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Wrestling with Angels

Or How to Avoid Decisionist Messianic Romances

Jayne Svenungsson ©

Throughout (Christian) history, the messianic event has been linked in the imagination to the idea of a consumption – and thus abrogation – of the (Jewish) Law.¹ Although there is little scriptural basis for such an opposition, Law has been pitted against Grace, Letter against Spirit, and the Jewish God of Judgment against the Christian God of Love. Even in secular Western thought, the pejorative connotations of the Law remain, most markedly in psychoanalytically influenced philosophies such as those of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. A similar tendency can also be detected in Alain Badiou's and Slavoj Žižek's more recent appraisals of Saint Paul as the founder of a universal gospel of justice and redemption, causing an irreversible rupture with Jewish legalism and particularism. To both philosophers – writing from the reemerged radical left-wing of European political thought – the apostle's (alleged) turning against the Law not only reveals the very matrix for every truly emancipatory politics; it also offers an impulse to wrestle free from decades of unfruitful identity politics and localist pragmatism. In line with a significant number of modern European – notably Protestant – theologians, philosophers and biblical scholars, “Law” is once more associated here with restrictive forces which stand in the way of universal human liberation.

Although, at first glance, Badiou and Žižek might seem to merely repeat the supersessionist stereotypes referred to above, both philosophers are careful to stress that the opposition drawn between a reactionary particularism and an emancipatory universalism should by no means be projected onto an opposition between the Jewish and the Christian legacies. Rather, it is a matter of two different veins *within* the Jewish heritage itself. As Žižek puts it in the introduction to one of his recent works:

The irony is that in the history of anti-Semitism Jews stand for both of these poles: sometimes they stand for the stubborn attachment [*sic*] to their particular life-form

¹ I would like to thank Elena Namli, Göran Rosenberg and Ola Sigurdson for their helpful comments. I am also indebted to Rowan Williams for the title “Wrestling with Angels.” Although, in this article, the words primarily refer to Emmanuel Levinas' essay “Le pacte” (cf. below), the collection of essays entitled *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (edited by Mike Higton, Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007) is – like much of Rowan Williams' work – an important inspiration for my thought.

which prevents them from becoming full citizens of the state they live in, sometimes they stand for a “homeless” and rootless universal cosmopolitanism indifferent to all particular ethnic forms. The first thing to recall is thus that this struggle is (also) *inherent* to Jewish identity. And, perhaps, this Jewish struggle is our central struggle today: the struggle between fidelity to the Messianic impulse and the *reactive* (in the precise Nietzschean sense) “politics of fear” which focuses on preserving one’s particular identity.²

Without contesting the claim that the Jewish tradition, throughout history, has known both extreme particularizing currents and far-reaching universalizing impulses,³ it is difficult not to object to Žižek’s gesture of reducing the tension between particularism and universalism to an internal “Jewish struggle.” This gesture not only obscures the actual historical tropes (epitomized in the dialectical reading of the Christ event implicit in much of Žižek’s own work) which link Judaism to particularism and Christianity to universalism. It also, simultaneously, reinforces these long-lived anti-Jewish tropes by identifying what is held to be the more constructive impulse within the Jewish legacy with figures who in one way or another departed from Judaism: Spinoza, Marx and Freud. The message seems clear: a good Jew is no longer a Jew. Or, as Žižek himself “succinctly” puts it with his unmistakable predilection for iconoclastic rhetorical twists, “the only true solution to the ‘Jewish question’ is the ‘final solution’ (their annihilation), because Jews *qua objet a* are the ultimate obstacle to the ‘final solution’ of History itself, to the overcoming of divisions in all-encompassing unity and flexibility.”⁴ It is also, for the purposes of this article, noteworthy how the “Messianic” – to which, Žižek confesses, the current book is “unashamedly committed” – is defined in contrast to Law (the “ultimate mark of finitude”), which is precisely what it, for the greater part of the Jewish tradition throughout history, has *not* been.

The fact that both Badiou’s and Žižek’s works rest on a quasi-Christian dialectics of Law and Grace which carries problematic anti-Jewish undertones has not gone unnoticed.⁵ I shall, however, set aside the accusations (without thereby necessarily denying

² Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London & New York: Verso, 2008, pp. 6-7. A similar position is articulated by Badiou in *Circonstances*, 3. *Portées du mot “juif”*, Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2005, pp. 14-15.

³ Cf. Göran Rosenberg, *Das verlorene Land. Israel – eine persönliche Geschichte*, trans. Jörg Scherzer, Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp, 1998, pp. 64-87.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, p. 5.

