



The Kingdom of God. Martin Buber's Critique of Messianic Politics

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Abstract

Through a textual and contextual analysis of Martin Buber's scholarly disquisition, *Königtum Gottes* (1932), the article focuses on his critique of political Messianism. This critique is addressed to his friends who participated in the Bavarian Revolution of 1918/19, the political theology of Friedrich Gogarten and Carl Schmitt, and given trends in Zionism. With regard to the latter, Buber's religious and social anarchism is particularly manifest as it is in his study of the biblical origins of Messianism, *Königtum Gottes*. The article concludes with a discussion of the affinities of Buber's critique of political Messianism with that of Max Weber who like Buber called for a political and ethical re-valorization of the everyday. This call is contrasted with Walter Benjamin's political Messianism, whose dialectic in effect endorses a similar ethos.

Keywords: apocalyptic Messianism; eschatology; Kingship of God; political Messianism; political theology

“As soon as JHWH and Israel encounter one another in history, the kingship of God as such emerges. It dares to embody historically a tendency toward the actualization [of the encounter] that can be no other than a political one.”
(Buber 1990, 118)

Between the Academy and Political Engagement

In the winter of 1932 Martin Buber published the first volume of what was to be a trilogy on the biblical origins of “Messianic faith.” The other two volumes never came to fruition.¹ Entitled *Kingship of God (Königtum Gottes)*, this volume was the fruit of many years of prodigious research.² For one familiar with Buber's writings hitherto, the book's densely philological and exegetical arguments were surely disarming. Indeed, it was intended to demonstrate his scholarly credentials. Although he had been teaching at the

1 The general title of the trilogy was to be entitled: *Das Kommende. Untersuchungen zur Entstehungsgeschichte des messianischen Glaubens*. “The second volume entitled *Der Gesalbte* was half finished in 1938 and had already been set in type when the Schocken Press, Berlin [...] was officially dissolved [by the Nazis]. For many years external and internal causes hindered continuation of the work.” Buber's note to the English translation of *Kingship of God*, 13.

2 Buber 1932, Preface to First Edition, translated in: Buber 1991, 13f.

University of Frankfurt since the autumn of 1923, he lacked a scholarly profile, at least one that would be recognized as such by the accepted academic standards. At the university he was engaged only as an adjunct lecturer (*Lehrbeauftragter*) in *Jüdische Religionswissenschaft und Ethik*, for which he was awarded a modest stipend by the Jewish community.³ In 1930 the appointment was upgraded to an “honorary” professorship in comparative religion, which was still an adjunct position, bearing little academic prestige and but a symbolic salary.⁴ What was standing in his way to a full professorial position was not only nigh-total the lack of scholarly publications but also the so-called *Habilitationschrift*, which would have qualified him for a *bona fide* university appointment.⁵ In April 1933 he was dismissed from the faculty of the University of Frankfurt – in Nazi parlance “vacationed” (*beurlaubt*) – under the civil service law banning non-Aryans from holding a position in state institutions.⁶

The expulsion from the ranks of the German professoriate thrust Buber back into the liminal space between the academy and the life of a public intellectual that by disposition he seemed to prefer.⁷ He immediately assumed a leading role in what was called “the spiritual resistance” to the Nazi program systematically to defame the Jews and to rescind their civil and human rights.⁸ Within the bounds of ever shrinking possibilities he established a network of educational institutions to provide his disinherited people a knowledge of Judaism and the spiritual legacy that many had lost through assimilation and their concerted efforts to become members of Germany’s educated middle class (*Bildungsbürgertum*). He himself would travel the length and breadth of Germany lecturing and conducting seminars. Under the watchful eye of the Gestapo he adopted in these lectures as well as in his written work an Aesopian style, with a strong political message often hidden between the lines, but nonetheless audible to the attentive ear.⁹ A political

3 See Franz Rosenzweig to Martin Buber, letter dated January 12, 1923, in: Buber 1991, 293f.

4 As a honorary professor Buber earned an annual salary of 2,400 Reich Marks, while the yearly salary of a full professor (Ordanarius) was over 20,000 Reich Marks, in addition to benefits. See Willy Schottroff 1985, vol. 1, 65, n. 5.

