion is treated, it is only as a means to the end of showing that philosophy overcomes its religious-representational form. She does not mention Hegel’s invocation of Golgotha

### §31 The Fulfillment of Golgotha

Hegel describes the arrival of spirit at its final, consummated figure, absolute knowing, as a transformation of spirit's conception of its own content.

What in religion was *content*, or the form of representation an *other* [i.e., the transcendent God], is here the *self's* own *doing* [*ist hier Thuns des Selbsts*]. The concept makes it binding that the content is that of the *self's* own *doing*. For this concept is, as we see, the knowing of the self's doing within itself as all essentiality and all existence, the knowing of *this subject* as *substance* and of the substance as this knowing of its doing. (GW 9:427)

Scientific cognition does not appear "in time and actuality" until spirit has reached this transformative consciousness of itself. In order to reach itself, spirit must complete "the labor

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in the final lines of the *Phenomenology*. On the one hand, this makes sense. Nuzzo announces that her reading of Hegel accords with the anti-metaphysical and anti-theological interpretations that have risen to prominence in recent decades (Nuzzo, *Memory*, 117). She also notes that Hegel is not always faithful to the systematic implications of the *Logic*, singling out the *Vorlesungen* (lectures) in particular. Presumably she has in mind the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* and the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. In the anti-metaphysical reading of Hegel, religion is only a stage on the way to absolute spirit; it has no lasting significance for Hegel's thought other than its mediating role. On the other hand, as we've seen above (§28), religious representation is not something that Hegel leaves behind, refutes, or jettisons in his later logical works, but is both essential and necessary for philosophy if philosophy is to prove capable of performing its proper, specific, and singular task: transforming representations into concepts. This is not a position at which Hegel arrives in the decades following the *Phenomenology*, but is already stated explicitly in the chapter on absolute knowing. Spirit cannot achieve its self-transparency and self-consciousness in the absolute concept without passing through time and history. Spirit's passage through time and history is subject to an anachronism: "the content of religion expresses what *spirit is* earlier in time than science does, but it is science alone which is spirit's true knowing of itself" (GW 9:430). In other words, religion gives the concept (God's pure thought is God's pure activity) in representational form; science knows that what is represented as God is, in fact, the activity of spirit itself, the self as such. Religion promises; science fulfills.

of compelling its incomplete shapes [*seine unvollkommene Gestalt*] to provide for its consciousness the shape of its essence [*Gestalt seines Wesens*], and in this manner to bring *its self-consciousness* in balance with its *consciousness*” (GW 9:428). The imbalance between self-consciousness and consciousness is due to the burdensome character of the temporal-historical figures that provide the substance of spirit with a much richer content than is found in the simple, implicit concept. Thus, when spirit’s substance initially becomes self-conscious, it has only the abstract moments of its becoming for its content. And yet, because they are moments (i.e., vanishing magnitudes, as in infinitesimal calculus), self-consciousness is in motion; since it is what moves itself, spirit “enriches itself” with the wealth of its time and its history. What, for spirit still en route to itself, is a burden, is for the self-conscious concept a wealth, which it has created through its own activity and that it, therefore, has created *for* the very consciousness from which it is drawing.<sup>59</sup>

The imbalance between self-consciousness and consciousness is also the reason that spirit necessarily appears in time as a historical reality (or, put another way, why spirit appears as a succession of figures). Once the requisite balance is achieved in the concept, the fulfilled totality of time and history appears as the result of the purely logical movements of the moments, which are spirit’s own activity (or, put in representational terms, history is the visible, revealed will of God). In consciousness, the fulfilled whole is prior to the moments because, in the representational-figural form of thought that is proper to religion, history is

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<sup>59</sup> “While as pure movements these moments impel themselves forward, self-consciousness enriches itself until it has wrested the entire substance from consciousness and has absorbed into itself the entire structure of the substance’s essentialities, and—while this negative conduct towards objectivity is equally positive, is a positing—it has created these elements from out of itself and has thereby at the same time produced them for consciousness” (GW 9:428-9).

conceived as a providential totality bounded, and thus limited, by eternity.<sup>60</sup> This difference compels Hegel to signal the inadequacy and incompleteness of time, yet he does so not in order to denigrate time in favor of eternity but to show that the difference must not remain a difference. So long as time is limited by, because opposed to, eternity, eternity is limited as well and is not, in fact, eternal at all.<sup>61</sup> Spirit must recognize that it is eternal, but this recognition must take the form of a supersession of time itself, in which the emptiness, *not the richness and fullness*, of time is erased or balanced out (*tilgt*). This turning point of Hegel's argument is prone to misunderstanding. Let us dwell a moment on it.

Hegel writes that “*time is the concept itself that is there and is represented to consciousness as empty intuition*” (GW 9:429). Here, Hegel makes a clear reference to Kant's transcendental aesthetic, where time is understood as the pure, or empty, form of inner sense, according to which experience is structured by the form of temporal succession.<sup>62</sup> Hegel's contribution is to show that time as empty intuition, as the form of succession, is not merely inner sense but is the way that the pure ‘self’ of the concept is intuited—but not grasped or conceptualized—in exteriority. Because time is represented as empty intuition,

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<sup>60</sup> “In the concept which knows itself as the concept, the *moments* thereby come on the scene prior to the *fulfilled whole*, whose coming-to-be [*Werden*] is the movement of those moments. In contrast, in *consciousness* the whole is prior to the moments, but not as conceptually comprehended [*unbegriffne*]” (GW 9:429).

<sup>61</sup> Hegel makes a similar point, this time with regard to the difference between the finite and the infinite, in the *Encyclopedia Logic*. There, Hegel argues that if the infinite is merely opposed to the finite, then the infinite is, by definition, limited by what opposes it and thus not infinite at all. See EL 149-152.