⁵ See Éric Marty, *Une querelle avec Alain Badiou, philosophe*, Paris: Gallimard, 2007. A fierce critique of what was explicitly termed “anti-Semitic” traits in Badiou’s and Žižek’s works was expressed last autumn by Mark Lilla and Adam Kirsch in two review articles for *The New York Review of Books* (Mark Lilla, “A New, Political Saint Paul?,” Nr 16, October 23, 2008) and *The New Republic* (Adam Kirsch, “The Deadly Jester,” December 3,

their relevance) of latent anti-Judaism in the works of the two philosophers. Rather, it is my intention in this article to engage in a more constructive critical discussion, challenging the neo-Pauline universalism of Badiou and Žižek by confronting it with a notion of the messianic which is not set in opposition to Law, precisely because Law will not be placed within the quasi-Christian dialectics which opposes it to Grace. My point of departure will instead be the notion of the messianic which is elaborated – paradigmatically to much Jewish thought – by Maimonides in the 12th century and further developed by Emmanuel Levinas in the 20th century.

In Maimonides' extensive codification of the Law, the *Mishneh Torah*, the messianic event is spelled out not in terms of a liberation from the Law, but precisely as a liberation *to* the Law. Concretely, his messianic vision – which contains nothing otherworldly – consists in a re-establishment of the Davidic kingdom, which will allow the Jewish people to contemplate the Law without constraints, and, as a consequence of this contemplation, bring about a reign of peace and justice exemplary to all people. Maimonides' firm conviction that commitment to a particular way of life – *Halakhah* – need not stand in opposition to universal philosophical impulses is echoed in Levinas' explicit endeavor to link messianism to universalism. The messianic universalism advocated by Levinas is thus one which retains its shape, but also its force, from the particular, which in the halakhic tradition is inseparable from the Law. Needless to say, this halakhic notion of the universal stands in obvious contrast to the messianic universalism envisioned by Badiou and Žižek. This, however, is precisely the point at which I wish to engage in a critical discussion with their works. Notably, I wish to challenge the latent – and potentially dangerous – decisionism of a universalism which claims its only legitimacy from “ungrounded” messianic events, i.e. political interventions without any (historical, discursive or other) foundation outside the subversive Event itself.

The messianic as rational contemplation of the Law

As Gershom Scholem emphasizes in his famous essay on the messianic idea in Judaism, there is an essential link between a community's sense of loss of historical reality and the acute longing for a radically different world order to break in.⁶ This dialectics between unendurable historical conditions and the urgent longing for messianic redemption is important to keep in mind when one approaches Maimonides' exegesis of the messianic. The trajectory of

2008), respectively. Žižek responded to the latter and generated a heated debate (Slavoj Žižek, “Who Are You Calling Anti-Semitic?” and Adam Kirsch, “Still the Most Dangerous Philosopher in the West,” January 7, 2009).
⁶ Gershom Scholem, “Die messianische Idee im Judentum” (1959), in idem., *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996, pp. 121-167.

Maimonides' personal life – exiled from country to country until he finally found a safe haven in Egypt – testifies to the intolerance and oppression which was the historical reality for large parts of the Jewish population of the Mediterranean world (Muslim as well as Christian) in the High Middle Ages. One of his two most well-known texts treating the messianic was also written in direct response to a situation of extreme oppression and rising messianic expectations. Yet, despite this background, Maimonides comes to defend an essentially anti-apocalyptic interpretation of the messianic.

The formal addressee of Maimonides' *Epistle to Yemen*, written in 1172, is a Yemenite Jew named Jacob ben Nethanel Fayyumi, who had turned to the great master for advice and guidance concerning the appearance in the country of a man claiming to be the Messiah. A few years earlier, Yemen had been stirred by an insurgence in which a Shiite sect had overthrown the ruling Sunnite dynasty. The Shiite rulers had imposed forced conversion on the country's Jewish population, arousing despair and messianic fervor. This was the context in which the self-proclaimed Redeemer had appeared, a man who infused hope in the demoralized Jewish community, but who also made them still more vulnerable to the arbitrary reprisals of the new rulers.⁷

Was this actually the Messiah? In his epistle, Maimonides takes pains to offer a theological and historical interpretation of the situation. Like the addressee of the letter, Maimonides perceives the calamities of the Jewish people as presaging messianic times and the restoration of prophecy. However, regarding the alleged messianic harbinger, Maimonides makes the diagnosis that the man must be simple-minded and utterly uneducated. He therefore enjoins the Yemenites to lock the poor man up so that he would not bring any more harm upon the community. Jewish history, Maimonides further reminds his reader, knows of too many renegades who proclaimed peace and redemption, and yet left only violence and turmoil in their wake. Maimonides' firm advice to his Yemenite fellow Jews is thus to exercise passive resistance and to wait until the true Messiah appears.⁸

How, then, would we know that an alleged Messiah really is *the* Messiah? Maimonides, in his *Epistle to Yemen*, does not offer much detail regarding the distinguishing traits of the true Messiah, nor does his second famous text on the messianic, situated at the end of the Book of Judges in the *Mishneh Torah*, give a more extensive answer. What is

⁷ See further Joel L. Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds*, New York and London: Doubleday, 2008, pp. 233-242.