5 Buber’s decision to pursue Habilitation seems also to have been prompted by his overall strategy of securing a position at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The first chancellor of the university, founded in 1925, was eager to appoint Buber to the fledgling institution, but his recurrently reformulated recommendations failed to attain the approval of the pertinent academic committees. The major stumbling block seemed to be Buber’s lack of Habilitation and a clear scholarly profile. Was he a philosopher, a biblical scholar, a historian of Jewish mysticism and Hasidism? Or was he perhaps a scholar of comparative religion (Religionswissenschaft)? In a letter from September 1929 to Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, who was the first appointment in philosophy at the Hebrew University, Buber expressed his understanding of the situation and indicated that he had thus begun to devote himself to a scholarly project: “I have started my scholarly work late [at the time Buber was 51 years old]. [...] My ideas and my methods diverge considerably from those customary in the present-day study of religion. I can only let them be represented by my work itself [i.e., *Kingship of God*]. [...] I have no idea, however, whether it will be recognized by official [sic] scholarship despite its ideas and methods, and if so when.” Buber to S.H. Bergmann, September 11, 1927, Buber 1991, 354. Several years after having earned his doctorate (in 1904), he commenced research on a Habilitationsschrift in art history, but soon abandoned the project.

6 Buber’s lack of Habilitation was one of the factors that hindered his professorial appointment at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. See Hans Kohn 1961, 418f.

7 Buber’s ambivalent attitude towards the protocols of academic scholarship are discussed extensively in Mendes-Flohr 2002, 1–24.

8 On Buber’s ramified activities on behalf of the “spiritual resistance” see Simon 1959, 2.

9 On the language of resistance, see *ibid.*, *passim*, and Urban 2009, 165–191.

and social activism refracted through learned lectures and essays was his calling. Hence, as he confided in a letter to one of his friends, who had been pushing for his appointment to the faculty of the Hebrew University, “*ich bin kein Universitätsmensch*,” explaining that he would join the faculty of the Jerusalem center of higher learning only reluctantly and would remain a “stranger,” a self-conscious outsider, to the institution, for he would continue to resist conforming to its academic expectations and demands (Buber to S.H. Bergmann, April 16, 1936, in: Buber 1973, 589). Indeed, he remained at the margins of the institution and actively engaged in the public and political life of the *yishuv* and later the State of Israel, advancing positions that were decidedly to the “left” of the community’s consensus.¹⁰

The Tragedy of Messianic Politics

Despite its formal scientific character – more than a quarter of its 260 pages are devoted to footnotes – *Kingship of God* was informed by an overarching ideological concern, namely, political theology. His initial interest in the nexus between politics and religious conviction seems to have been spurred by what he referred to as the tragedy of messianic politics, the exuberant desire to change the world in one fell, revolutionary swoop and to rush the gates of paradise here and now.

Telling is his letter to the poet Ludwig Strauss, written a day after the assassination of Kurt Eisner, the leader of the Bavarian revolution who in November 1918 who became the president of the short-lived independent socialist state of the Bavaria. Buber had just returned from Munich where he met with Eisner and his revolutionary associates, a high proportion of whom were Jews. His letter to Strauss, dated February 22, 1919, was penned just after he learned that Eisner had been assassinated on the previous day. He told Strauss, who several years later was to become his son-in-law, that he had just returned from Munich where he meet with Eisner and his revolutionary comrades:

“The deepest human problems of the revolution were discussed with utmost candor: in the very heart of events I posed questions and offered replies and there were nocturnal hours of apocalyptic gravity, during which silence spoke eloquently in the midst of discussion, and the future became more distinct than the present. And yet for all but a few it was nothing but mere bustle, and face-to-face with them I sometimes felt like a Cassandra. As for Eisner, to be with him was to peer into the tormented passions of a divided Jewish soul; nemesis shone from his glittering surface; he was a marked man. [Gustav] Landauer, by dint of the greatest spiritual effort, kept up his faith in him, and protected him – a shield-bearer terribly moving in his selflessness. The whole thing is an unspeakable Jewish tragedy.” (Buber to L. Strauss, February 22, 1919, in: Buber 1991, 242)

Ten weeks after Buber posted this letter Landauer was brutally bludgeoned to death by counter-revolutionary troops. Buber was deeply shaken by the murder of his dearest friend. In a memorial address he portrayed Landauer as a martyred messianic prophet, as a latter-day Christ:

