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Hope in Dark Times

Theological Accounts of Hope as Critical Resources for Coping with Political Defeatism

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Hope in Dark Times

Theological Accounts of Hope as Critical Resources for Coping with Political Defeatism

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24 October 1941: “Tonight new measures against the Jews. I have allowed myself to be depressed about it for half an hour.”¹ 22 March 1942: “We are not allowed to walk along the Promenade any longer, and every miserable little clump of two or three trees has been pronounced a wood with a board nailed up: No Admittance to Jews.”² 26 May 1942: “We walked along the quay in a balmy and refreshing breeze. We passed lilac trees and small rose-bushes and German soldiers on patrol. We spoke about our future and how we would so like to stay together.”³

The realization of the unfathomable dimensions of the Holocaust arrives gradually in Etty Hillesum’s (1914–1943) diary. It comes piecemeal, in laconic comments in the midst of a flow of other observations, as in the entries just quoted. It is only in July 1942 that she sees with brutal clarity the full dimensions of the sinister fate that the Nazis were preparing for Europe’s Jews: “I must admit a new insight into my life and find a place for it: what is at stake is our impending destruction and annihilation, we can have no more illusions about that. They are out to destroy us completely, we must accept that and go on from there.”⁴

1. Etty Hillesum, *The Complete Works 1941–1943*, vol. 1, Maastricht 2014, 224.

2. Hillesum, *The Complete Works*, vol. 1, 476.

3. Hillesum, *The Complete Works*, vol. 1, 604.

4. Hillesum, *The Complete Works*, vol. 2, 736.

In all its tragic beauty, Hillesum's journal – which has recently been re-published in Scandinavia in a new Swedish edition⁵ – is a painful literary journey of vanishing hope. And yet it is not only a testimony of lost hope. As the horizon darkens and the snare is drawn tighter around Hillesum and her friends, she slowly finds a new confidence, intimately linked to her belief in a deeply personal God. At about the same time as she realizes the unbearable truth of the Nazi crime, that is in July 1942, she also starts writing about a newfound assurance, a hope for a new age to come: “I know that a new and kinder day will come. I would so much like to live on, if only to express all the love I carry within me.”⁶ A little later, as autumn approaches, she writes: “It is quite possible that after the war people will [...] collectively wake up to a higher world order.”⁷

Hillesum never lived to see the new world order for which she hoped. She was murdered by the Nazis along with millions of fellow Jews. However, her hope for a better world order would become fulfilled in the new Europe which emerged after the war and which swore to itself: “Never again.” Gradually and painstakingly, international institutions and conventions were established in order to secure the border between civilization and barbarism. Generations of Europeans were educated to respect the inviolability of human dignity and monuments were raised to keep the memory of past crimes alive.

Today we experience yet a new era in Europe. In spite of good education and ever so many monuments, museums, and documentaries, parts of the better world order of which Hillesum dreamt seem inevitably to be slipping out of our hands and the border between civilization and barbarism is yet again being blurred. The most emblematic sign of this development is the rapid growth of antisemitism across Europe, along with the growth of other racist ideologies and stereotypes directed against Muslims, Romani, or simply “non-European” people (whoever they are considered to be). Attitudes and values that were impossible to express in public only twenty years ago are today bread and butter in many political discourses across the continent. And to make the picture even more troublesome, various racist stereotypes intersect or are turned against each other, as for instance in the widespread Muslim antisemitism.

In this article, I wish to reflect upon this present situation in which hope is again vanishing, not only for the reasons just mentioned, but also due to growing economic inequality, the impending climate crisis, and yet other

5. Ety Hillesum, *Dagböcker och brev i urval*, Stockholm 2018.

6. Hillesum, *The Complete Works*, vol. 2, 794.

7. Hillesum, *The Complete Works*, vol. 2, 858.

factors. My overall aim is to ponder how Jewish and Christian discourses on hope can contribute in a critical way to contemporary political and philosophical discussions of hope. By “hope” I refer to the distinct human capacity to conceive of and desire a state of affairs that transcends the present situation, whether existentially, politically, or metaphysically. However, as already indicated by my introduction, focus will be placed on political forms of hope – such as the hope for a better society or world order – although political hope implicitly involves existential and sometimes metaphysical dimensions.