⁸ Maimonides, "Epistle to Yemen," in Abraham Halkin and David Hartman (eds.), *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*, trans. Abraham Halkin, Philadelphia, New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985, pp. 91-149.

uncontestable, however, is that the Messiah envisaged by Maimonides is an altogether non-apocalyptic figure. In sharp contrast to the vision of the power and glory of the Savior descending from the clouds of heaven, Maimonides soberly states that no spectacular signs or miracles shall distinguish the Messiah. Furthermore, with the inauguration of the messianic age, neither the law of natural order nor the Law of moral order (as revealed in the Torah) will be abrogated. On the contrary, it is precisely at this point that the very core of Maimonides' messianic vision becomes discernable: the messianic age will bring about the end of exile and subsequently a time when the Jewish people shall live in peace and finally be able to devote themselves fully to the contemplation of the commands of the Torah.

However, the precondition for the materialization of this vision is a re-establishment of the Davidic kingdom, which is the concrete aim of Maimonides' messianic hope. Yet it is important to recognize that what is at stake here is not first and foremost a political vision. The crucial point is precisely what this worldly restoration of Israel will bring about, i.e. the possibility of undisturbed contemplation of the Law:

The Sages and the Prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah that Israel might exercise dominion over the world, or rule over the nations, or that it might eat and drink and rejoice. Their aspiration was that Israel be free to devote itself to the Law and its wisdom, with no one to oppress or disturb it, and thus be worthy of life in the world to come.⁹

The freedom to devote oneself to the Law, according to Maimonides, will mean that more people will gain enhanced knowledge of God and his ways. This, in turn, is the condition for the essential *telos* of the messianic: a time, foretold by the prophets, when peace and justice shall reign and when God's Law shall be written on the hearts of his people.

In his above-mentioned essay on the messianic idea in Judaism, Scholem depicts Maimonides as a radically anti-utopian thinker. This is certainly correct, as far as focus is placed on his misgivings about apocalyptic expressions of messianism. Yet one can rightly claim that the messianism of Maimonides is marked by another form of utopianism – a *rationalistic* utopianism, manifested in his strong conviction that enhanced knowledge will bring about social perfection. The opposite side of the same coin is an equally strong conviction that violence and conflict are ultimately the outcome of ignorance – of deficient

⁹ Maimonides, *The Code of Maimonides. Book Fourteen: The Book of Judges*, trans. Abraham M. Hershman, New Haven: Yale University Press: 1949, p. 242.

employment of reason. Hence, the more people are given the opportunity to exercise spiritual and intellectual refinement, the more social evil will wither away, and peace and justice will flourish.

Although the extreme rationalism of Maimonides may be termed utopian, there is no dialectical determinism underlying his philosophy of history. Messianic redemption is not the effect of a divine necessity, enacted through a miraculous intervention by God in history. On the contrary, it is the fruit of human repentance (*teshuvah*). What we encounter in Maimonides is an active messianism, based on the conviction that a community's historical condition is affected by its moral actions. And in the case of the Jewish people, these actions are guided by the Torah. We can thus begin to discern the full range of the role played by the Law in Maimonides' philosophy: the Law is nothing more and nothing less than God's answer to his people's longing for redemption.¹⁰

Let me further emphasize this point. In striking contrast to the disjunctive construal of the relationship between Law and Grace prevailing in much Christian (religious and secular) thought, God's gracious action in history, according to Maimonides, is revealed precisely in his giving of the Torah, by which his people receive a vehicle to change their historical condition through an acquisition of moral qualities. This, furthermore, brings us back to the question of the particular and the universal as stated in the beginning of this article. In retaining the central function of the Law also in the messianic age, it might at first appear as if Maimonides gives priority to the particular over the universal. Yet it is precisely in his refusal to pit Law against Grace that the universal impulse of his philosophy is revealed. By stressing that no law – whether the natural law or the revealed Law given as a sign of the Covenant – shall be abrogated in the messianic times, Maimonides confirms an understanding of history which does not violate human reason in order to establish immediacy with God. And it is perhaps here, in his endeavor to explain Jewish particularity in light of an acceptance of universal reason, that the greatest value of his philosophical legacy lies. Maimonides remains, in the words of David Hartman, “a witness to the fact that intense love for a particular way of life need not entail intellectual and spiritual indifference to that which is beyond one's own tradition.”¹¹