<sup>62</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 172-192, esp. 178-182.

spirit necessarily appears in time, and appears in time as long as it does not *grasp* [erfaßt] its pure concept, which is to say, as long as it does not erase time [*nicht die Zeit tilgt*]. Time is the pure self *externally* intuited by the self but not *grasped* [nicht erfaßte] by the self; it is only the intuited concept. (GW 9:429)

The ‘erasure’ that Hegel speaks of is not to be understood as a final or total erasure; it should rather be read as the sublation or supersession of time. Hegel’s term, *tilgt*, signifies erasure or deletion, but also repayment of a debt or the balancing of an account. The ‘erasure’ at stake is not a pure annihilation but a negation of the purity and emptiness of time construed as mere intuition of succession.

As this concept grasps itself, it sublates its temporal form [*hebt er seine Zeitform auf*], conceptually comprehends the intuiting, and is conceptually comprehended and conceptually comprehended intuiting [*ist begriffnes und begreifendes Anschauen*].  
— Time thus appears as the destiny and necessity of the spirit that is not yet completed within itself. (GW 9:429)

This, indeed, is the meaning of supersession. History is not simply the contingent succession of persons and events that are related to one another externally, but the inner, spiritual truth of their unity. The abstract identity of the figures and their fulfillments is a function of their difference or relation of similitude. The fulfillment is the ‘future original,’ or the concrete identity, the truth, or the concept of that difference.

The very notion of a ‘future original’ suggests that time is neither empty nor linear, but rather recursive. Inasmuch as it is superseded in the “conceptually comprehended intuition,” time is a circle that knows itself not as an abstract theorem (i.e., a geometrical figure where



every point of the curve is equidistant from the center), but knows itself in and through itself, because it is a curve that, by both anchoring itself in itself and extending itself outside itself, has *drawn* itself from itself.<sup>63</sup> Hegel says as much of spirit:

Spirit is in itself the movement which is cognition—the transformation of that former *in-itself* into *for-itself*, of *substance* into *subject*, of the object of *consciousness* into the object of *self-consciousness*, i.e., into an object that is just as much sublated, or into the *concept*. This transformation is a circle returning back into itself, which presupposes its beginning and reaches its beginning only at the end. (GW 9:429)

What Hegel has in view here is the consummation of spirit's journey in the "equality of the self with itself" (GW 9:430), or the identity and unity of substance and subject in absolute spirit. Significantly, Hegel's discussion of the role of time in the *Bildung* (cultivation, education) and *Gestaltung* (figuration, configuration) of absolute spirit leads him back to the 'eschatological problem' of religious representation.

The movement of spirit is described by the *Phenomenology* as spirit's accomplishment of "actual history [wirkliche Geschichte]" (GW 9:430). Apropos of this actual history, the Christian community, which is "initially the substance of absolute spirit," is not in an especially enviable position. Hegel highlights the acute and intolerable eschatological anguish of the faithful in their fear and trembling. "The religious community," he writes,

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<sup>63</sup> Here I have in mind the distinction drawn by Spinoza between formal and genetic definitions. A formal definition of a circle only indicates a property of a circle ("a figure in which the lines drawn from the center to the circumference are equal"), but a genetic definition penetrates to the essence of a circle, namely, its proximate cause and power of action ("a figure that is described by any line of which one end is fixed and the other movable"). See Benedict de Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 39-40.

“is the coarse consciousness which has an existence all the more harsh and barbaric as its inner spirit is deeper, and whose dull and expressionless self has an even more difficult labor in dealing with its essence, with the alien content of its consciousness” (GW 9:430).

Hegel then describes what the concept will have accomplished for Christianity at the Golgotha of absolute spirit; or, from the point of view of the spirit of Christianity, what is required for the Christian community to surrender the work of anguish and finitude and to take up, instead, the work of spirit that it had all along prefigured.

Not until it has abandoned the hope of sublating alienness in an external, i.e., alien manner, does that [Christian] consciousness in itself (because the sublated alien mode is the return into self-consciousness) appeal to its own world and present time [*an seine eigne Welt und Gegenwart*], discover that world to be its own property [*als sein Eigentum*], and thus will have taken the first step to climb down from the *intellectual world*, or, instead, to give spirit [*begeistern*] to the abstract element of the intellectual world with the actual self [*mit dem wirklichen Selbst*]. (GW 9:430)<sup>64</sup>

In other words, Christianity will never be what it is (namely, the witness of spirit) unless it is reconciled to the present world. So long as it is turned toward the distant past (the Incarnation) and the remote future (the Parousia), Christianity cannot properly inhabit the present except as the harrowing ellipsis of the temporal-existential formula “already ... not yet.” As with all things spiritual, Christianity must lose itself, that it might gain itself.

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<sup>64</sup> Remarkably, this description is pitched in terms that closely approximate what Blumenberg would call the ‘proper’ concept of secularization (see LMA 13-26), namely, that of the ‘secular’ appropriation of formerly ‘religious’ property. The world was always and already the property of Christianity; it lacked only a Christian philosopher bold enough to claim it as such.

Remarkably, the same is true of science. Hegel goes on to say that the self-emptying, kenotic movement of scientific cognition is incomplete (or unfulfilled; *unvollkommen*) so long as it remains in a relation of self-certainty to its objects. Because it knows itself as its own limit (i.e., as the negative of itself), spirit must sacrifice itself. Hegel describes this sacrifice as a kenosis, self-emptying, or outpouring, or exteriorization (“*Diese Aufopferung ist die Entäußerung*”) (GW 9:433). One even gets the impression that philosophy—or spirit’s scientific cognition—learns the true meaning of sacrifice ‘at the same time’ as the Christian community does, for spirit’s becoming also involves its emptying—into time and history—as the knowledge of its self-mediation, but this self-emptying is an emptying emptying: “This relinquishing is likewise the relinquishing of itself; the negative is the negative of itself [*diese Entäußerung ist ebenso die Entäßerung ihrer selbst; das Negative ist das negative seiner selbst*]” (GW 9:433). In representational terms, God must empty God both into nature (into time and space) and into history (into the figures and the moments). The result is not an empty, vacant eternity but, rather, the spiritual comprehension that eternity is the very substance of the world that spirit, as subject, takes up as its own. Christianity—the true religion—will have been philosophy’s teacher, and spirit will have been the identity of that relation of learning. Spirit is the learner who, learning itself, learns itself. Here, everything is illuminated, revealed. Spirit walks on the running water of the gulf between time and eternity; secular history is not other than salvation history. And this, at long last, returns us to where we began this chapter: Golgotha.