I shall proceed in three steps. Taking my cue from the biblical idea of messianic redemption, I first describe how this idea throughout history has been interpreted in both restorative and apocalyptic ways. In line with Gershom Scholem’s (1897–1982) famous analysis of Jewish messianism throughout history, “restorative” and “apocalyptic” are here used as phenomenological categories, i.e. as interpretative tools aimed at capturing distinct features of how hope has been shaped and expressed in different discourses and by various thinkers. In the second part, I relate my historical overview of restorative and apocalyptic expressions of hope to the contemporary political situation and to current politico-philosophical debates on hope. While implicit in the first part, I here make explicit my argument that the restorative strand of both Jewish and Christian discourses on hope is preferable to the apocalyptic: while apocalyptic expressions of hope tend to betray the complexity of historical reality, restorative messianism shows, by contrast, the possibility of combining radical visions with practices and institutions that care for the durability of justice. Finally, in the third part, I turn to the concrete albeit intricate question of what to hope *for* in a time of rising populism and reemerging xenophobic tendencies, and offer a brief discussion of the critical task of the theologian in the public debate.

Hope and Messianism

Hope in the biblical tradition is intimately linked to messianism, the expectation of a coming redemption. When the notion of the messianic first emerges in the Hebrew Bible, it is precisely as a response to vanishing hope. In his famous essay from 1959, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism”, Gershom Scholem even goes so far as to describe messianism as “a theory of catastrophe”, whereby he indicates the connection that exists between the loss of a bearable historical reality and the desire for a radically different reality.⁸ It is therefore not so strange that the origins of

8. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York 1971, 7.

messianism are often traced back to the Babylonian exile and the accompanying experience of rootlessness. The Book of Isaiah, which took shape over a period spanning both the time before and the time after the exile, offers several illuminating examples. One such is the famous prophecy in chapter 11, enunciating a time when “the wolf shall live with the lamb” (Isa. 11:6) and “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9).⁹

However, although it is possible to speak of embryonic forms of messianism in several of the Prophets, it is only in the Hellenistic era that these embryonic forms were to develop into fully fledged messianic visions. This process went hand in hand with a gradual spread of messianic expectations of a more apocalyptic nature. Whereas the redemptive visions found in the older prophetic literature are generally of a political and inner-worldly nature – such as a hope for the exile to end – a shift occurs in much of the intertestamental literature: to the apocalyptic seer, redemption entails nothing less than the cataclysmic end of this world and the arrival of a new aeon.¹⁰

This contrast between older prophetism and the apocalyptic visions of the Hellenistic era is reflected in the tension between what Scholem and others have described as restorative versus apocalyptic tendencies in subsequent messianism. While the former emphasizes continuity with the past and connects redemption with an ongoing transformation of creation through the practice of justice, the latter conceives of redemption as an external divine intervention that also involves a radical break with all previous history.¹¹

Some scholars also depict early Judaism and Christianity in terms of a contrast between these two forms of messianism. For example, the Jewish scholar Benjamin Gross describes rabbinic Judaism, which emerged in tandem with Christianity, as a reaction against the strongly apocalyptic nature of the early Jesus movement. While early Christianity, in Gross’s reading, attached the messianic impulse to a singular apocalyptic event (the resurrection of Christ), Judaism instead placed emphasis on the redemptive process itself. This also entailed that redemption, in the Jewish tradition, came to be considered as the fruit of a continuous work of justice by which the Jewish

9. Most biblical scholars today consider the paragraph to be a later, probably post-exilic addition to Proto-Isaiah. For an erudite discussion of the kingdom visions in Isaiah, see Thomas Wagner, *Gottes Herrschaft: Eine Analyse der Denkschrift (Jes 6,1–9,6)*, Leiden 2006. All Bible quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