¹⁰ See further David Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976, pp. 151-153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

The messianic as an extreme conscience

In the early 1960s, Levinas wrote a commentary to four passages from the final chapter of the Talmudic Tractate Sanhedrin, treating the question of the nature and the advent of the Messiah. At the opening of the article, Levinas inserted a footnote in which he takes issue with Scholem's rather harsh judgment of Maimonides and explicitly states, "It is the positive meaning of the messianism of the rabbis that I want to show in my commentary."¹² By situating himself in the rationalistic tradition of Maimonides, Levinas clearly dissociates himself from any interpretation of spirituality in terms of the Sacred, the Numinous, or the Irrational. These notions, in Levinas' view, are inevitably linked to violence and arbitrariness, and are as such the very opposite of true spirituality:

Inevitably, a spiritualism of the Irrational is a contradiction. Adhering to the Sacred is infinitely more materialist than proclaiming the incontestable value of bread and meat in the lives of ordinary people.¹³

These words not only indicate that spirituality, to Levinas, is something radically earthbound; that it is "on earth, amongst men, that the spirit's adventure unfolds."¹⁴ They also indicate Levinas' reluctance towards any attempt at playing out spirituality against rationality. Despite the sharp antinomy between the Greek and Hebrew legacies so often depicted by Levinas, he found, in this respect, a deep concord between Western philosophy and the Jewish spiritual tradition, in that each has struggled to liberate humanity from the arbitrariness of the Sacred.

In Levinas' commentary on the messianic, the rationalistic spirit of Maimonides reverberates from the very first page. Accordingly, with regard to the idea of the Messiah, he states:

One has failed to say anything about the Messiah if one represents him as a person who comes to put a miraculous end to the violence in the world, the injustice and contradictions which destroy humanity but have their source in the nature of humanity, and simply in Nature.¹⁵

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté, Essais sur le judaïsme*, 3rd ed., Paris: Albin Michel, 1976 (1963), Le Livre de Poche: p. 96, n. 1. English translation: *Difficult freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 59, n. 1 (pp. 296-297).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21; Eng. trans., p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50; Eng. trans., p. 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95; Eng. trans., p. 59.

Levinas, like Maimonides, discards every attempt to interpret the Messiah in terms of a supernatural figure, expected to bring redemption through a miraculous intervention in history. Notwithstanding the agreement between the two philosophers, there is, however, an important shift in emphasis regarding the content of the messianic vision. If Levinas, too, places the messianic event within this world order, he nevertheless tends to remove it to a greater extent than Maimonides from any particular political vision. Levinas, for obvious reasons, does not envision a restoration of the Davidic kingdom (although, *de facto*, the state of Israel had become a historical reality by the time Levinas wrote his commentary – something towards which he remained ambivalent), and he definitely does not harbor the illusion that enhanced knowledge will automatically bring an end to the injustice and contradictions of human life.

It is, rather, the *enduring* nature of human injustice and contradictions which makes the messianic idea perpetually significant. Accordingly, Levinas entirely dissociates the messianic hope from any large-scale vision of collective emancipation, and ultimately from the very idea of redemption in the objective sense. On the contrary, he places the messianic event in the subject, or more precisely, in the innermost being of *any* human subject. The argument is elaborated through a rabbinic commentary on the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, a well-known passage, not least because it is regarded, within the Christian tradition, as the primary prophecy of Christ's suffering and death for the sake of our atonement. However, in Levinas' interpretation of the passage, the very point of it is that it *transcends* the notion of the Messiah in terms of a particular individual and simultaneously reveals an existential possibility accessible to *each* particular individual:

Messianism is ... not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognize this power and my universal responsibility.¹⁶

Messianism, as conceived of by Levinas, thus amounts to a personal call, to the claim that each self is the Messiah, in the sense that it is summoned to be the righteous servant who takes upon himself the suffering of the other. This claim ultimately echoes Levinas' strong misgivings about the idea of a vicarious redeemer, fearing that the notion of a Messiah who takes the sins of humanity upon himself will induce us to grow complacent and to repress

¹⁶ Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, p. 139; Eng. trans., p. 90. Cf. also idem., *Entre nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Paris: Grasset, 1991, pp. 64-71.