The figure-fulfillment relation comprehended at the Golgotha of absolute spirit is significant because it is in, or at, Golgotha that the religious representation of spirit’s absolute knowledge is achieved, and is achieved on the basis of spirit’s power of recollection

(*Erinnerung*). What spirit recollects is the meaning of *its* Golgotha (of absolute spirit), conceptually comprehended as the fulfillment of the ‘first,’ and therefore ‘second’ Golgotha (of history). This achievement is achieved on the basis of spirit’s power of recollection. Yet, what spirit recollects is its own Golgotha (of absolute spirit), now understood as the fulfillment of the other Golgotha (of history). The first Golgotha is the repetition (or, as one might say in French, the ‘rehearsal,’ *la répétition*) of the second Golgotha. The Golgotha of absolute spirit is the ‘future original’ of the figural and historical Golgotha, which, because it comes first is counted second. The historical Golgotha is the kenosis (*Entäußerung*) of eternity in time. History is the memory (*Erinnerung*) of that kenosis, the ‘stage’ at which spirit “forsakes its existence and gives its shape [*Gestalt*] over to recollection” (GW 9: 433). In its final form of the absolute concept, spirit is the kenosis of kenosis, in which the figures and the moments, vanishing into one another, are unified. Time is superseded in the eternity of the concept (opening the way for Hegel to think, in the *Logic*, the mind of God before the creation of the world), but the figures and the history they incarnate are neither forgotten nor destroyed. They are, on the contrary, preserved.

Hegel says explicitly that “the aim, absolute knowing, or spirit knowing itself as spirit, has its path in the recollection of spirits *as they are in themselves and as they achieve the organization of their realm*” (GW 9:467; my emphasis). In other words, spirit achieves its absolute self-knowledge by unifying the figures (“as they are in themselves”) and the moments (“as they achieve the organization of their realm”). Their preservation (*Aufbewahrung*) according to their status as figures (“appearing in the form of contingency”) is history (*ist die Geschichte*), and their preservation according to their status as moments (“their conceptually grasped organization”) is the science of phenomenal knowing (*die*

*Wissenschaft des erscheinenden Wissens*). These are not two separate preservations but a single conceptual unity: “Both together are conceptually grasped history [*die begriffne Geschichte*]; they form the recollection [*Erinnerung*] and the Golgotha of absolute spirit [*die Schädelstätte des absoluten Geistes*], the actuality, the truth, the certainty of its throne, without which it would be lifeless and alone” (GW 9:434).<sup>65</sup> For Hegel, the representational form of Christian consciousness, especially its historical dimension (i.e., figural interpretation) demands to be superseded because it subjects the Christian tradition to a terrible double bind. Figural interpretation, in particular, binds the Christian tradition to the exteriority of history (historically real prophecy), while at the same time granting the Christian tradition the inner secret of that history (spiritual understanding).

The trouble is that the spiritual understanding of history is abstract, limited by its representational, eschatological form, such that history appears as a positive process governed—given—by providence, rather than something that spirit itself makes for itself. Figural interpretation takes history as the stage of its eschatological drama, and takes the history of the Jews as the substance of that drama, but bars the reconciliation of Christians with the world as it is, because the figure of the world is passing away. What Hegel offers to Christians is what they already have but are reluctant to allow themselves to grasp, namely, their own history and the world wrought by that history. As we’ll see below (§32), the price of the reconciliation of Christianity with its world is high. For in order to make that reconciliation actual, Christians must become—or come to occupy the structural position of—the Jews.

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. GW 9: 35: “In the *whole* of the movement, taken as being at rest, what distinguishes itself in it and what gives itself existence is preserved as the kind that *remembers*, as that whose existence is its knowing of itself, just as this self-knowing is no less immediate existence.”

### §32 Living Witnesses

Of the consciousness of the Christian community, Hegel writes that it

constitutes [*ausmacht*] the truth upon which the community is founded. This is the explication of reconciliation: that God is reconciled with the world, or rather that God has shown himself to be reconciled with the world, that even the human is not something alien to him, but rather that this otherness, this self-distinguishing, finitude as it is expressed, is a moment in God himself, although, to be sure, it is a vanishing moment [*verschwindendes*]. (VPR 3:250)

Hegel then remarks that this reconciliation is expressed in “the history of the appearance of God,” and that this history is a “divine history [*göttliche Geschichte*” that has led the church to the certainty of truth (VPR 3:250-1). From this history is developed the christological tradition and the trinitarian idea. The reconciliation accomplished in and through the Christ would “make no sense [*hat keinen Sinn*]” unless God were known as triune, unless it were known that God is other than Godself, and that the sublation of God’s otherness and the “return of love [*Rückkehr der Liebe*]” is itself the Holy Spirit, which Hegel understands as the true, albeit still ambiguously religious and representational, expression of absolute spirit (VPR 3:251).