10. See for example Joseph Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, 2nd ed., Louisville, KY 1983, 212–216.

11. See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, 1–36; Benjamin Gross, *Messianisme et histoire juive*, Paris 1994, 35–38; James C. VanderKam, “Messianism and Apocalypticism”, in Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins & Stephen Stein (eds.), *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, New York 2003, 112–138.

people was called to realize the messianic promise. “Jewish messianism”, Gross contends, “is more than anything a vibrant protest, an energetic refusal to accept the conditions of this world as definite.”¹²

While there is much to be said for Gross’s map of the differing fates of the messianic idea within emergent Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, it nonetheless needs to be nuanced. To be sure, there has long been a broad consensus among biblical scholars about the apocalyptic character of both the original Jesus movement and the early church.¹³ As exemplified by the Pauline letters, the early Christian movement was driven by a strong hope in Jesus’ imminent return (*parousia*) and the end of this world. That being said, it would be an oversimplification to pigeonhole emergent Christianity as unambiguously apocalyptic. Once it became clear that the *parousia* was not in fact imminent, Christian theologians began to adjust their messianic expectations. The result was a dynamic theology of history, which – not unlike certain strands of rabbinic messianism – emphasized the positive significance of the postponed messianic event and saw incomplete redemption as a possibility rather than a failure.¹⁴

Likewise, it would be an oversimplification to depict Judaism during the remainder of classical antiquity as free from apocalyptic tendencies. The emerging rabbinic tradition may have sought to suppress apocalyptic movements in favour of a more rationalistic and restorative position, but the Talmud contains elements of both strands. As regards the nature of the messianic event, in other words, one finds both the notion that it is a matter of a dramatic external intervention beyond the influence of humans and the notion that redemption is the fruit of humanity’s patient preparations.¹⁵

To summarize, both Judaism and Christianity contain both types of messianic expectations, and, I shall argue, both kinds of hope. Whereas apocalyptic movements have proliferated especially during times of hardship and political upheaval, there have always been attempts among both Jewish and

12. Gross, *Messianisme*, 54. My translation.

13. See for example John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*, New York 1989; Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins: The Setting and Character of the Most Important Messianic Sect of Judaism*, 2nd ed., London 2002. Whether Jesus’ own assessment of his mission was apocalyptic in character is a matter of scholarly debate; for an overview of this debate, see for example Dale C. Allison, “The Eschatology of Jesus”, in Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins & Stephen Stein (eds.), *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, New York 2003, 139–165.

14. I discuss this development at length in Jayne Svenungsson, *Divining History: Prophetism, Messianism and the Development of the Spirit*, New York 2016, 38–44.

15. See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, 1–36. On the ideological tensions underpinning the conflict between the two strands of messianism, see also Karin Zetterholm, “Elijah and the Messiah as Spokesmen of Rabbinic Ideology”, in Magnus Zetterholm (ed.), *The Messiah in Early Judaism and Christianity*, Minneapolis, MN 2007, 57–78.

Christian thinkers to temper the anarchic and often antinomian tendencies of apocalyptic messianism.

Augustine (354–430) may serve as an illuminating example from the Christian tradition. In the early fifth century, as he wrote some of his major works, apocalyptic ideas enjoyed a renaissance due to the turbulence following the disintegration of the Roman Empire. Faced with the accusation that Christianity itself was the ultimate cause of imperial collapse, Augustine, however, dismissed all attempts to interpret contemporary upheavals as auguring the beginning of the last days. In *City of God*, he distanced himself from all forms of millenarianism and argued for a strictly allegorical reading of Revelation's reference to a thousand-years reign. Instead of seeing the passage as a prophecy of an imminent time to come – and thereby encouraging apocalyptic sentiments – he read it as an allusion to the time between Christ's first and second coming, that is to say, the time of the Christian church in this world. During this time, Christians were to act as God's servants, patiently preparing for the final redemption to come.¹⁶