the immediate responsibility which commands us to constant vigilance. Although this critique of what Levinas terms “idyllic messianism” is not explicitly directed against Christianity (and, to be sure, it is not unknown to Christian theology either – think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “cheap grace”), it is clear that he uses it as a contrast to what he perceives as an essentially Jewish, or, to be precise, *rabbinic* notion of the messianic. Messianism, in this particular setting, manifests itself as an “extreme conscience,” or even as an “extreme humanism of a God who demands much of man – some would say He demands too much!”¹⁷

Although carried – literally – to extremes, we recognize here Maimonides’ view of messianic redemption as the fruit of the *joint* work of God and his people: God grants the instrument (the Law); human beings are the subjects who execute redemption by patiently acquiring moral and spiritual virtues and thus “helping to bring about a messianic reign, a reign of justice foretold by the prophets.”¹⁸

On the dialectics and anti-dialectics of Law and Grace

In recent years, the impulse to gain politico-philosophical insights from traditional theological discourses has found its most spectacular expression in the revived interest in Saint Paul. Accordingly, as I pointed out in my introduction, Badiou and Žižek find in Paul a resource for rethinking a new political universalism. Although both philosophers explicitly restrict their interest to a contemporary *formal* use of the apostle – notably of the messianic “Event” proclaimed by him – their endeavors have not escaped criticism from historians. As a number of biblical scholars have pointed out, notwithstanding their alleged absence of contextual presupposition, Badiou and Žižek both seemingly unaware subscribe to an exegetical paradigm established in early modernity.¹⁹ This paradigm – which was deeply rooted in German idealist philosophy – has in recent decades been revealed as highly problematic, not least because it relies on a false and implicitly anti-Jewish dialectics which opposes Law to Grace, Letter to Spirit, the Old Testament to the New, and so forth.²⁰ Above all, this was the case with the Lutheran Tübingen School, which to a significant extent laid the foundation for the modern image of Paul. In accordance with Hegel’s interpretation of the incarnation as the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 50; Eng. trans., p. 26. Cf. also p. 19; Eng. trans., p. 6 (N.B. that the French word “conscience” has been incorrectly translated into “consciousness”).

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 50; Eng. trans., p. 26.

¹⁹ See e.g. Ward Blanton, “Disturbing Politics: Neo-Paulinism and the Scrambling of Religious and Secular Identities,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 46:1 (2007), p. 3-13. Cf. also the excellent contributions of Paula Fredriksen, E.P. Sanders, Dale B. Martin and Daniel Boyarin in John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff (eds.), *St. Paul among the Philosophers*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009.

²⁰ See further Magnus Zetterholm, *Lagen som evangelium? Den nya synen på Paulus och judendomen*, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2006, pp. 39-46.

bridge from the legalistic religion of the Pharisees to the universal Pauline religion of love and grace, these early New Testament scholars based their reading of the biblical texts on a dialectical opposition between a pro-Petrine legalist position and a Pauline universalist position – the former of which was doomed by necessity to perish as history unfolded.²¹

To be entirely fair, however, it should be emphasized that Badiou – who in many ways inaugurated the philosophical “turn to Saint Paul” – defines his neo-Pauline enterprise as explicitly *anti-dialectical*. Certainly, Badiou operates within the opposition between Law and Grace; he even reduces the very essence of Paul’s teaching to it.²² In line with Lacan, Badiou identifies Paul’s main concern as the problem of how to avoid the vicious circle in which the prohibitive Law generates and supports its transgression and *vice versa* (cf. Rom 7:7). Paul’s great insight, according to this view, is that the Law has become a figure for Death (in the existential sense of chaining the subject to perversions), and his unique and brilliant move is to proclaim an Event – the Resurrection – which brings us back to Life. The wider political import of this is that it can be applied to our contemporary cultural condition, in which the deadly cycle of Law and transgression resounds in the way in which capitalist homogenization and the proliferation of identity politics nurture each other in a cynical abandonment of any overarching visions or truths. Thus, the transition from Law to Grace articulated by Paul simultaneously offers a way to suspend identitarian particularism in favor of a Truth-Event which interpellates subjects universally, i.e. irrespectively of ethnic, social or gender related predicates (cf. Gal 3:28).²³

However, in order for this transition to succeed, it must not be construed dialectically. Badiou adamantly rejects Hegel’s reading of the Cross and the Resurrection, arguing that it ultimately preserves our preoccupation with death and suffering. On the contrary, Paul, in Badiou’s reading, manages to break the economy of transgressive desire precisely by proclaiming a purely affirmative Event – the Resurrection as an absolute break with the Law and a radically New Beginning. It is thus important to note that Badiou’s strong objection to the dialectics between Law and Grace indeed does not suspend the *opposition* between the two notions. Quite the reverse, his discomfort with a dialectical reading of the messianic event is that it does not break radically *enough* with the Law.²⁴