While the concept of religion is universal and implicitly present in every culture and religious tradition, only the Christian tradition is capable, for Hegel, of superseding all other incomplete and inadequate forms of religious understanding, and of giving the content of

religion (God) its actual, historical, and proper expression.<sup>66</sup> The proper expression of God as spirit is found in the ritual and socio-religious activity of the Christian tradition, what Hegel calls the *cultus*. “The community itself,” he writes, is the existing Spirit, the Spirit in its existence [*Existenz*], God existing as community” (VPR 3:254). This is because the cultus—the form of the religious community—is itself the third, culminating moment of the concept of religion, which Hegel glosses in a trinitarian mixture of philosophical and theological terms.

The first moment is the idea in its simple universality for itself, self-enclosed, having not yet progressed to the primal division, to otherness—the Father. The second is the particular, the idea in appearance—the Son. It is the idea in its externality, such that the external appearance is converted back to the first [moment] and is known as the divine idea, the identity of the divine and the human. The third element, then, is this consciousness—God as the Spirit. This spirit as existing and realizing itself is the community. (VPR 3:254)

In his earlier, summary digest (VPR 1:333-6) of the subject of the Christian cultus, Hegel argues that there are three forms in which the cultus appears. While these forms are distinct from one another, they belong together as a unity in the cultus itself. In the first place, Hegel refers to devotion (*Andacht*) in general. Devotion has the character of inwardness, in which the believer prays, contemplates, immerses herself in her content, and generally aims to

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<sup>66</sup> Hegel: “The Christian religion appeared when the time had come. This time is not a contingent time, a discretionary or whimsical choice, but is rather grounded in an essential, eternal decree of God. That is, it is a time determined in the eternal reason and wisdom of God, not one determined in a contingent fashion. Rather it is the concept of the matter, the divine concept, the concept of God’s own self [*der Begriffe der Sache, göttlicher Begriff, Begriff Gottes selbst*]” (VPR 1:92)

harness the feeling of the divine within herself towards the elevation of her soul to her principal object: God (VPR 1:333) In the second place, Hegel refers to those external cultic activities and forms of life and expression that fall under the general heading of sacrifice (*Opfer*). Pre-eminent here are the sacraments (*Sakramenten*), in which reconciliation “is brought into feeling, into the here and now of present and sensible consciousness,” but Hegel is especially keen to thematize the way that the the members of the cultus, under the rubric of sacrifice, practice a principled negativity, or an ethic of renunciation, in relation to themselves and their possessions. He observes that while such negation “is accomplished in a more intensive fashion only through the sacrificing or burning of something,” it is also the case that the “sensible enjoyment [*sinnliche Genuß*] is itself the negation of external things,” such that the negation accomplished in sacrifice allows the believer to advance from the merely subjective negation of devotion to the objective enjoyment (*Genuß*) of their unity with God (VPR 1:334). We will return in a moment to this experience, and this power, of enjoyment.

The third—and, Hegel specifies, the highest—form of the cultus is the renunciation of one’s subjectivity as such, which Hegel associates with the offering of “one’s heart or inmost self to God and [the sense of] remorse and repentance [*Reue und Buße*] in this inmost self.” In short, the highest form of the cultus is found in the purity of its heart(s), from which results the most genuine cultus of all, namely, ethical life (*die Sittlichkeit*), which is necessarily bound up with consciousness of the true content, God (VPR 1:334). Hegel then remarks that

philosophy [too] is a continual cultus; it has as its object the true, and the true in its highest shape [*seiner höchsten Gestalt*] as absolute spirit, as God. To know this true



not only in its simple form as God, but also to know the rational in God's works—as produced by God and endowed with reason—that is philosophy. (VPR 1:335)

That philosophy is also a cultus is due to the fact that, as Hegel says in his prefatory remarks to the summary of the cultus, philosophy is a fundamentally speculative endeavor, but the speculative is naught but what was once called the mystical.

What concerns the speculative-mystical dimension of thinking is “whatever is concealed from the understanding” (VPR 1:333). Or, as Hegel puts it in an addition to §82 of the *Encyclopedia*,

the mystical is indeed something mysterious, but only for the understanding, simply because abstract identity is the principle of the understanding, whereas the mystical (taken as synonymously with the speculative) is the concrete unity of those determinations that count as true for the understanding only in their separation and opposition. (EL 133)

In other words, the mystical is that dimension of religious experience and thought that bursts the bounds of representation, the latter which is governed by the abstract identities of the understanding. Here again, we see that, for Hegel, the dividing line between religion and philosophy is not an absolute division, since the very idea of an absolute *division* is sub-mystical and non-speculative. Rather, “everything rational is to be called at the same time ‘mystical,’ by which, however, nothing more or less is said than that it goes beyond the understanding and in no way that it is to be regarded generally as inaccessible to thinking and as incomprehensible” (EL 133). In the context of the cultus, the mystical begins with feeling (*Gefühl*), which is the innermost feature (*das Innerste*) of the life and activity of the cultus,

but it does not remain there, for, as we've seen, the inner, mystical feeling of devotion is externalized in sacrifice and consummated in the ethical life of the church and the world it constitutes.

When Hegel turns explicitly to the cultus, we find that this third, culminating moment of the concept of religion itself has three moments: its origin (*Enstehen*), its subsistence (*Bestehen*), and the realization of its spirituality (*die Realisierung der Geistigen der Gemeinde*). Our interest lies pre-eminently in the second and third of these moments, but we should discuss the first briefly. The origin of the Christian cultus lies, as we might expect, in its foundational figure, the Christ. Christian faith begins, first, with the sensible appearance of God as a human being and, secondly, with the “spiritual comprehension [*geistige Auffassung*]” of the spiritual content of the Christ’s transformation of sensuous immediacy into its spiritual determinateness (*Verwandlung des Unmittelbaren zu geistiger Bestimmung*). The truth of the true content is not the sensible or finite, but the infinite. (VPR 3:253). Hegel pauses, briefly, to comment on the attempts of the scholars of his day to investigate the appearance of the resurrected Christ empirically, and to the early iterations of the ‘higher criticism,’ which argued that scripture should be treated like the writings of “profane authors” (here, Hegel may also have in mind the *Political-Theological Treatise* of Spinoza). Hegel avers that the church is, in fact, correct to refuse the legitimacy of such inquiries, because the empirical point of view implies that what is really at stake in the resurrection is the sensible, historical elements of the appearance of the Christ. They proceed “as though the confirmation of the Spirit depended on narratives of this kind about something represented as [merely] historical [*Historische*], in a historical fashion [*geschichtlicher Weise*]” (VPR 3:253). Hegel admits that such empirical investigations are legitimate when they concern

what is merely historical (i.e., finite and external), but “for the rest”—which, as it turns out, is quite a lot—one’s thinking about the Christ and his cultus is a spiritual comprehension.