Although it would not prevent continued apocalyptic outbursts throughout the Middle Ages and during early modernity, Augustine's level-headed theology of history would become paradigmatic for much subsequent Christian theology. An equally paradigmatic example from the Jewish tradition would be Maimonides (1135–1204). Like Augustine, Maimonides lived in a period of political unrest which gave rise to apocalyptic speculations and recurring waves of messianic fervour. One incident, in particular, seems to have shaped Maimonides's own view of the messianic. In a letter from the early 1170s, a Yemenite Jew had turned to the great master for advice concerning the appearance in the country of a man claiming to be the Messiah. After years of grave oppression caused by a ruling Shiite dynasty, the self-proclaimed redeemer had infused hope in the demoralized Jewish community but also made it still more vulnerable to the arbitrary reprisals of the Muslim rulers.¹⁷

In his *Epistle to Yemen*, written in 1172, Maimonides took pains to offer a theological and historical interpretation of the incident. Like the Yemenite Jew who had consulted him, Maimonides perceived the calamities of the Jewish people as presaging messianic times. However, regarding the alleged messianic harbinger, he enjoined the Yemenites to keep their distance. Jewish history, Maimonides reminded his readers, knew of too many renegades who had proclaimed peace and redemption, and yet only left

16. Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine – A Translation for the 21st Century*: 7. *The City of God (Books XI–XXII)*, New York 2013, book XX.VII–IX.

17. See Joel L. Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds*, New York 2008, 233–242.

violence and turmoil in their wake. His firm advice to his fellow Jews was therefore to exercise passive resistance and thus prepare for the true Messiah to appear.¹⁸

Augustine and Maimonides were both responding to the potentially pernicious effects of apocalyptic enthusiasm while still trying to offer theological guidance to the faithful. And yet one may ask whether they were not in fact depriving the faithful of hope and thereby hampering the radical emancipatory potential of apocalyptic expectations. Such critique has often been levelled, for instance by Gershom Scholem, who in his already mentioned essay on the messianic idea in Judaism reproaches Maimonides for abandoning “the dramatic element, which lent apocalypticism so much vitality”.¹⁹

By contrast, I think we should take Augustine’s and Maimonides’s precautions seriously. Both thinkers knew that apocalyptic expectations tended to breed disappointment and even despair: once the time of the expected redemption would pass without incident, the faithful would eventually be left with shattered hope. Rather than quenching hope, Augustine and Maimonides struggled to safeguard hope by elaborating a messianic theology which placed emphasis on patient waiting and preparation for the final redemption. In the case of Augustine, this preparing work consisted in a re-ordering of desire from the things of this world to the things of God, that is, to faith, hope, and charity; in the case of Maimonides, it consisted in the practice of justice and repentance (*teshuvah*), guided by the Torah. In both theologies, we encounter an understanding of history that does not violate human reason and agency in order to establish immediacy with God, and thereby also a thinking which closely links hope to responsibility.

Hope and Responsibility

After this brief historical exposé, let me return to our own time and the question prompted by the introductory fragments from Etty Hillesum’s diary: what hope can there be after the Holocaust, the unspeakable crime that ought to have ended all hope, at least any hope in a moral refinement of humanity throughout history? If anything, the Holocaust marked a loss of innocence – a humanity capable of staging systematic mass murder on an industrial scale had indeed proven capable of anything imaginable.

And yet, as we know, hope did not end with the Holocaust. On the contrary, the post-war era emerged as a period of large-scale hopes, not only in the sense hinted at above, that is, as a hope for a better and more peaceful

18. Maimonides, “Epistle to Yemen”, in Abraham Halkin & David Hartman (eds.), *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*, New York 1985, 91–149.

19. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, 32.

world order, materialized in international conventions and institutions. The second half of the twentieth century was also a period of enormous economic growth, technological evolution, and improved living conditions for most parts of Europe's population. Understanding this particular historical background is imperative for understanding the widespread sentiments of disillusionment in today's Europe. For the approximately three generations that have grown up with the promises of the welfare state, there is an increasing and often painful disproportion between the prospects once held out to them and what society has in fact been able to deliver. The deep-seated human desire that our children should be better off than ourselves is today anything but granted.