Žižek’s reading of Paul in large follows that of Badiou. Interestingly, however, the one point at which their readings clearly diverge concerns precisely dialectics. Žižek,

²¹ See further Horton Harris, *The Tübingen School*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

²² Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. La fondation de l’universalisme*, Paris: P.U.F., 1997, p. 79.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-78.

clinging more consistently to Lacan, charges Badiou's anti-dialectical reading of Paul with falling prey to the illusion that the Event can ever be entirely disentangled from libidinal investment in the Law.²⁵ In this respect it is, of course, telling that Badiou, in response to the question of whether the new subject generated by the Event stands *entirely* beyond the Law, states that the Love which replaces and fulfills the Law (Rom 13:10) can indeed be spelled out in terms of a transliteral, spiritual Law – a “law of the suspension of the law.”²⁶ In contrast, it is Žižek's conviction – elaborated much more thoroughly in his polemics with Giorgio Agamben – that such an acclamation to a Law of the Spirit merely reveals the “obscene unwritten underside” of the Law, i.e. the excessive superego which enjoins us to go beyond any determinate Law, but which thereby nevertheless binds us to the Law.²⁷

The crucial question thus becomes whether it is possible to disentangle ourselves not only from the “external” prohibitive Law, but also from the “internal” superego hyperbole of the Law. In other words, is there a way which truly leads us beyond Law to Grace? Žižek believes there is. The key, however, lies in *dialectics*: it is only by going through the Christian Event as a radically dialectical experience – the negation of a negation – that its truly emancipatory “core” is revealed. This double negation (or alienation) consists in the recognition that what takes place on the Cross simultaneously reveals humanity's alienation from God *and* God's alienation from himself in Christ (“Father, why hast thou forsaken me?”). In other (Hegel's) words, “*what dies on the Cross is not only the earthly-finite representative of God, but God himself, the very transcendent God of beyond.*”²⁸ Accordingly, both God as the Absolute In-Itself and Christ as God-for-us die and are sublated (*aufgehoben*) in the Holy Spirit. At this point, however, we must be careful not to misconstrue the Hegelian Spirit as a kind of meta-Subject mastering the course of History. What Christ's forsakenness on the Cross ultimately reveals is that there is no divine Substance whatsoever – that “all things are ultimately nothing, a substanceless Void.”²⁹ Yet this is precisely where the emancipatory core of Christianity resides: by recognizing that there is no Absolute Other granting meaning to history, human beings are finally set free to assert themselves as finite individuals. Thus, the Holy Spirit, rather than designating the Absolute made immanent,

²⁵ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology*, London & New York: Verso, 1999, pp. 158-167.

²⁶ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 94.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, London & New York: Verso, 2003, pp. 107-114.

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity,” in Creston Davis (ed.), *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, pp. 24-109 (here: p. 60).

²⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 27.

marks the *Aufhebung* of the Absolute into the “community of believers”, i.e. a “new collective held together not by a Master-Signifier, but by fidelity to a cause.”³⁰

We can now begin to discern the epochal significance of the Christian Event. Through the double negation which is revealed on the Cross, not only is God as the transcendent Other suspended, but also the supplement of this Big Other in the form of the obscene superego. It is therefore only through this dialectical movement that a truly radical break with the Law is achieved – i.e. a break which allows us to go beyond not only the explicit Law with its specific prohibitions and injunctions, but also its obscene underside.³¹ Interestingly, Žižek, to my mind, conducts a much richer and more intriguing reading of Law and Grace than does Badiou, precisely by construing their relationship dialectically. This, at least at one point in his argumentation, dissolves the stereotypical opposition between Judaism and Christianity, linking the one to reactionary particularism and the other to emancipatory universalism. Accordingly, referring to Eric Santner, Žižek recognizes that Jewish Law, by introducing a dimension of divine justice which is heterogeneous to the prevailing social law, already involves a gesture of “unplugging” from any totalizing system. And it is precisely this “rootless” universal stance created by Jewish Law which sustains Christian Love proper.³²

Towards a truly materialist universalism

Yet, against this background, it is all the more surprising that Žižek reverts to the most generalizing stereotypes of the Jewish and the Christian once he starts spelling out the details of the messianic Event. Locating the decisive shift from Judaism to Christianity to the status of the Messiah, he maintains that only the Christian stance, which proclaims that the Messiah has already arrived, has an adequate notion of the Event. Whereas the former is trapped in an infertile deferral of the Event, the latter lives in the aftermath of the Event, “*everything – the Big Thing – has already happened.*”³³ Conscious of the objection that the placement of the messianic Event in the past may foster complacency (cf. Levinas’ critique of idyllic messianism), Žižek turns the argument around and states that it is, in fact, the enduring wait for the Messiah which constrains us to passivity. The divine act proclaimed by Christianity,

³⁰ Ibid., p. 130.

³¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, London & New York: Verso, 2000, pp. 143-160.

³² Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, pp. 118-120. C.f. also Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 127-137.

³³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 136.

on the contrary, stands for “the openness of a New Beginning, and it is up to humanity to live up to it, to decide its meaning, to make something of it.”³⁴

Ironically, when Žižek spells out the theological implications of this argument – that we cannot rely on the help of God because God is not omnipotent – he refers to Jewish thinkers, in particular to Etty Hillesum’s conviction that *we* must help God to help ourselves, later developed by Hans Jonas.³⁵ However, the crucial observation I wish to make at this point is that Žižek, in this argumentation, also comes extremely close to the halakhic messianism represented by Maimonides and Levinas – notwithstanding his fierce rejection of the latter.³⁶ Like the two Jewish philosophers, Žižek translates messianic hope into a material vision which it is up to human beings themselves to bring about, and his plea for an urgent engagement in “the difficult work of actualizing” the messianic Event undeniably echoes Levinas’ notion of the messianic as a call to each subject to commit itself to the work of justice.

There is yet another interesting point of convergence. As pointed out above, Žižek has strong misgivings about “spiritual” reinterpretations of the Law, surmising that they merely replicate the Law into an anonymous meta-Law, in the worst scenario the “Stalinist Law” – anyone can be guilty of anything at any time.³⁷ Levinas, in a famous passage on the Talmudic notion of the Law, shares these misgivings about the spiritualization of the Law:

Everyone responds to the attempts to encapsulate Judaism in a few “spiritual” principles. Everyone is seduced by what might be called the angelic essence of the Torah, to which many verses and commandments can be reduced. This “internalization” of the Law enchants our liberal souls and we are inclined to reject anything which seems to resist the “rationality” or the “morality” of the Torah.³⁸

Yet, when it comes to the question of how to avoid such abstraction or anonymization of the Law, Levinas takes an opposite approach to that of Žižek. Rather than proposing a dialectical sublation of the Law in both its literal and spiritual senses, Levinas

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ It can, furthermore, be observed that the “radical idea that God is not omnipotent” (ibid., p. 137) is far less radical to much Jewish thought than it in general has been to Christian theology; see further Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.

³⁶ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 138.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 105.

³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *L’au-delà du verset. Lectures et discours talmudiques*, Paris: Minuit, p. 97. English translation: “The Pact,” in *The Levinas Reader*, trans. Seán Hand, Oxford and Cambridge MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990, p. 219.

endeavors to reconnect the Law to its materiality and concreteness. More precisely, he does this by pointing to the presence in Judaism of elements which cannot be immediately internalized: “Alongside the *mishpatim*, the laws we all recognize as just, there are the *hukkim*, those unjustifiable laws in which Satan delights when he mocks the Torah.”³⁹ The philosophical value of these elements – seemingly illogical ritual prescriptions or ceremonial arrangements – lies in the resistance they offer to the temptation of surrendering to empty spiritual abstractions, precisely by tying us to memories, to materiality, even to the *flesh*.⁴⁰ It is in this light, Levinas further claims, that the allegory of Jacob’s struggle with the Angel shall be read: as the overcoming of the angelism or otherworldliness of pure interiority. This struggle between flesh and spirit is indeed an unending struggle. Still, we must remember that “the Angel is not the highest creature; as a purely spiritual being, ... he has no need to eat, or take, or give, or work, or even not to work on the Shabbat! He is a principle of generosity, but no more than a principle.”⁴¹

This gesture of reconnecting our spiritual principles or visions to the materiality of the Law, I will argue, also has value in relation to both Badiou’s and Žižek’s notions of the messianic Event. The underlying motive for the romance with Saint Paul in which both philosophers are engaged, we remember, is that Paul is a proclaimer of a Truth-Event, the political-philosophical import of which is that it allows us to formulate a notion of political interventions whose radicality lies in their ungroundedness. Such interventions, in other words, are brought about solely by the decision of a subject which does not pre-exist the actual Event – and *vice versa*: “there is no Event outside the engaged subjective decision which creates it – if we wait for the time to become ripe for the Event, the Event will never occur. ... Authentic revolution, in contrast, always occurs in an absolute Present.”⁴² Viewed in light of his “demythologized” Hegelian notion of history,⁴³ Žižek’s rhetoric here comes dangerously close to the decisionist tendencies – incisively analyzed by Karl Löwith – of Schmitt, Heidegger and Friedrich Gogarten. Steeped in a tradition – German idealism – which had turned history itself into “the tribunal of the world,” the only foundation of the legitimacy

³⁹ Ibid., p. 97; Eng. trans., p. 219.