Inasmuch as Hegel is unfazed by—even supportive of—the prospect of abandoning biblical literalism, we might say that this is something of an ‘Origenian’ moment in Hegel’s philosophy of religion. The ultimate truth is not to be found in the ‘body’ or the ‘letter,’ but in the deeper levels of scripture’s meaning. The truth is spiritual, and the letter threatens to choke the life from the spirit. On the other hand, we might say that Hegel has substituted, for the old and worn practice of *literalism*, an altogether more radical concept of *literality*. As we’ll see in just a moment, one can scarcely imagine Hegel admitting that his claim that “the community itself is the existing Spirit” should be taken as a metaphor, a symbol, or a moral lesson. When Hegel says that God *is* the existence of the cultus, he means it. Indeed, one of the most striking features of Hegel’s philosophy of religion is the extent to which he demands to be taken *literally*, all the while eschewing the narrowness and abstraction of literalism, which remains ensnared in the basest and most impoverished modes of representational thought. Hegel’s thought aims to show that the spiritual is not the contrary of the literal but the truth of the literal. In this regard, Hegel is most un-Origenian, for the spiritual is not something other than the literal but is the self-conscious activity of passing through the unity of the internal and the external.

This becomes most clear in the third moment of the cultus (to which we will turn in a moment), but it is already clarified when Hegel turns to the second moment of the cultus: its subsistence (*Bestehen*). This moment is characterized by the existence and perdurance of the church, which appropriates the truth to itself,

so that the Holy Spirit becomes real, actual, and present within them and has its abode

in them, whereby the truth can be within them and they can enjoy and give active expression to the truth of the Spirit; [the institution of the church] is the means whereby they as subjects *are* the active expression of the Spirit. (VPR 3:256)

The church is, first of all, universal. It presupposes the truth, rather than receiving it for the first time (as in the first moment of its origin). The presupposed truth is the whole doctrine of the church, though Hegel focuses his attention on the doctrine of reconciliation (*die Lehre von der Versöhnung*), in which the religious subject becomes capable of sharing, and abiding in, the truth (VPR 3:256). Hegel observes that doctrine (*Lehre*) is something taught (*gelehrt*), and thus the presupposed truth is given to humanity, first and foremost, in the form of authority (VPR 3:258). But authority gives way to education, cultivation, and habituation (the soils of ethical life), such that the content of the rational spirit of the human person (i.e., God as spirit) is “brought to consciousness for the individual as something objective” (VPR 3:259). Since evil has been overcome (*überwunden*) at Golgotha, Christian education need not concern itself with its overcoming (*überwinden*). The church has been reconciled to God; it needs but to promote repentance and practice penitence and raise its children—who are “born in freedom and to freedom [*in der Freiheit und our Freiheit geboren*]—in the faith (VPR 3:259). Christians need not seek moral certification from, say, Kant, for whom the continued existence of evil implies an “unending progression [*unendliche Progreß*]” toward the supreme good (VPR 3:260).

The subsistence of the Christian cultus is completed or fulfilled (*vollendet*) in its central ritual action: the Eucharist. Hegel refers to the Eucharist with the term *Genuß*, which means both consumption and enjoyment. What is at stake in the Eucharist “is a question precisely of the conscious presence of God, of unity with God, the *unio mystica*, one’s self-feeling of

God, the feeling of God's immediate presence within the subject" (VPR 3:260). Because the self-feeling of this enjoyment is something real and existing, it presupposes a movement in which the difference between God and humanity is sublated or superseded. What results, Hegel says, is a negative unity [*diese negative Einheit*]. As we saw above (§29) in our brief discussion of Hegel's reading of the Eucharist in "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," the partaking of the Eucharist—"this external, sensible thing"—binds the community together and to God, but therefore sets it against the world around it. The church is a unity, but negatively so: it remains mired in its difference from the world. We will soon see that, by the time Hegel delivers his lectures on the philosophy of religion (we are reading, specifically, from the 1827 lectures), the problem of the reconciliation of the church with the world has been resolved, and that this resolution has been achieved by—or rather at—the Golgotha of absolute spirit, where representation dies, so as to be resurrected as speculative thought. First, let us pause to consider Hegel's brief gloss of the doctrines of the Christian enjoyment of God that prevailed in his time.

Hegel distinguishes (VPR 3:261) three ideas or representations (*Vorstellungen*) of the Eucharist: the Catholic, the Lutheran, and the Reformed (specifically, the doctrine of Zwingli). That the Catholic Eucharist should prove inadequate is obvious; for Hegel, the Catholic host is but an external, sensible thing (the bread and the wine) that has been consecrated. Moreover, its truth is held hostage by the church, since it exists outside of the subject who, consuming it, cannot truly enjoy it (for to properly enjoy God is to know that God is present in oneself as oneself). Hegel very clearly prefers the Lutheran doctrine of the Eucharist, which

does indeed begin with something external, which is an ordinary, common thing, but

the communion [*Genuß*], the self-feeling of the presence of God, comes about only insofar as the external thing is consumed—not merely physically but in spirit and in faith. [...] Here there is no transubstantiation, or at any rate only one by which externality is annulled, so that the presence of God is utterly a spiritual presence—the consecration takes place in the faith of the subject. (VPR 3:261)

The third view is, like the Catholic view, pronounced inadequate, but for a different reason. Hegel remarks that the Zwinglian Eucharist is *merely* memorial, such that “the presence of God exists only representation, in memory [*der gegenwärtige Gott nur in der Vorstellung, in der Erinnerung ist*],” thus God has no immediate subjective presence (VPR 3:261). The communicant can only enjoy the memory of the Christ, the memory of his last meal, and the memory of his crucifixion.