10 Buber’s political activities in the *yishuv* and the State of Israel are documented in Mendes-Flohr 2005.

“Gustav Landauer had lived as a prophet of the coming human community and fell as its blood-witness. He went upon the path on which Maximus Tyrius – whose words Landauer used as the motto of his book, *Die Revolution* [1906] declares: ‘Here is the way of the Passion, which you call disaster (*Untergang*), and which you [falsely] judge according to those who have passed upon it; I, however, deem it salvation, since I judge it according to the result of what is still to come.’ In a Church at Brescia I saw a mural whose entire surface was covered with crucified individuals. The field of crosses stretched until the horizon, hanging from each, men of varied physiques and faces. Then it struck me that this was the true image of Jesus Christ. On one of the crosses I see Gustav Landauer hanging.” (Buber 1919, 291)

For Buber Landauer’s death was “apocalyptic horror” that marked the tragedy of “messianic politics,” of a noble but ultimately misguided desire to hasten the advent of a world redeemed of injustice and human suffering.

Though he had celebrated Messianism as “the most deeply original idea of Judaism” (Buber 1911, 91), Buber was now profoundly perplexed by tragic implications of efforts to expedite redemption through revolutionary action. In conversation, epistolary exchange, essays and lectures he sought to clarify the spiritual and ethical dialectics of messianic expectation. He even tried his hand at writing a novel to explore the issues raised by messianic politics. Projected on the image of the apocalyptic struggle between Gog and Magog described in the biblical Book of Ezekiel (38–39), the novel sought to explore alternative ways of working for redemption. In a letter to Franz Rosenzweig, dated 1923, he apologized for not making a promised visit, explaining that he was preoccupied with the initial drafts of the novel:

“‘Gog’ is crowding in on me, but not so much in an ‘artistic’ sense. Rather I am becoming aware, with a cruel clarity that is altogether different from any product of the imagination, of how much ‘evil’ is essential to the coming of the Kingdom. In thinking about this I had a flash of insight about Napoleon, something I had previously not understood. On the Island of Elba, he once said that his name would remain on earth as long as *le nom de l’Eternal*. That is how he translated the Word that the three heard in the fiery furnace of the Hebrew year 5574 [1814] and which caused his death in 5575 [1815]. *Nostra res agitur* [it is a matter of our concern].” (Buber to Rosenzweig, January 18, 1923, in: Buber 1991, 298)

The “three in the fiery furnace” is an allusion to Daniel 3 which Buber applied to three Hasidic masters, contemporaries of Napoleon, who would chant theurgic prayers to influence God to hasten the redemption by employing the French tyrant, who was about to invade Poland with his armies, to serve as His messianic agent.

Buber’s messianic novel had a prolonged and anguished gestation. After two false starts, countless drafts, and more than twenty years later, he finally completed the novel, published first in Hebrew in 1944 (*God u’Magog: Megilat Yamim*) and then in German in 1949 (*Gog und Magog: Eine Chronik*). Both the Hebrew and German title captured the apocalyptic drama depicted in the novel: *Gog and Magog: A Chronicle*. The English translation, which appeared in 1958, somewhat obscured the drama by rendering the title *For the Sake of Heaven* (Buber 1958).

It was actually an anti-apocalyptic tale meant to highlight the folly of attempts to usher in the Kingdom of God with one grand stroke – in the case of Buber’s Hasidic rabbis, through magical prayer and mystic practices intended to promote that one last apocalyptic

battle of Gog from the Land of Magog. To Buber this was the road of false Messianism leading inexorably not only to inconsolable disappointment, but also to nihilism, a rejection of our ethical and political task *within* history and the laborious – most often humble and unnoticed – work of spiritual and moral transformation of society and the political order. Redemption, as Buber understood biblical and Jewish teachings, is not as the apocalyptic vision has it, “the end of history,” but rather its perfection that is the “sanctification” of the world within history.

Hence, Buber declared in an essay of 1930, “we can only work on the Kingdom of God though working in all the spheres allotted to us” (Buber 1974, 137). No sphere, he hastened to add, is more valid or more effective than the other. “One cannot say, we must work here and not there, this leads to the goal and that does not.” Accordingly, he concluded, there is “no legitimately messianic, no legitimately messianically-oriented politics” (ibid.).

