



## Introduction

### 1. Autobiographical Approaches to the Epistle to the Romans

When I was a guest at this institute a few months ago, the topic was apocalypics, and the theme of the conference was “Time Presses” [“*Die Zeit drängt*”]. At the time it seemed to me that we didn’t have a handle on the Pauline problem of the deadline [*Frist*]. And, vain as I am, I said, as a nontheologian: I could tell you something about that. I had in mind 1 Corinthians 1–4. On this Epistle to the Corinthians I had given a lecture course at the Free University in Berlin, in the Faculty of Philosophy. At that time, it became apparent to me that the Letter to the Corinthians is one great fugue around the single word *pan*. The whole text revolves, is constructed, around this word.

When I accepted this invitation, I did not have the idea of being so “pressed for time.” I was thinking more of apocalyptic time pressure, but did not know that time was pressing so personally, that is, because of an incurable illness. Amidst all the obstacles that my condition placed in the way of this risky journey, I had a clear sense of orientation. I had solemnly promised Edith Picht that I would come. And I brushed aside all reservations because I wanted to keep that promise.

Since I now know that time presses more for me than it does in general for us all, I have decided not to speak about Corinthians, but rather to take up something that is a more secret concern of mine, that is, the Epis-

tle to the Romans. To broach this Epistle is a monstrous task. Just as, in general, this conference is not lacking in monstrosities. Here I am in Heidelberg, which is the city of Martin Dibelius, of Günther Bornkamm, of Gerd Theissen and other New Testament scholars. What am I doing, carrying coals to Heidelberg? This is why I must say right from the outset that all that I plan to say here has nothing directly to do with the Paul who is practiced by the theology departments, with good reason and in their legitimacy. And only this legitimates me in presenting, in suggesting to you, who are such an illustrious circle of scholars and artists, what I have in mind.

I thus wish to present to you something very personal. This also concerns the change of topic from Corinthians to Romans. In order for you to understand this decision, I need to tell you something of the story that lies beyond my official role as Professor of Hermeneutics in Berlin. I have given you the letter that I wrote from Paris in 1979 to Carl Schmitt in Plettenberg.<sup>1</sup> I should have, I ought to have provided a commentary on it. But that would have amounted to a conference in itself, to explain and to clarify the range of things that constitute the subtext of this letter.

For now, let me tell you only the story that ensued from this letter. A number of people here (certainly one of you) who knew Carl Schmitt well know that he was no switchboard operator [*Telephonist*]. That was not his mode of communication. One day in Paris, on about September 25, I get a call from the housekeeper: Carl Schmitt wants to talk to me on the phone. It was astonishing. Carl Schmitt tells me: I read the letter, read it over and over, and I am feeling terrible. I don't know how long I have to live, come right away.

I had other plans. It was the time around the Jewish New Year, but right away I took the next train to the Sauerland, to Plettenberg. The conversations were incredible. I cannot relate them here. In part they were conducted under a priestly seal. (Not that I'm a priest, but there are things one has to treat like a priest.) On "Joachim Ritter Lane" (Schmitt had the habit of naming his streets and walkways after those with whom he first walked them) things were said to me that I cannot forget, but that I also cannot say. We came back from these walks, came into the house and were served tea, and he said: All right, Taubes, let's read Romans 9–11.

It's one thing to read Romans 9–11 with theologians and philosophers, and another thing with the greatest state law theorist [*Staatsrechtler*]<sup>2</sup> of our time. The intense charge of the political, he hears it in a different way, just as a cardiologist knows the heart differently from an ordinary in-

ternist. He listened. And I developed for him, for the first time and spontaneously, the picture of Moses as an advocate for the people of Israel, Moses who rejects, twice rejects the idea that with him begins a new people and that the people of Israel should be eliminated—and of Paul, who accepts this idea. This tension and the question, What does it mean to be the “founder of a people”? then preoccupied us a great deal. We spoke at the time freely, without the support of even the most modest reference library. Then he said, when I presented all this to him, up to the rite of the Jewish Day of Atonement—he said: Taubes, before you die, you must tell some people about this.

And this is how I—a poor Job—came to the Letter to the Romans: as a Jew and not as a professor (which, actually, I’m not all that invested in, except that it should provide me a decent living).

But before I now attempt to read Romans with you, I want to tell you two more stories. Anecdotes. When you reach the age and the phase I am in, they can make sense as a way to convey something to another generation.