In other words, Hegel reproaches the Reformed tradition, and Zwingli in particular, for mirroring themselves in the very situation that he had lamented two decades prior in the *Phenomenology*: the Christ-event is represented as something that belongs to the remote past (GW 9:408); it can only be memorialized, never truly recollected as the inner truth of spirit’s enjoyment of the presence of God. The superiority of the Lutheran Eucharist is due to its knowing acceptance that, as mere things, the bread is bread and the wine is wine, but that, as objects of faith, the bread is flesh and the wine is blood. The transformation of the bread and wine is spiritual. There is no substantial transformation, yet the literality of the presence of God is—because it has, and is, a historical reality—found in God’s figures: the bread the body, the wine the blood.

When Hegel turns to the final moment of the Christian cultus, in which its spirituality is to be realized in universal actuality (*allgemeinen Wirklichkeit*), he notes straightaway that

such a realization demands the transformation or conversion (*Umwandlung*) of the community (VPR 3:262). As things stands in the cultus, it is the heart that is reconciled, but this reconciliation remains abstract so long as it is not converted from its universal spirituality (*allgemeine Geistigkeit*) to its universal actuality in and through its relation to the world.

It is the pure heart that attains to this partaking [*Genuß*] of God's presence within it, and consequently reconciliation, the enjoyment [*Genuß*] of being reconciled. At the same time, however, this reconciliation is abstract and has the world as such over against it [*sie hat sich gegenüber die Welt überhaupt*]. (VPR 3:262).

Hegel points out that not all is lost for the pure heart, since in the purity of heart of the Christian self there exists a "developed worldliness [*entwickelte Weltlichkeit*]," which means that the cultus, the Kingdom of God, stands in some relation to the worldly. Here, Hegel likely has in mind Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, but Hegel's aim is that they should not remain two.<sup>67</sup>

Because the spiritual is the world's truth, the Christian subject is, in fact, already closely related to the world. Hegel writes that this is due to the "vocation" or "determination" (*Bestimmung*) of the Christian.

On the basis of this vocation [*Bestimmung*], the subject is known as spirit's certainty of itself [*Gewißheit des Geistes von sich selbst*], as the eternity of spirit. The vocation

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<sup>67</sup> See Harro Höpfl (ed.), *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, trans. Harro Höpfl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Hegel may also be thinking of Augustine's doctrine of the two cities.

to infinitude [*Bestimmung zur Unendlichkeit*] of the subject that is inwardly infinite is its *freedom*. [...] This vocation of the subject ought to be foundational in its relation with what is worldly. The freedom of the subject is its rationality—the fact that as subject it is thus liberated and has attained this liberation through religion, that in accord with its religious vocation [*religiösen Bestimmung*] it is essentially free. This freedom, which has the impulse and determinacy [*die den Trieb und die Bestimmtheit hat*] to realize itself, is rationality. (VPR 3:262-3)

Hegel specifies that the freedom of the Christian, condensed in their vocational determination, is the substance of Christian subjectivity. A Christian is a free person, but what freedom means to the Christian is that they are at home with themselves, reconciled to themselves, “an utterly secure and infinite subjectivity” (VPR 3:262). What remains outstanding in the Christian cultus is not any development in itself (for the heart is pure), nor any development of itself (for it is already reconciled), but the accomplishment of the accomplished reconciliation in the world (VPR 3:363). Hegel describes this process of reconciliation in terms of its three principal forms, but he remarks, too, that these forms correspond to “three real stages [*drei reale Stufen*],” namely, the stage of immediacy (the heart), the stage of negative determinacy (the church), and the stage of the true and absolute reconciliation of religion with worldliness (ethical life) (VPR 3:265). In other words, reconciliation has a history. It is the history of Christianity.

The first, immediate form of the reconciliation of Christianity with the world is what Löwith (see above, §22, §26) considers to be the authentic Christian position: the rejection or renunciation of worldliness. Here, the Christian community abstracts itself from the world, thereby placing itself in a negative relation to the world. Hegel notes that this abstract



reconciliation also places the Christian community in a negative relation to itself, “for the world is in the subject; it is there as the impulse toward nature, toward social life, toward art and science.” This “monkish withdrawal [*mönkchische Abstraktion*] signals that the heart is not, in fact, fully developed, “for the nature of spirit is to develop itself, to differentiate itself even unto worldliness” (VPR 3:263). This form of reconciliation corresponds to the early Christian era and to the emergence of monasticism in the early desert fathers. The second form of the reconciliation of Christianity with the world is that in which religion and world remain external to one another, but are nonetheless compelled to enter into relation. This second stage of reconciliation is also inadequate, because the church itself—being already reconciled—senses that it “ought to prevail over what is yet unreconciled, namely, the world” (VPR 3:263). The church’s dominion, or its pretension to such dominion, leads to corruption and unfreedom for all, since the result of the church’s dominion is the emergence in the church itself of a “worldliness devoid of spirit [*geistlose Weltlichkeit*]” (VPR 3:263-4). This form of reconciliation corresponds to the high middle ages, when the church’s complicity with secular power reached its most acute levels of contradiction.