Although politics is invariably compromised and tainted by the imperious realities of the mundane order, it is not to be disdained or rejected. In an essay of 1936, he criticized Søren Kierkegaard precisely because in order to achieve spiritual purity and to be alone with God, the Danish philosopher renounced marriage and any relationship with what he called “the crowd.” Buber cites Kierkegaard, “‘The Single One’ is the category of the spirit, of spiritual awakening and revival, and is sharply opposed to politics as much as possible” (Buber 1965, 59). Buber protests: “‘The Single One,’ is not the man who has to do with God essentially, and only unessentially with others, who is unconditionally concerned with God and conditionally with the body politic. The Single One must [...] take his world, what of the world that is extended and entrusted to him in his life, without any reduction into his life of devotion. [...] He must put his arms round the vexatious world, whose true name is creation” (ibid., 65). Nor is one to regard oneself “at liberty to select” what of the body politic suits one, “for the whole cruel hour is at stake,” the “whole claims” one, and one “must answer – Him” (ibid., 66).

Nor is politics to be consigned to the cynical realism recommended by Carl Schmitt. According to this Nazi-affiliated professor of constitutional law, politics is not accountable to any principle or authority other than its own immanent logic. In a seminal essay, he identified politics as a specific domain of interest – comparable to other distinct spheres of activity, aesthetics, religion, economics or ethics – that is guided by its own autonomous criteria (Schmitt 1996). Whereas aesthetic judgment is determined by beauty versus ugliness, ethics good and evil, religion sacred and profane, Schmitt averred, politics is to distinguish between friend and foe. All other considerations are not only alien but also actually inimical to politics. As Buber points out, Schmitt’s dichotomy allows only the defeat, if not utter elimination of one’s foes. “There is no reconciliation, no mediation, no adequate expiation. [...] Every classic duel is a ‘masked judgment of God’” (Buber 1965, 73f.) Politics is ultimately a Manichean, apocalyptic struggle against one’s foe. Buber faults Schmitt on methodological grounds. The Nazi jurist, who incidentally also introduced the concept of “political theology” (Schmitt 1922). Buber contends Schmitt derives his foe-friend formula from rare, extreme situations of conflict, situations in which there is an imminent threat from outside or from alien forces within one’s society,¹¹ whereas

11 Buber forcefully objects to Schmitt’s facile conflation of outside and inner foes. Cf. “The [outside] foe has no interest in the preservation of the [political] formation, but the rebel [that is, the inner foe] has – he

political life is generally far more fluid. Further, by setting the binary opposition of friend-foe alongside the distinction between, in Schmitt's words, "good and evil in the moral sphere, and beautiful and ugly in the aesthetic," Schmitt is confounding normative categories with attitudinal perceptions engendered by extraordinary situations (Buber 1965, 74).

Schmitt found, Buber observes, an improbable ally in the Lutheran theologian Friedrich Gogarten, the author of a volume entitled *Politische Ethik* of 1932 (Gogarten 1932). Examining political life from the perspective of dialectical theology, which posits the absolute distinction and, therefore, an unbridgeable distance between God and humans, Gogarten argues that ethical problems are, in essence, political and thus emphatically worldly. Hence, Buber observes, Gogarten in effect severed politics from religion. "If ethical problems receive their relevance from the political realm, they cannot also receive them from the religious, even if the political has a religious basis" (Buber 1965, 76). At bottom, what Schmitt and Gogarten share is a dismal view of human nature: humanity is incorrigibly evil. The theologian and the legal scholar meet on the plane of a Hobbesian view of the state. As Gogarten concludes, it is the ethical task of the state to ward off "the evil to which men haven fallen prey by its sovereign power and by its right over the life and the property of its subjects." Citing this proposition, Buber biting remarks, "this is a theological version of the old police state idea" (ibid., 77). The political order, so Gogarten, can at most control human sinfulness; redemption comes from God alone, as an act of unearned grace.