During the war I was a student in Zurich. Don’t ask why, how, what: that’s just how it was. I was studying, God help me, German literature, because we had an important Germanist there and because I went more by teachers than by disciplines: Emil Staiger. More than a Germanist, though, he was a Greek scholar. He translated Sophocles and had the courage to say in the preface on Wilamowitz’s translation that it was pulp-novel German [*Gartenlauben-Deutsch*]; what did it matter that he knew Greek when he knew no German? How did I get to know Emil Staiger? One day on the way from the university to Bellevue I said to him that I had read Heidegger’s “On the Essence of Truth,” and he said: You can’t understand that. How come you know that I don’t understand it? At this, he invited me over, and we spent an entire afternoon discussing “On the Essence of Truth.” And he was astonished that I had indeed understood it. For this I was treated to a performance of a Mozart sonata. From then on, our relationship was no longer one of professor and student (after all, he still had to examine me in my minor field); I wouldn’t go so far as to say we were friends, but casual.

One day we were walking along the Rämistrasse from the university to the lake, to Bellevue. He turned a corner, and I was continuing on to the Jewish quarter in Enge, and he said to me: You know, Taubes, yesterday I was reading the Letters of the Apostle Paul. To which he added, with great

bitterness: But that isn't Greek, it's Yiddish! Upon which I said: Yes, Professor, and that's why I understand it! That was the first thing.

The second thing was later, less dramatic, in New York, when I was hosting Kurt Latte, the historian of religion from Göttingen. His reputation preceded him; he was known as someone with a special ear for Greek and Latin. The problem had always pursued me, and I asked him: Mr. Latte, do you understand, with your Greek ear, the Letters of the Apostle Paul? He thought about it (of course he understands them, because sixteen hundred years of Christianization in Europe have made them understandable), and he said: You know, Mr. Taubes, not really. I cannot grasp them with my Greek ear. That's an important judgment coming from a great philologist. It was with these additional experiences that I approached this text.

In the course of this lecture I want to try to convey to you why Paul concerns me as a Jew. But before we get to that, I also have to justify in a few words why Paul concerns me as a philosopher. Why do I venture onto theological territory? I think the isolation of the theology departments is disastrous. In my view these departments face the urgent task of installing a few windows into their monads.

In fact, I generally believe, now that I for once have the chance to speak freely, that a chair for Old Testament and a chair (after all, you people always have at least two of these) for New Testament and even a chair for Church History should be instituted in departments of philosophy. I think it's scandalous, and in Berlin you can just feel it, the ignorance that comes about because the departments are closed units. These are impermeable formations. You can't delude yourself about this. I consider this the calamity of the German educational system. But of course I'm hardly going to change that. I have friends like [Dieter] Henrich who conclude from this that departments of theology should be eliminated from the university. I have always resisted this, because I said: Without this A-B-C I couldn't teach any philosophy at all! He can, since he begins with self-consciousness, you understand, but me, poor Job, I can't do without history.

And this is why I am of the opinion that here in the institutions some permeability must be created. I think it is a disaster that my students grow up in sheer ignorance of the Bible. I received a dissertation about Benjamin in which twenty percent of the associations were mistaken, for the reason that they were biblical associations. So the student comes to me with the finished product, I read some of it and I say: Listen, you need to go to Sunday school and read the Bible! And with the delicacy of the Benjaminites he says to me: In what translation? I say: For you, any one will do.

That is the situation in departments of philosophy as I experience it. But still there are two hundred students who attend a lecture course on Paul, Corinthians. The widespread ignorance of the Bible is linked to the humanistic-Humboldt-cultural idea, this *interpretatio graeca* of European history. I can't change that.

I should have devoted myself to this, but by vanity and fate I became a philosopher. I thought it wasn't my calling. Today I see that a Bible lesson is more important than a lesson on Hegel. A little late. I can only suggest that you take your Bible lessons more seriously than all of philosophy. But I know I won't get anywhere with that, it isn't modern. Of course I never wanted to be modern, that wasn't my problem.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Paul in Jewish Religious History: Messianic Logic