⁴⁰ Cf. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 13: “The Judaism of the Halakhah despises rhetoric, avoids pathos, abjures the visionary. ... It prevents flight from one’s functions and tasks in this inferior world to an imaginary world which is all good, beautiful, and sublime. Not by chance are so many of the Mitzvoth concerned with the body, procreation and birth, food and drink, sexual life, diseases, and the corpse.”

⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *L’au-delà du verset*, p. 98; eng. trans., p. 220.

⁴² Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 135. Cf. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul*, pp. 15-16.

⁴³ Cf. John D. Caputo, “Postcards from Paul: Substraction versus Grafting,” in idem. and Linda Martin Alcoff (eds.), *St. Paul among the Philosophers*, op. cit., p. 17.

of truth which remained to those pessimists, who (contrary to the idealists themselves) no longer believed history to contain any higher meaning, was the resolute decision in the face of Nothingness.⁴⁴ The frailty of such a position, making contingency the mark of truth, has been manifested throughout history, from the political activism of these three authors down to the apocalyptic messianism of the Yemenite renegade with whom Maimonides sought to come to terms in his famous epistle.

I believe this position is particularly perilous when combined with a universalism which draws its inspiration from the Christian notion of Love or Grace. Such universalism – like the Angel – retains its generosity precisely by virtue of its generality. The temptation of such “formal” or “empty” universalism is that it tends to be generous to anyone but those who persist in their “stubborn attachment” to particularity – a pattern all too familiar in Christian history. To this, both Žižek and Badiou would certainly object that the universality they propose is one grounded in *singularity*, i.e. in a subjectively rooted fidelity to a Cause or an Event which is universal in the sense of not being constrained by particular identities. Žižek, as indicated above, would even admit that this notion of a “singular universal” has an important precursor in the cosmopolitanism of diaspora Judaism. Yet there is a crucial difference between the universalism of (rabbinic) Judaism and the one proposed by Žižek, which deals precisely with how the messianic Event is conceived. To Žižek, the Event is a Radical Novelty, “a pure-empty sign, and we have to work to generate its meaning.”⁴⁵ By contrast, in its halakhic setting, the messianic Event is never severed from the Law – the sign of the Covenant – which, more substantially, means that it is uncompromisingly tied to the *past* – to memories, promises and commitments. Such a stance not only denies the possibility of effacing the memory of past crimes and past victims; it also shelters us from the utopian delusion that there ever was such a thing as a radically New Beginning.⁴⁶

Yet, in the end, does not this halakhic construal of the messianic Event – which refuses to abandon Law – amount precisely to “reactionary particularism,” and thereby fail to meet the urgent need for a new political-philosophical universalism? If we are to answer this question in the negative, as I wish to do, it is imperative to clarify that the notion of Law in question has little to do with Christian (and post-Christian) readings of the Law with all their pejorative connotations (static, prohibitive, condemning). As Levinas points out, the Law in

⁴⁴ See further Karl Löwith, “Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von Carl Schmitt” [1935], *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. VIII, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984, pp. 32-71.

⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 136.

⁴⁶ Cf., David Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest*, op. cit., pp. 181-182.

its Talmudic setting is a system of casuistry – and precisely herein lies its great value for the effort to reconstruct a universalism which is more than empty ideology. Concerned with the passage from the general principles of the Law to its possible execution or concrete effects, the Talmudic dialectics reminds us that this passage is not one of simple deduction and above all that general principles always risk being inverted in the course of their application:

All generous thought is threatened by its own Stalinism. The great strength of the Talmud's casuistry is that it is the special discipline which studies the particular case in order to identify the precise moment within it when the general principle is at risk of turning into its opposite; it serves the general from the standpoint of the particular.⁴⁷

This is not a reactionary particularism. It is an urgent awareness of the betrayal which lies in wait for every general Principle, Cause or Event at the moment of its execution or application. This is also why the struggle with the Angel is unending.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *L'au-delà du verset*, pp. 98-99; eng. trans., p. 220.