Buber's response to Gogarten and Schmitt is pointedly brief: "Man is not 'radically' this or that" (ibid., 77). Humans have the potential for both good and evil. "Man is not good, man is not evil; he is, in a pre-eminent sense, good and evil together" (ibid., 77–78). The state is not an abstract, ontological given, but a labile historical formation, whose political character depends on how individuals realize their moral potential. If political power is understood as an ethical responsibility, that is taken "theologically and biblically seriously", it becomes an expression of profound religious faith (ibid., 78). Indeed, one cannot fully and "legitimately" establish a relation with God "without a relation to the body politic"¹² (ibid., 76). Echoing the thesis articulated in *Kingship of God*, Buber explains that this relation is fully in accord with the testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures:

The Old Testament records, in the history of the kings of Israel and the history of the foreign rulers, the degeneration of legitimacy into illegitimacy and of full power [that is, fully authorized power] into antagonistic power.¹³ As no philosophical concept of the state, so likewise no theological concept of the state leads beyond the reality of the human person in the situation of faith. None leads beyond his responsibility – be he servant or emperor – for the body politic as man in the sight of God (ibid., 79).

wants to 'change' it: it is precisely it he wants to change. Only the former is radical enough to establish the import of [Schmitt's] formula" (Buber 1965, 74). This is clearly an oblique defense of the post-war revolutionaries, often cast as a Jewish cohort, whom Schmitt and his ilk condemned as Germany's foes, a fifth-column.

12 Ibid., 76.

13 The German is a play on words: "... der Abartung ... der Vollmacht in Wiedermacht ..." (Buber 1979, 262).

This is the gist of Buber's political theology: Our responsibility before God is realized *inter alia* in the political realm.¹⁴ Redemption is not to be sought beyond history and its political imperatives. But if political action is the road to Redemption, it must be pursued *in pianissimo*, in soft, even imperceptible, incremental steps, and not in a flash, in one frenzied dash to the *eschaton*. Buber elaborated this thesis with scholarly detail in the *Kingship of God*.¹⁵

The Destructive Apocalyptic Logic of Messianism

Upon reading Buber's monograph, Gershom Scholem penned him an appreciative letter, and approvingly highlighted what he discerned to be its *leitmotif*: the presentation and varied formulations about "theocracy and anarchy". Scholem was particularly pleased to have read Buber's discussion of this theme because, as he put, "I have come to the same conclusion in my own studies [...]. The significance of this connection for every stratum of Jewish reality is incalculable, and I deem myself fortunate to have found confirmation in your testimony of this in such a prominent place" (Scholem to Buber, June 22, 1932, in: Buber 1991, 224f.). He refers Buber to a newspaper article he had published on Rosenzweig in which he criticizes the then recently deceased religious philosopher for ignoring the anarchic impulses inherent in Messianism, or rather shrewdly domesticating it to accommodate bourgeois sensibilities. Though Rosenzweig is rightly celebrated for retrieving for an assimilated Jewry Judaism as "theocratic mode of life" in which one bears the yoke of the Torah and its commandments as an intense anticipation of redemption, he is to be faulted for removing its anarchic dialectic. Messianic longing cannot but beget apocalyptic defiance of history and the regnant political order. Rosenzweig chose to ignore "the truth that redemption possesses not only a liberating but also a destructive force – a truth which only too many Jewish theologians are loath to consider and which a whole literature takes pains to avoid" (Scholem 1971, 323). Scholem thus praises the *Kingship of God* as a striking and welcome exception to this rule. For in this work, Buber acknowledges head-on the dialectic tension between theocracy and the anarchic, apoca-

14 Cf. "The political sphere is not to be excluded from the hallowing of all things" (Buber 1974, 137).

15 A polemic with the Christian eschatological understanding of Messianism also looms large in Buber's study. Explaining why he undertook this study, Buber noted: "Of most importance to me [...] was the question of the origin of 'Messianism' in Israel. It touched on another, concerning which I begun more than twenty years ago, a slowly growing, subsequently postponed, essay-project and which now – in a special connection, but supplementing these investigation – begged to be taken up again, the Christological question." Preface to the First Edition of *Königtum Gottes* (Buber 1990, 13f.). Also see Buber's early exchange with the philosopher S.H. Bergmann on the Jewish and Christian conceptions of the Messiah, in which the seeds of his political theology are already found. Cf. "Now, I grant it is apparent that in the primitive Christian community the psychological process that took place was – in its 'projection' – regarded as the eventuated redemption in the world, in fact even as the eventuated redemption of God [...]. But the persistent experience with the unredeemed world, the – as you say – continuing history of mankind, which goes its way with all its confusions, forced the believers to divined Christ into he who had come and he would come, and to wait for the Paraclete as the real completer of the redemption, the one who would make redemption visible. This meant the splitting of the temporal aspect of existence into something within and something without. Such a splitting is at odds with the Jewish faith in the Messiah, which regards the messianic function of man to be, in addition to absolute fulfillment, an indissoluble blending of within and without, 'rising the sparks' and raising of humanity [...]" (Buber to S.H. Bergmann, letter dated December 4, 1917, in: Buber 1991, 224f.).