How is it possible to entertain hope in this situation and what kind of hope should we entertain? In terms of my earlier distinction between two forms of messianism and two corresponding notions of hope, I am inclined to suggest that what we need today is a pragmatic and realistic hope of the sort that Augustine and Maimonides championed. Needless to say, the late antique and medieval societies of Augustine and Maimonides were very different from our own late modern societies. And yet I think one can fairly assume that the felt human experience of powerlessness and frustration is timeless and transhistorical. In that respect, there is a continuity between the kind of situations that Augustine and Maimonides sought to tackle in their political and theological thinking and our own cultural context. Now like then, there is a widespread sense of unrest and disintegration, and now like then there are those who take advantage of people's frustration and offer easy solutions, be it in the form of Jihadist promises of instant heavenly reward or right-wing extremist visions of a racially purified nation.

What we can learn from the anti-apocalyptic theologies of Augustine and Maimonides is to be suspicious of radical proclamations of instant redemption, precisely for the reason that they tend to breed disappointment and ultimately cynicism. Without denying the legitimate motivation apocalyptic imagery has at times given to political and religious struggle for change, apocalyptic hope always runs the risk of ending up in an all-or-nothing logic: if we cannot have it all, then there is nothing left to struggle for.²⁰ The restorative strand of Jewish and Christian messianism teaches exactly the opposite: through tiny acts of justice and charity we can indeed change a given situation for the better and so continue the work of God in this world. Hope, on this account, is rather a matter of tuning down our expectations to realistic proportions without giving up the ultimate hope of a final redemption.

20. See also Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, Cambridge 2018.

All that being said, is there not a risk that the restorative kind of messianism that I am here advocating eventually ends up thwarting true and genuine hope, the kind of hope that is sometimes needed in order for radical change to take place? Or even worse, is it not just a covert defence of conservatism, a desire to preserve the existing order of things? That was, as I have indicated, the objection underlying Scholem's critique of Maimonides. Interestingly, the same critique resounds in parts of the contemporary politico-philosophical debates on the messianic, where thinkers as various as John Milbank, Gianni Vattimo, Miroslav Volf, and Slavoj Žižek have criticized Emmanuel Levinas and above all Jacques Derrida for advocating a political messianism that is nothing more than an endless deferral of the emancipatory event. Such a stance, so the critique goes, is ultimately nihilistic and amounts to nothing more than a tacit acceptance of the existing neoliberal order.²¹

It is true that the messianic reflections of Levinas and Derrida ultimately took their inspiration from the rationalist strand of Jewish messianism which became paradigmatic with Maimonides and which was later echoed in figures such as the Gaon of Vilna (1720–1797), Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), and Walter Benjamin (1892–1940).²² That this was indeed the case is testified to in their predilection for a well-known rabbinic anecdote which points to the irreducibly futural character of the messianic event, here in a version recounted by Derrida:

If the Messiah is at the gates of Rome among the beggars and lepers, one might think that his incognito protects or prevents him from coming, but, precisely, he is recognized; someone, haunted with

21. See for example John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford 1990, 302–313; Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, New York 2002, 37; Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*, Grand Rapids, MI 2011, 46–48; Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, London 2003, 139–143. Another prominent critic of Derrida's notion of the messianic is, of course, Giorgio Agamben. However, Agamben's more nuanced and elaborated critique would deserve a space which the scope of the present article does not allow for. I shall therefore have to refer to my discussion in Jayne Svenungsson, "Law and Liberation: Critical Notes on Agamben's Political Messianism", *European Judaism* 50 (2017), 68–77.

22. Levinas's most extensive reflections on the messianic are found in a commentary to four passages from the final chapter of the Talmudic Tractate Sanhedrin, which he wrote in the early 1960s. At the opening of the article, Levinas takes issue with Scholem's critical 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." Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, Baltimore, MD 1990, 59. As for Derrida's concept of the messianic, see Svenungsson, *Divining History*, 117–125, 137–147, 191–198.

questioning and unable to leave off, asks him: “When will you come?” (*Quand viendras-tu?*).²³

The anecdote seems indeed to suggest that the Messiah, in the strict sense, belongs to the future, and therefore that redemption is in a state of permanent deferral and in principle impossible: if the Messiah would one day show up, we would still have to ask him “when will you come?”, indicating that a present Messiah is by definition a false Messiah. So, does this not after all imply a nihilistic position in which every substantial proposition of any kind is deferred to a future always beyond reach?