The third, final, and true form of reconciliation appears in ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), in which the principle of freedom that was germinated and cultivated in the Christian cultus penetrates into the world itself and suffuses worldliness with the concrete truth and concrete freedom of the content of the concept of religion, God (VPR 3:264). The “institutions of ethical life are divine institutions [*göttliche Institutionen*]” not because they are church institutions, but because they are freely and rationally determined in and through spirit (VPR 3:264-5). Elsewhere, Hegel argues that the ‘stage’ of ethical life has its first beginnings in the period of the Reformation, but it is also clear, from his discussion of the Enlightenment, that

he believes that the truly universal actuality of the reconciliation of the world is an event that has occurred, and is occurring, in his own lifetime. It is tempting, and perhaps not wholly wrong, to scoff at Hegel's hubris, yet a more charitable reading would simply recognize the fact that Hegel did, indeed, live in an era of virtually unprecedented economic, social, political, and philosophical revolutions. Moreover, Hegel rarely, if ever, prognosticated. Whatever one makes of absolute idealism, it is evident that what Hegel wishes to offer to thinking spirit is the chance to find oneself in one's own present, it being understood that one's present, and one's belonging in that present, is the result of a history that, while it outstrips the individual and vanishes into memory, is, in principle, thinkable.

This, too, is what Hegel offers to Christianity: that the Christian spirit might appeal "to its own world and present time [*an seine eigne Welt und Gegenwart*]" (GW 9:430). Yet, Hegel would likely object that he offers nothing but what was offered him. The content is the same. Thus, Hegel's gift, such as it is, is not to have added anything to the true religion, but only to have justified it.

The concept indeed produces the truth—this is subjective freedom—but it recognizes this truth as at the same time not produced, as the truth that subsists in and for itself. This objective standpoint [i.e., speculative philosophy] is alone capable of bearing witness to, and thus of expressing the witness of, spirit in a developed, thoughtful fashion. Therefore, it is the justification of religion, especially the Christian religion, the true religion; it knows the *content* in accord with its necessity and reason.

Likewise it knows the *forms* in the development of this content. The two belong together: form and content. (VPR 3:268).

Philosophy is nothing other than the reconciliation of the form and content of religion (or the

transformation of the represented content into its conceptual form), and to this extent, Hegel says, “philosophy is theology.” For philosophy

presents the reconciliation of God with himself and with nature, showing that nature, otherness, is implicitly divine, and that the raising of itself to reconciliation is one the one hand what finite spirit implicitly is, while on the other hand it arrives this reconciliation, or brings it forth, in world history. (VPR 3:269).

Hegel gives to Christianity what it had and what it was but could not grasp in and for itself: the history of the reconciliation of God and the world.<sup>68</sup> And, as we saw above (§25), the Christian tradition of the Latin West, with which Hegel is pre-eminently concerned, could think itself as world-historical only inasmuch as it had superseded and fulfilled the only ‘secular’ history that mattered: the history of the Jews. All else is vanity and cupidity. With Hegel, the Augustinian division between the two cities is resolved in the philosophical reconciliation of secular and sacred history, to which the thinking (read: Christian) spirit bears witness.

What Hegel articulates and justifies is what we might call the historicity and actuality of *secular Christians*. This is a strange, seemingly oxymoronic expression, but in Hegel’s view it is more of a pleonasm. ‘Secular’ adds nothing to ‘Christian,’ nor ‘Christian’ to ‘secular’. ‘Secular Christian’ expresses the conceptual unity of its two terms. It has many synonyms, among them ‘modern,’ ‘European,’ even ‘philosopher.’ That said, not all Christians have accepted, let alone heard, Hegel’s gospel. While Christians have truly and concretely what

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<sup>68</sup> On this topic, see Michael Vater, “Religion, Worldliness, and *Sittlichkeit*,” in David Kolb (ed.), *New Perspectives on Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 201-216.

other religions have only abstractly (i.e., the concept, God spirit in and for itself), not every Christian will have arrived, let alone embraced, the philosophical justification of their own truth. This is not surprising, as Hegel himself recognized. “Religion is for everyone,” he declares, but religion is not philosophy, “which is not for everyone” (VPR 1:89). Moreover, as we’ve seen above (§25, §31), the price of admission to the salons of absolute idealism is, for Christians, particularly steep. We are now in a position to understand why this should be so.

What Hegel proposes is the philosophical supersession of Christianity. In accordance with the logic of supersession, Christianity is not rejected by philosophy but included in philosophy as the true untruth that philosophy needs in order to be what it is. Philosophy is the true form of the true content. Christianity is, for Hegel, the true religion, but in order to know themselves as this true religion, in order to inherit what is theirs, Christians must inherit or adopt the structural position of the Jews. Christians must be superseded; they must be the superseded. The logic of supersession requires that there be (the structural position of the) Jews. That is to say, just as the Jews are the living witnesses to the truth of the gospel, so are Christians—in and through their knowing enjoyment (*Genuß*)—the living witnesses to the truth of spirit, for, as Hegel says, again and again, “spirit witnesses to spirit.”

### §33 Coda

In the *Zusatze* (‘Addition’) to §96 of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel pauses to reflect on two meanings of the word *aufheben*. In the first place, *aufheben* signifies negating or deleting something (*negieren*) or clearing something out of the way (*hinwegräumen*). In the second, *aufheben* signifies a preserving (*aufbewahren*). According to this second sense, Hegel

remarks that Germans “say that something is well taken care of [*wohl aufgehoben*]” (EL 153/W8:204). Perhaps, in the spirit of charity, this is how the translation of *aufheben* by ‘supersession’ is to be read: as care, charity, or love.

God—or, if you’ll pardon the expression, the Idea—is this very love that does not rest, yet does not move; this love that leaves nothing (indeed, not even nothing) out to spoil, for everything has vanished in God, who is all in all and in whom all is well and well taken care of.