lyptic impulse that invariably issues from “the recognition of the catastrophic potential of all historical order in an unredeemed world” (ibid.).

Scholem and Buber shared a more basic religious and political anarchism that inflected not only their respective understandings of Messianism and its place within Jewish spiritual history but also their conception of the Zionist project. In a time when the *Endziel* of Zionism was still debated,¹⁶ they doubted the wisdom of pursuing the establishment of an independent Jewish state, and not only because, in their judgment, it would gravely exacerbate the conflict with the Arabs. They feared that the pursuit of sovereign Jewish rule in Palestine would thrust the Zionist movement on the mistaken path of political nationalism, thus endangering its supreme spiritual and cultural objectives. Hence, they both endorsed the program of *Brit Shalom*, founded in 1925 to advance the vision of a bi-national state in which Jews and Arabs would exercise co-dominion over Palestine. Buber's reservations about Jewish political sovereignty found expression in *Kingship of God*. In tracing the origins of the messianic idea, he turns to ancient Israel's “pre-state history” (Buber 1990, 117). Not only do the roots of Judaism's conception of God's rule lie in the age of patriarchs, but it was the period before the Children of Israel settled in the Land of Israel that witnessed the most pristine expression of the people's relationship to God. Under the leadership of patriarchs and later Moses, Israel came to understand that it had one sovereign and that was God alone. And divine kingship entails the unconditional demand that all aspects of the people's existence be brought under his rule:

“The unconditioned claim of the divine Kingship is recognized at the point when the people proclaims JHWH Himself as King, Him alone and directly (Exodus 15:18), and JHWH Himself enters upon the kingly reign (Exodus 19:16). He is not content to be ‘God’ in the religious sense. He does not want to surrender to a man that which is [His], the rule over the entire actuality of worldly life: this very rule He lays claim to and enters upon it; for there is nothing which is not God's. [...] *The separation of religion and politics which stretches through history is here overcome. [...]*” (Buber 1990, 138, italics added)

The comprehensive compass of God's directives meant that Israel's faith was performed “religio-political” (ibid., 117).

The wandering tribes of Israel thus discovered the true meaning of theocracy, one that would in the course of time be corrupted once they entered the Promised Land and established a state. Since theocracy is usually misunderstood to belong typologically to a state, and thus to avoid unnecessary confusion Buber declared that he would gladly “surrender” the term and “rather call what I mean kingship of God” (ibid., 20). Buber further distinguishes Israel's theo-political relationship to God from state-sponsored theocracy by characterizing the former as a “direct theocracy,” for it is mediated neither by the rule of clerical class nor by governmental decree. Indeed, grounded in the existential reality of faith, it is an expression of free will (ibid., 18, 138, 141). But the “anarchic psychic foundation” (ibid., 161) of Israel's pre-state theocracy unleashed a dialectic that threatened to lead to its degeneration into “empty anarchy” (ibid. 139) and “aggressive disorder” (ib-