To the contrary, I contend that this criticism rests upon a common misreading of the particular strand of Jewish messianism that is echoed in this anecdote and hence in the philosophies of thinkers such as Derrida and Levinas. When Derrida refers to a Messiah whose arrival always lies in the future, he is not claiming that such a Messiah is impossible or absent. It is, rather, a way for him to underscore the fact that we should never take the presence of justice for granted. Even if the Messiah should one day reveal himself, we must therefore continue to call to him.²⁴

In another version of this anecdote, the Messiah replies to the enquiry as to when he will arrive with: “Today.” When Rabbi Joshua, who has posed the question, later consults with the Prophet Elijah for clarification, he receives the answer: “Today, if you hear his voice.” This is also the rabbinic tradition invoked by Rosenzweig, when in a famous letter he makes a distinction between two fundamentally different understandings of the word “today”; on the one hand, today as “merely the bridge to tomorrow” (*[ein] Heute, das nur die Brücke zum Morgen sein will*), on the other, today as “a springboard to eternity” (*[ein] Heute, das das Sprungbrett zur Ewigkeit ist*).²⁵ A few decades later, we can hear the same motif echoed in the famous final fragment of Benjamin’s theses on history:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty

23. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, London 2005, 46. To be precise, Derrida is here quoting Maurice Blanchot’s rendering of the anecdote.

24. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 46.

25. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften I. Briefe und Tagebücher, I, 1900–1918*, Hague 1979, 345.

time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.²⁶

Returning now to the question of the politico-philosophical value of these various theological tropes, I want to reiterate my argument that this restorative strand of messianism is preferable to the apocalyptic. While apocalyptic messianism always runs the risk of betraying the complexity of historical reality, restorative messianism shows, by contrast, the possibility of combining radical visions with practices and institutions that care for the durability of justice. In proclaiming a Messiah who is present “every second of time”, a radical responsibility is placed on each singular human being at every moment, including moments when hope seems to vanish and no redeeming event is likely to occur.

Part of what makes Etty Hillesum’s journal such a captivating and affecting document – to return to where I set out in this article – is undoubtedly the way in which it gives testimony to such a hope against all odds, combined with a radical sense of ethical responsibility. When in 1942 she realizes the full dimensions of the Nazi extermination policy, her response is not passive despair. But neither does she express any hope that the God to whom she prays and whose presence she experiences so intensively will come to her rescue. Instead she turns to God with a plea that he might give her strength to do what God himself is evidently incapable of:

[O]ne thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn’t seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last.²⁷

Here, as elsewhere in the journal, Hillesum expresses a deep conviction that traditional ideas of an omnipotent God capable of miraculously putting an end to human suffering have lost their legitimacy. But that insight did not leave her bereft of hope. On the contrary, as Maria Essunger remarks in a perceptive reading of Hillesum, the journal is permeated with hope and, above all, a firm belief that acts of justice and charity have a value even

26. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, London 1999, 255.

27. Hillesum, *The Complete Works*, vol. 2, 780.

though the impending disaster could not be avoided.²⁸ It was precisely this belief that prompted her, by the time she wrote the entry above, to volunteer for work in the Nazi transit camp of Westerbork, only to eventually be deported herself to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943.

