

Review, Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*. Translated with a preface by David Ratmoko. Cultural Memory in the Present. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. xxxvi + 215 pp. ISBN: 978-0-804-76029-4

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This translation of Jacob Taubes's doctoral thesis is sweeping, succinct, presumptuous and error-ridden, if not profoundly misleading. I do not think I have read a book with which every fibre in my body disagreed from the first word I read. It carries on in a long tradition that goes back at least to Philo of trying to counter the classicist narrative of 'Western' culture and thought – that it all derives from that Eastern European country of ancient Greece – by arguing that the roots of the 'West', especially 'Western' Europe, lie not in Greece but in the Hebrew Bible. The key to the 'West's' perception of history, and thereby the structures of its philosophy, history and theology, may be found, argues Taubes, in the ground-breaking biblical proposal that time moves not in circles but in a straight line. In other words, time and thereby history has a beginning, middle and end, never to be repeated. This so-called discovery he calls an eschatological view of time, eventually to become an 'occidental eschatology' that influences and determines thinkers such as Lessing, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Kierkegaard.

Before I point out what is so problematic about this text, a few details: it was the only work published in the lifetime of Taubes, an Austrian Jew and rabbi (like his father) who survived the Second World War in Vienna. After some shuffling between the USA and Palestine after the war, he settled at the Free University in Berlin in 1966, dying of cancer at the age of 64 in 1987. For English readers, Taubes is best known for the text that was translated as *The Political Theology of Paul* (2004), the posthumously published lectures delivered as he was in the last stages of cancer. *Occidental Eschatology* is, by contrast, the only book published in his lifetime. It was his doctoral thesis, published in 1947 as *Abendländische Eschatologie* and this is its first English translation (A pity, then, that it has no index.) The book has four sections: one seeks to define eschatology; another traces its 'history' from the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible, sweeping through the New Testament and Christian thought until Joachim of Fiore; a third traces the theological nature of eschatology from Fiore, through Thomas Müntzer to founder on the rocks of the scientific modern age; and the last continues the story, seeking to show how the baton of eschatology passed from the radical theologians to philosophers such as Lessing, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Kierkegaard.

What is wrong with this argument? To begin with, it presupposes that the Hebrew Bible and those who wrote and compiled it were unique in their ancient Near Eastern environment. In doing so, Taubes absolutises the Hebrew Bible and makes it the *fons et origo* of eschatology in a way that betrays his deeply theological position – for the Hebrew Bible comes ultimately from God. It is unique because only its authors thought of history as linear while all those around them continued to be mired in the cyclical patterns of the seasons, of perpetual death and renewal as narrated in myth. In light of these arguments, it is a shame that Taubes's book has been translated now, for philosophical readers not acquainted with biblical criticism will perpetuate both errors – absolutising the Hebrew Bible and assuming its complete uniqueness in relation to its surroundings.. As has become obvious in the half a century Taubes since first published this work, ancient Israel was not unique. On the other hand, Taubes's Jewish perspective leads him to argue that while the Hebrew Bible is thoroughly unique, Jesus and the New Testament are not, giving voice to standard opinions and positions of the time (pp. 47-58).

Further, the supposed distinction between cyclical and linear time, so popular when Taubes wrote, simply does not hold up to scrutiny. A cursory glance at any collection of ancient Near Eastern literature – the Bible included – will soon reveal complex understandings of time in which linear and cyclical and spiral and regressive and political and ideological tendencies compete with one another. *Enuma Elish* is a case in point, beginning with the struggles between the gods, Marduk's victory and the creation of the world, the establishment of Babylon and the founding of a royal line that traces its origin to Marduk.

Without these nodal points or absolute origin and linear time, Taubes's thesis for an eschatological thread that runs from the Hebrew Bible to Marx and Kierkegaard rapidly loses traction. But there are other errors. In his effort to provide a definition of eschatology in the first part of the book, he elides the distinct categories of eschatology, messianism and apocalypticism, ignoring in addition the differences between the literary, ideological, and sociological features of each. We end up with porridge in which every thought about history becomes eschatological.