16 On the ramified debates in the pre-state period of the Zionist movement's *Endziel*, see Halpern 1961, ch. 1.

id.), and eventually “in to an indolent or brutalized subordination” (ibid., 138) to a purportedly stabilizing leader. Due to the inevitable abuse of the “anarchy” (that is, the absence of a ruler) supporting direct theocracy there are those who long for “divine rulership against that of ‘history’” and “experience therein the first shudder of eschatology” (ibid.). The crisis of direct theocracy is thus ultimately one of faith, of the faltering trust of the Children of Israel in “a world that does not want to be God’s, and to a God who does not want to compel the world to become His” (ibid.). The “purely charismatic” leadership of Moses, alas, failed to prevent a “disenchantment of faith” (ibid.). His authority held sway solely by virtue of divine *charis*, a supernal grace that “stands superior to every enchantment as well as law” (ibid., 140). In time it was destined to wane, for, as Max Weber noted, “the duration of charismatic authority” is inherently unstable and ephemeral (cited in ibid.),¹⁷ and the charismatic leader is, therefore, obliged by his adherents to transform *charis*, in Buber’s words, “into stable political reality, into permanent presuppositions of political life and action” (ibid., 140). Accordingly, theo-politics is no longer to be based on merely “covenant and statue” (ibid., 141). This process did not begin with Moses and Joshua who resisted the call to establish the mechanisms to render, as Weber would put it, “charisma into a perennial institution” (cited in ibid.). The failure of Moses and Joshua to ensure the transference or continuation of charismatic leadership left a vacuum. “The problem of charismatic succession in pre-state Israel” is manifest in the longing of the people, again Buber cites Weber, “for the epiphany of a successor who personally demonstrates his qualifications” to lay claim to “*charis*” (ibid., 158).

The desire to give charismatic leadership institutional and presumably perdurable expression eventually yielded a process leading to the selection of a human king for Israel. Out of the crisis of theocracy emerged a human king of Israel, “the follower of JHWH, as His anointed, the Messiah, the *Messiach* or Messiah of Israel [...]” (ibid., 162). The anointing and crowning of Saul as the King of Israel marked a decisive – and to Buber’s mind a profoundly lamentable – turning-point in the spiritual history of Israel and in general the theistic religious imagination. The establishment of the monarchy had far-reaching consequences. The longing for a divinely appointed King-Messiah that was to follow in the wake of the ultimate failure of the earthly kings of Israel was foreign to the very spirit of the direct theocracy of pre-state Israel. “Messianism,” Buber emphatically states, “cannot be derived, even in the form of the messiah from primitive theocracy” (ibid., 40). Consequent to anointing an earthly king – and the attendant founding of an hierocracy or priestly rule, which Buber sharply distinguishes from a genuine theocracy (ibid., 22, 30) – was the separation of religion from politics and the affirmation of history as the arena of divine service. The divorce of religion from politics ineluctably entailed the removal of the Kingship of God from the quotidian “political” realities of everyday life to an eschatological realm in eternity. Hence, Buber concludes, the path from Messianism to eschatology was determined by a dialectic logic. The shift of the horizon of

17 Buber warmly acknowledged his indebtedness to Max Weber for his analysis of the sociological dynamics of charismatic leadership. See the Preface to the first edition of *Königtum Gottes* in Buber “thankfully” mentions: “The Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie by Max Weber, together with his book *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* offer in the way of supplementary general insights and pertinent matters which were expanded upon in conversation with the extraordinary man. In the last chapter of this volume I have made use of Weber’s concepts and ideas for the presentation of a view essentially different than his I profess, however, I have done no injustice to his intention [...]” (Buber 1990, 19f.).

religious meaning and hope from history to the *eschaton*, to an age beyond the mundane and often exasperatingly tedious political tasks of the here and now, perforce begets the apocalyptic idealism that has led so many well-meaning people astray.¹⁸

Buber's insistence that the Kingship of God is to be realized within history, in response to the demands of the everyday, echoes the words with which Max Weber concluded his critique of the messianic idealism that fired the ill-fated Bavarian revolution of 1918. Speaking before an audience in Munich comprised largely of students who "share in the intoxication signified by this revolution" (Weber 1968, 127; Roth/Schluchter 1979, 66f), he solemnly observed:

"It would be nice if matters turned out in such a way that Shakespeare's Sonnet 102 should hold:

Our love was new, and then but in the spring,
When I was wont to greet it with my lays;
As Philomel in summer's front doth sing,
And stops her pipe in growth of riper days.

But such is not the case. Not summer's bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness [...]. When this night shall have slowly receded, who of those for whom spring apparently has bloomed so luxuriously will be alive?" (Weber 1968, 128)

Weber challenged his youthful audience to prepare themselves for the disillusionment that would surely follow in the heels of the Revolution's inevitable failure to usher in Paradise. They would then have to measure up to "the world as it really is *in everyday routine*." Should they meet the challenge, one could then say that they "experienced the vocation of politics in its deepest meaning." And if not, "they would have done better in simply cultivating plain brotherliness in personal relations. [...]" (ibid., italics added).