Of course I'm not speaking *ex nihilo* here. This means that I still owe you a scholarly answer to the question of what tradition of Jewish religious history I stand within. Now it happens that the Jewish study of Paul is in a very sad state. There is a literary corpus about Jesus, a nice guy,<sup>4</sup> about the rabbi in Galilee, and about the Sermon on the Mount; it's all in the Talmud and so on. To which [Adolf von] Harnack once answered very briskly: Yes, but unfortunately, there's more in the Talmud than that! This apologetic literature proliferated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and there is a consensus in Liberal Judaism (not in Orthodox Judaism, which hasn't moved an inch), that is, a sort of pride in this son of Israel. But when it comes to Paul, that's a borderline that's hard to cross. (Of course there are these Evangelical-Academy journalists from Israel, I'm not talking about them. That's just the cheapest sort of journalism. It's because of the Evangelical Academies that they do this, since of course they always need a Jew with whom to enter into dialogue. That six million were exterminated and that one then seeks out a puppet with whom to conduct a dialogue, I think that's just in bad taste. One has to recognize that something has happened, that dialogues aren't possible, given that there's no way to conjure up the dead!)

But to the extent that this is an internal Jewish problem, there was a book, during the twenties, for an educated audience, by Joseph Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*.<sup>5</sup> There it says that Jesus was still altogether inside the land of Israel, whereas Paul was in essence already outside and had neg-

lected his duty as a Jew. Not worth mentioning: a guy whose religious imagination amounted to nothing, and he couldn't write either, but all right, he was a professor of Hebrew literature, and he had a certain impact.

A very special case that unfortunately did not really have a great effect is that of Leo Baeck, who was a great scholar. A student of Wilamowitz's, who read Greek tragedy on a daily basis and who had a sense for *aggadah*. There's a work by him that the Nazis pulped, but there still remain a few copies: *From Three Millennia*, a collection of essays.<sup>6</sup> His main work is of course well known: *The Essence of Judaism*, a kind of polemic against Harnack's *The Essence of Christianity*.<sup>7</sup> What is most characteristic about this work is the word *and*. Faith *and* law, always *and*. I don't have much patience for this harmonistic type, but it's significant. Baeck wrote an essay entitled "Romantic Religion," in which he applied the categories "classic" and "Romantic" to Paul as a Romantic.<sup>8</sup> This doesn't take us very far, but it's not uninteresting. Baeck of course survived the war in Theresienstadt, and afterwards, as the shipwrecked representative, so to speak, of destroyed German Judaism, wrote an essay entitled "The Faith of Paul." (I believe that it is reprinted in the volume published by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft entitled *The Image of Paul in the Present Age*.<sup>9</sup>)

But all this doesn't change the fact that Paul has not yet really been comprehended by Jewish religious history. I am leaving aside Mr. Joachim Schoeps, which is just Protestantism; he draws his sources from Strack-Billerbeck<sup>10</sup>—I don't have to go into that here.<sup>11</sup> The most important Jewish book on Paul, written deeply from the heart and as an attack, is Martin Buber's *Two Types of Faith*.<sup>12</sup> This book deserves to be taken seriously; it's based on a thesis that I think is highly dubious but from which I have learned a great deal. He distinguishes two types of faith: *emunah*, this Jewish, primary, natural faith, where man finds himself in a relation of faith; and the other type of faith, in which man converts. The person who finds himself in the former is primarily a link in a community whose covenant in the unconditioned (I don't know what this means) engulfs and determines him; the person who converts to faith is primarily an individual (which for Buber is a bad thing)—he has become an individual, and community arises as a union of converted individuals. The first of the two types of faith, that is, this *emunah*, has its classic example—now listen carefully (one might think one were reading Heidegger)—"in the early beginnings of the people of faith, Israel." That sure is a good thing that it happened in the "early beginnings"—the "early beginnings" of a people that arose as a

community of faith. The second, which I suppose is *pistis*, a faith *in* something, arose in the “early beginnings” of Christendom, “which arose in the decay of ancient settled Israel and the peoples and faith-communities of the Ancient Orient as a new formation, from the death of a great son of Israel and the subsequent belief in his resurrection.”<sup>13</sup> Now I have no patience, neither with respect to Heidegger nor with respect to Buber, for this apotheosis of the early. Why the early should be better than the later I simply don’t understand. Those who have trained with Riegl and Benjamin know that the late has its own law.<sup>14</sup> Of course apocalypics comes later than prophecy. It presupposes prophecy, it presupposes the canon, it presupposes interpretation. But that apocalypics should therefore be less important or decadent, that’s something I cannot see. Buber wrote an essay on “Prophecy and Apocalypse” that pursues this schematism to the point of absurdity.<sup>15</sup>

You can see what this leads to: Buber of course wants Jesus on the first, on the positive side (which is very hard to do, since he was more of an apocalyptic than a prophet), and Paul belongs on the other side. Now where does this decline or this “faith in,” this other type of faith, come from? “That the faith-principle of acknowledgment and acceptance in the sense of a holding henceforth that so-and-so is true is of Greek origin requires no discussion.”<sup>16</sup> Ladies and Gentlemen, this certainly does require discussion. Buber here misses the whole point of the thing, which is that “faith in” is by no means only Greek but is *the center of a messianic logic*.