Hope and Redemption

When some years ago I gave a lecture on the topic of “hope against all odds”, a colleague of mine retorted that while I had spoken lengthily about hope from every possible angle, I had not said a word about what to hope *for*. She thereby pinpointed a serious flaw in much theological rhetoric about hope, including my own. For obvious reasons, theologians have a predilection for speaking about hope as being one of the cardinal virtues of Christianity and part and parcel of the biblical legacy as such. But all too often discourses about hope tend to get stuck in generalizations, as if hope in itself were something inherently good and desirable. To realize that this is not the case, we need only remind ourselves of the kind of aspirations that are today being nurtured by populist parties across Europe, let alone by extreme right-wing movements. Hope, in other words, can be filled with the most sinister content.²⁹

In addition to my reflections on what kind of hope we could and should entertain in post-Holocaust Europe, I shall therefore end this article with a brief reflection on the question “what should we hope for?”. The shorthand answer, in a biblical perspective, is redemption. But then again, are we not left with another general term unable to give us any concrete guidance whatsoever? To be sure, the idea of redemption can be filled with varying content, and throughout history theologians have offered very different visions of what redemption entails. Nonetheless, the biblical narratives, taken on their own account, convey a vision of redemption which could not be transmuted into anything. From its earliest embryonic forms in the Hebrew Bible, the idea of messianic redemption is intimately linked to justice, not in a formal or theoretical sense, but as manifested in concrete situations and embodied life.³⁰

To get a sense of this particular ethos, let me quote just a few well-known precepts from the Hebrew Bible. For instance, the Mosaic laws prescribe

28. See Maria Essunger, “The Phantom of God in the (Auto-)Biographical Writings of Hélène Cixous and Etty Hillesum”, in Klaas A.D. Smelik, Meins G.S. Coetsier & Jurjen Wiersma (eds.), *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at Ghent University, January 2014*, Leiden 2017, 205–220.

29. My thanks to Susanne Wigorts Yngvesson for these significant critical comments.

30. I elaborate on this theme extensively in Jayne Svenungsson, “Justice in the Prophetic Tradition”, *Eco-ethica* 6 (2017), 135–149.

that every seventh year, slaves are to be set free and debts are to be forgiven, just as the land is to lay fallow, “so that the poor of your people may eat” (Ex. 23:11). Furthermore, landowners are enjoined not to reap the corners of their fields or to harvest their vineyards and olive trees thoroughly, so that “the alien, the orphan, and the widow” may find provisions (Deut. 24:19–21); likewise, employers are commanded not to “withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns” (Deut. 24:14). If the Mosaic laws as well as the prophetic literature are imbued with a concern for the poor and vulnerable, this is no less the case with the gospels and letters of the New Testament. Hence Jesus’ words: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40), or Paul’s instruction to the Romans: “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up” (Rom. 15:1–2).

I am not making the claim that the ethos manifested in these extracts in any easy way could be transposed to particular political programs, let alone into party politics. How to best promote justice in relation to property, equality, and individual rights is a complex issue and a matter of ongoing democratic debate. What I am contending, however, is that you need to exert yourself *not* to get the basic message in precepts such as the ones quoted, and therefore, that you simply cannot turn them into any possible ethics or politics. This is not to deny that such efforts are today being made – it is a well-known fact that populist and, in some cases, extreme right-wing parties across Europe lay claim to the Christian legacy for nationalist and xenophobic purposes.³¹ Such tendencies, however, need to be countered in the public debate, and theologians, as experts on the biblical inheritance, have an important role to play in this respect. One way among many in which theologians could contribute to public discussions on hope is therefore to insist on the messianic character of biblical hope, indicating that hope is intimately linked to justice in a fundamental sense, which has consequences for how you act towards the poor, the sick, the elderly, and the “aliens who reside in your land”. ▲

SUMMARY

The aim of this article is to ponder how Jewish and Christian discourses on hope can contribute in a critical way to contemporary political and philosophical discussions of hope. Taking its cue from the biblical idea of

31. See the forthcoming article Jayne Svenungsson, “Christianity and Crisis: Uses and Abuses of Religion in Modern Europe”, *Eco-ethica* 8 (2019).

messianic redemption, the first part of the article describes how this idea throughout history has been interpreted in both restorative and apocalyptic ways. In the second part, these various tendencies are related to the contemporary political situation and to current politico-philosophical debates on hope. Finally, the article addresses the intricate question of what to hope for in a time of rising populism and reemerging xenophobic and antisemitic tendencies.