Buber endorsed Weber's realism, although he gave it a theological twist that the former, given his religiously "unmusical ear," would surely not have countenanced. Aside from the Kingship of God and related biblical studies, Buber was wont to refract his critique of messianic politics through his representations of Hasidic lore and teachings. Recoiling from the apocalyptic frenzy engendered by the ultimately delusional messianic hopes attached to the ill-fated eschatological escapades of Shabbatai Tzvi, the Hasidim adopted, according to Buber, a decidedly non-eschatological conception of Messianism that focused on the redemptive power of pious and ethical deeds in the seemingly profane landscape of everyday life. Although critical of Buber's scholarship and interpretation of Hasidism as an existentialist ethic, Scholem concurred with his reading of the movement as neutralizing Messianism (Scholem 1971b, 176–202, esp. 178f, 181), and, correspondingly, teaching that redemption is to be sought in the here and now. But unlike Buber, Scholem held that Messianic hopes cannot be utterly expunged from the Judaic imagination, for the apocalyptic vision of a miraculous advent of an otherworldly Redeemer breaking the hold of history is too deeply lodged in the human psyche to be utterly dis-

18 Buber contrasts "apocalyptic politics" to "prophetic politics," guided by an non-messianic theo-political ethos. See Buber, Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the History Hour, in: Buber 1968, 172–187.

lodged.¹⁹ Walter Benjamin gave this understanding of the apocalyptic impulse a dialectical rendering that, in effect, sanctions Buber's (and Weber's) call to work for the Kingdom of God in the everyday.

Benjamin's Messianic Hope and the Re-Valorization of the Everyday

Identifying the "malaise of modernity" with the myth of progress, or the belief in history's inexorable march toward absolute happiness and human well-being, Benjamin held that this chimerical and thus delusory vision degrades and corrupts the immediacy of the human and objects alike. Apparently inspired by his friend, Scholem's insight that the traditional Jewish longing for a Messiah, miraculously dispatched by God, implies a radical disjunction between history and redemption, Benjamin discerned in this hope-beyond-hope a dialectical affirmation of existence on this, the quotidian-side of the *eschaton*, and thus the revalorization of the everyday and the insignificant. The apocalyptic vision of the imminent coming of the Messiah illuminates the here-and-now and the profane with the light of redemption:

"For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious side or the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectic optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday. The most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomena, for example, will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic process) as the profane illumination of reading will teach us about telepathic phenomena [...]" (Benjamin 1999, 216)

The Messianic vision illuminates the ephemeral, the insignificant moments and events that define our day-to-day existence with the light of Redemption:

"A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in

19 Scholem faulted Buber for attempting "in vain [...] to minimize or obliterate altogether" Messianism from the Hasidic worldview (*ibid.*, 195). Cf. "The magnitude of the Messianic idea corresponds to the endless powerlessness in Jewish history during all the centuries of exile, when it was ill prepared to come forward onto the plane of world history. [...] For the Messianic idea is not only consolation and hope. Every attempt to realize it tears open the abysses which lead each of its manifestations ad absurdum. There is something grand about living in hope but at the same time there is something profoundly unreal about it. [...] Precisely understood, there is nothing concrete that can be accomplished by the unredeemed. This makes for the greatness of Messianism, but also for its constitutional weakness. Jewish so-called Existenz possesses a tension that never finds true release; it never burns itself out" (Scholem 1971, 35).

all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes *a citation a l'ordre du jour* – and that day is Judgment Day.” (Benjamin 1968, 254)²⁰

The negative dialectic driving Benjamin's Messianic politics thus spins a course that surprisingly intersects with the trajectory of Buber's critique of apocalyptic, meta-historical fantasies as deflecting one from the biblical political imperative of “hallowing the everyday.”

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²⁰ My reading of Benjamin is indebted to the elegantly insightful essay by Cheryl Beaver, *Walter Benjamin's Exegesis of Stuff*, in: *Epoché: The University of California Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 24 (2006): 69–87.

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