I will attempt to explain this, but before I explain it I want at least to make mention of my teacher, who did not work on the New Testament, but on Jewish mysticism, and who was also a guest at FEST, Gershom Scholem, and his work *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, written in 1938. Perhaps I can read to you this book’s dedication, so that you can see what’s up here and what at the time in New York, where it appeared, no one understood. “To the memory of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), the friend of a lifetime whose genius united the insight of the Metaphysician, the interpretative power of the Critic and the erudition of the Scholar.” In 1941 in New York there were four or five people who knew who that was: Hannah Arendt and so on—things are different now, after the Benjamin renaissance here (which by the way began with Carl Schmitt; his book *Hamlet or Hecuba* is the first critical treatment of Benjamin’s *Trauerspielbuch*, and the most interesting to date<sup>17</sup>).

So it is under this dedication that we find the eighth chapter of this

book on Sabbatianism.<sup>18</sup> You have to get this in order to understand what I am telling you now and what pulls the rug out from under Buber's thesis. Allow me to formulate this loosely: If there is something like a catalogue of Jewish virtues, and there is such a thing, then the word *emunah* plays a very subordinate role. That is, if you read the moral literature of the Talmud or of thirteenth-century Spain or of the fifteenth century (which is an endlessly large literature; there's a professor now for it, Mr. Tishby in Jerusalem), if you read this moral literature, then you will also find, among the wide variety of virtues they have there, the word *emunah*.

In the Sabbatian literature the coverage is very dense. This is in the first place a statistical finding: Suddenly the word *emunah* appears six, seven times on each folio page. This statistical finding is incredibly instructive. The Sabbatian drama is a caricature of the Christian drama. By caricature I don't mean that it is imitated; let me try rather a two-minute description of it using Christian terminology.

I'll leave aside the reasons behind this development. It so happens that in 1648 a manic-depressive, mystically sensitive man comes to a Kabbalist in order to be cured by him of his manic-depressive states. In these manic phases, in this small town Jerusalem or Smyrna that he came from, he has committed obvious transgressions of Rabbinical law. He comes to this man, to this young, twenty-three-year-old Nathan of Gaza, who says to him: I can't cure you, your suffering is a messianic suffering. The soul of the Messiah reigns within you. And there ensues a *folie à deux*; on the one hand, the Messiah and, on the other hand, his proclaimer. This Nathan of Gaza was once described by Scholem as a cross between John the Baptist and Paul. As a *folie à deux* this is not yet interesting, but it is infectious. This is the only messianic movement that catches on from Yemen to Poland, that is, across all the tribes of the dispersed people of Israel. There are wonderful stories by Glückel of Hameln, who tells how people sell the shirts off their backs and think they're going to be carried on clouds to Jerusalem. You can read up on all of this.<sup>19</sup>

And this is when catastrophe strikes. The Sultan is worried about this thing getting out of hand in the Jewish ghetto in Smyrna, Constantinople, and so on. And, on the advice of a converted Muslim doctor, he presents to the "Messiah" the following alternatives: death or conversion to Islam. Now, I know death is a hard thing, but nothing is more ingrained in the Jewish soul and in the Jewish body than to die for the sanctification of the name of God. For that you don't need to be a Messiah, you don't need to



be a Rabbi, for this the communities in Worms slaughtered their children, so that they wouldn't fall into the hands of the Crusaders. And in Speyer. So it really isn't a problem. Yet the astonishing thing occurs: he converts to Islam and gets a position at court with an annual salary.

At first there is dismay in the communities: this just can't be true! He must have gone undercover. But the truth cannot be concealed; after all, he's living in a palace jail, and his followers are going to see him. So now the problem arises: What is this supposed to mean? Well, that is a very deep mystery. He has descended into the abysses of impurity, which is the world, so that he can there gather in the sparks of purity. That is the Kabbalistic vision: the world lives off the sparks of purity, and when these are scattered throughout the world and when they are gathered, the world of impurity collapses into itself.