Nevertheless, we may well find warrant to address, both to Hegel and to his true religion, the same question that Nietzsche posed with regard to the “stroke of genius of Christianity.” In the second essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*—where he is discussing the doctrine of atonement by satisfaction, in which God is conceived as a creditor who, sacrificing himself in order to make payment to himself, redeems humankind from their intractable indebtedness—Nietzsche remarks that God, our creditor, undertakes this sacrifice and redemption out of *love* for his debtors, out of *love* for we guilty, we unredeemed, we obstinate, we blind.

Of this love, and without a trace of charity, Nietzsche exclaims, “folks—do we buy it?”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke VII* (Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1921), 390. My translation.

## Conclusion

*But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.*

— St. Paul

In his 1998 *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews*, Yirmiyahu Yovel observes that the mature Hegel (i.e., the Hegel of the Berlin *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion*) effects a much more moderate tone in his remarks on Judaism. In the 1827 lecture series, Judaism even enjoys a ‘higher’ position in the hierarchy of determinate religion than its ancient counterpart, Greek paganism, though Yovel remarks that, if Hegel had not been so unwilling to grant Judaism such pride of place, this should have been the case all along.<sup>1</sup> Yovel also notes that, all things considered, Hegel was not much of an antisemite:

Not every critic of ancient Judaism, however fierce, is necessarily anti-Semitic; the crucial question is whether he or she uses this critique as a weapon against contemporary Jews, sees the Jews as enemies, feels threatened by them, works out historical reasons to make them hated, to hurt them, and to negate their rights in the present. None of this is true of Hegel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, 83.

<sup>2</sup> Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, 89.

Given this distinction between antisemitism and anti-Judaism, Yovel avers that “any debate with Hegel must start from the assumption that he has a right to maintain his critical view of Judaism without being denounced as an anti-Semite.”<sup>3</sup>

On this basis, Yovel points out a “remarkable fact”:

Almost all the negative features of Judaism are said to originate in fear and servitude, the two classic factors upon which the Enlightenment critique of religion is based, and which go far back in time to Epicurus. [...] Although Hegel had long ago rejected the Enlightenment critique of religion, he continues to use it himself, perhaps unwittingly, with respect to one particular religion—Judaism. [...] Judaism is singled out as the self-alienated religion *par excellence*. Singular among the historical religions, Judaism is made the target of the same blows which religion *as such* has been dealt throughout the ages by its rationalist opponents.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Judaism appears in Hegel’s thought as something like a synecdoche for religion in general, but also as the particular religion that allows for the Christian religion to emerge. Judaism makes the Hegelian history of religions possible, but dogs that very history like an indigestible anachronism.<sup>5</sup> The real problem with Hegel, according to Yovel, stems from the

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<sup>3</sup> Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, 98.

<sup>4</sup> Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, if we take the long view of Hegel’s philosophies of religion and history, we see that, in fact, everyone (at any rate, every religious person) is, so to speak, a Jew. This is so because Christianity, the true religion, contains each and every superseded religion, and philosophy contains Christianity as the final figure of the fulfillment of God’s universal, spiritual actuality. The Jews themselves are but a figure and a moment of the true religion, yet so is everyone else. For Hegel, everyone is a Jew—except, that is, for Christians, who, just as the church fathers held, are for Hegel the *true* Jews.

fact that he simply does not know much about Judaism. For Hegel, ‘Judaism’ refers simply and solely to the Jewish religion of the Second Temple period. As far as Hegel is concerned, Judaism is something of a fossil; it has not developed or differentiated itself meaningfully since the razing of the temple in 70 CE; its determination or vocation (*Bestimmung*) is to serve as a necessary moment in the emergence of the true religion, Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen throughout this study, the ‘emergence’ of Christianity from its Jewish origins is fraught with a perverse mixture of hatred and love. The hermeneutical protocols of figural interpretation, as they were developed in the Latin tradition of antiquity, install that mixture at the heart of many Christian theologies of history. The Jews—their religion, their scripture, and their history—must be saved, or at least salvaged, so that the prophetic proofs of the gospel can be affirmed. The very fact that that so many diasporic Jews refused—and refuse—to affirm that Jesus is the very Christ prophesied by their own scriptures is not dangerous to the Christian faith but dispositive of its truth. As I’ve argued at length above, this ambiguous love-hate for Jews, Judaism, and the history of the promises made to them by God, is the outworking of the logic of supersession, which demands both that the Jews *were once* the people of God and *remain* the living witnesses to their own supersession.

Supersession is not a simple pretension to the superiority of the Christian faith but the expression of Christianity’s distinctive claim to have transcended Judaism.

While it is often articulated in terms of the eternal life bestowed upon Christians and denied to Jews, the transcendence of Christianity is better conceived as the kiss of a vampire. Such a kiss can, indeed, promise eternal life, but only on condition that the kiss, such as it is, is aborted. As Yovel puts it,

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<sup>6</sup> Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, 95.



Christianity (and following it, Hegel) was not satisfied with saying that it was superior to Judaism; it saw itself as draining Judaism of meaning and spiritual assets and leaving it an empty shell—and this, indeed, only this, is an act of spiritual violence. Christianity gave itself the title of the ‘true Israel,’ and thereby took away not only the Jews’ election (a doubtful concept) but their history as well. The ancient history of the Jews became the Church’s own ‘sacred history,’ and Jewish history after Jesus was thrust outside the realm of religious and spiritual meaning. [...] The dialectic itself expressed a fundamental injustice toward Judaism, because it sublates it into Christianity while dismissing its post-Jesus history as meaningless. In this respect, Hegel’s dialectic does to Judaism what the medieval church (*ekklesia*) has done to the synagogue (*synagoga*).<sup>7</sup>

It is not clear what it would mean for the Christian tradition to conclude its kiss, for to do so would require that Christians, who love their symptom by way of their love of the Jews, become indifferent to the historical objects of their love—and to be indifferent to the Jews is to not be Christian.

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<sup>7</sup> Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, 99.

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