In light of these flaws, the much-touted option for the poor and oppressed in Taubes's book begins to look rather weak. Much is made of this option in the preface by David Ratmoko, which is as superficial as it is worshipful. But one wonders whether Taubes really does take such a position when he can come up with sentences such as this: 'The communism of the early community is rooted first and foremost in the tribal practices [*Stammesverfassung*] of Jesus' relatives, who, like other itinerant artisan families, held things in common' (p. 66). The only word that seems to fit this suggestion is eccentric

Further, Taubes opts again and again for a Fall narrative, far too favoured among historians. The narrative structure is as simple as it is reused: the situation was *thus* at the point of origin but it is not *now*; therefore, we must have fallen from that initial moment. In Taubes's text, the Fall appears on at least two occasions. First, the comprehensive end of early Christian apocalyptic comes with Origen (pp. 71-8), who is pervasive in his baleful influence, offering a spiritualised theology that removes any apocalyptic hope. Second, the great apocalyptic system of Joachim of Fiore falls eventually to the individualised eschatology and pietism of Lutheranism and the rationalism of the Reformation's mainstream currents (pp. 118-22). But now we come across a further feature of Taubes's arguments, for it is idealist to the core. Crucial sets of ideas – those of Paul, or Origen or Joachim – influence the attitudes of people who then act in light of those ideas. Not only is this idealism deeply liberal, but it is also characteristic of biblical scholars and philosophers who would like to think that ideas influence history – especially their own.

I wrap up my assessment with two points, one concerning techniques of writing and the other a favourite of mine, Marx. Concerning technique, Taubes tends to focus on secondary sources for his arguments, especially in relation to figures such as Müntzer and Joachim. He also makes use of a standard but misleading approach favoured by some scholars, namely, to find a neglected text by a well-known critic and use that as the source of their whole thought. For example, with Hegel it is *The Early Theological Writings* (pp. 149-52), while Marx's letter written to his father at the age of 18 (p. 169) becomes the source of understanding all that Marx wrote. Taubes also makes some loose mistakes with his sources, stating that Marx's *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* was published in 1843 (p. 165). Not so, for Marx may have written the text in 1843, but the full text – really a collection of observations from the Kreuznach notebooks – was first published in 1927. Only the short introduction was published in 1844, but the main text stayed in Marx's bundles on notes, far from the eyes of his contemporaries, until Taubes's own lifetime. While on the matter of sources, I would add that the bibliography offers some curious and – again – erroneous citations (at the hand of the editor). For example, the references to Marx's works in English cite the collected works as edited by Bottomore and published in London in 1964, whereas the MEGA, the *Gesamtausgabe*, is listed as published in Frankfurt am Main, 1927-32. Both are incorrect, for the collected works were

published in Moscow, London and New York between 1975 and 2004, and the MEGA is still being published, in Berlin, as I write.

As far as Marx is concerned (pp. 34, 184-8), Taubes buys into a popular but erroneous assumption that Marx provides a secularised Jewish and/or Christian eschatology: we live in a sinful, alienated age, for which the proletariat becomes the collective saviour which will save us for a new life in the New Jerusalem of communism. Taubes cites approvingly some of the first who made this argument, such as Fritz Gerlich's *Der Kommunismus als Lehre vom tausendjährigen Reich* (1920) and Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (1949). The publication of this translation of Taubes's book will also perpetuate an error that simply does not stand up to a careful analysis of Marx's context and texts. Such an analysis shows that Marx set himself against eschatological understandings of history, trumpeted in particular by early communists like Moses Hess and Wilhelm Weitling.

In conclusion, it is good that Taubes's relatively few texts are seeing the light of publication, but without an awareness of their serious flaws, we risk falling into the same traps as he did, not least of which is the pious apocalypticism that emerges from Taubes's own effort at retelling.



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