Now we have the second problem: Is he doing this for us, is he taking this difficult task upon himself *for* us in the sense of Isaiah 53—he bears our sins—or are we obliged to descend with him into this world of the abyss, Islam. There are different answers, and I can't present all of them to you here, but the principle is clear: the inner experience of redemption is going to be *reinterpreted* in light of an external catastrophe and a slap in the face. In the literature, people are quick to speak of "pseudo-Messiahs." I think this is absolute nonsense; it's not our place to say about history what is pseudo and what isn't. People have believed it; that's the problem we're dealing with, and we have to learn to understand it. So: either it's disintegrated—this indeed was the view of most of the high rabbis, especially in the Sephardic tradition—or we have to find ways to deal with it.

The history of Sabbatianism continues up into the eighteenth century, and perhaps even into the nineteenth century, because there is an offshoot in Podolia, where the same thing is repeated at a later time with the Catholic church. This is before Hasidism. The thousands of Jews in Galicia—I know that area, Lemberg, by the name of Rohatyn, the families are well known—convert to Catholicism. They never dreamed of becoming Catholic. They were persecuted by the Jewish community because they were suspected of antinomianism, and they saved themselves by fleeing into the Church and calling upon the protection of the bishops. As a price for this they offered to convert. They converted, but they didn't give up their faith. They converted in order to undermine the church as a subversive force. The whole thing continued up to the French Revolution and beyond.

I can demonstrate this for you by citing the following detail: You

know the Jewish name Schoeps. What does Schoeps mean? A Shabbetai Tsevi-nik who belongs to this sect, a *shepsel*, that's what these people were called in the Jewish community. So, for instance, one found Jews in Nikolsburg who were called up to the Torah, and their shirts were torn open to reveal a large cross on their chest. A highly interesting interlude. The group as such ceased around the time of the French Revolution. Even today—today is an exaggeration, but thirty years ago—there were still people who remembered that their grandfathers had belonged to this group, in Prague especially.

I'm telling you all this not as an anecdote, but in order to show you the logic of this type of faith. This has nothing whatsoever to do with Greek, they didn't know any Greek, these were ghettoized Jews, Sephardic and Ashkenazi, among whom Greek and Greek philosophy were a non-issue. Rather the internal logic of events demanded a faith that is paradoxical, that is contradicted by the evidence.

Paul comes and says: Here is the Messiah. People have got to know that he died on the cross. After all, word has gotten around. This is a death by defamation. Here is the son of David hanging on the cross! Now try to think from the center in a Jewish way: expelled from the community he hangs here, accursed, and has to be taken down in the evening, lest the ground become impure.

This is a total and monstrous inversion of the values of Roman and Jewish thought. Certainly, not everyone bought this right away, but it seems to have caught on. The faith in this defamed son of David becomes an equivalent for all—now we're speaking in Pauline terms—works. This faith is more important than any works. Now you understand my corrective to Buber.

This messianic concentration on the paradoxical has nothing to do with a stereotypical Greece, but with the inner logic of the messianic. Here something is demanded at such a high price to the human soul that all works are nothing by comparison—to consider it for a moment from the perspective of religious psychology instead of theology. This is the point.<sup>20</sup> That Buber is sensitive and a great figure—we don't need to talk about that. But regarding this point, which to me is all important, he misses completely, and with such sureness that we can only be amazed. This is what we can learn from Gershom Scholem, implicitly, in this eighth chapter on Sabbatianism.

Once I allowed myself to joke with Scholem, back when I still was in

contact with him on a daily basis, and I asked him: Listen, for this Nathan of Gaza one gets a full professor's salary. I was referring to his own. And for Paul not even a lectureship at the Hebrew University! This did actually give him something to think about, and that was the beginning of the professorship of David Flusser, about whom I still want to say a word. Flusser's research on Paul is significant because he is really very intimately familiar with the theology of the Qumran people, that is, the groups associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls. Against this background he is able to set up new parallels between the dualisms, he can also connect this to the notion of flesh, and really has taken research into the terminology of ancient Pauline Christianity a step further by making a connection with the Qumran Essenes.

So far, so good. This is the point at which little Jacob Taubes comes along and enters into the business of gathering the heretic back into the fold, because I regard him—this is my own personal business—as more Jewish than any Reform rabbi, or any Liberal rabbi, I ever heard in Germany, England, America, Switzerland, or anywhere.