

Article

A Tale of Light and Darkness: Martin Buber's Gnostic Canon and the Birth of Theopolitics

Orr Scharf

Cultural Studies M.A. Program, The University of Haifa, Haifa 3498838, Israel; orr.scharf@gmail.com

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Abstract: The current article revisits the tenuous relationship between Martin Buber's conception of divine rule on earth (theopolitics) with Carl Schmitt's famous notion of political theology, by underscoring their shared, though diametrically opposed interest in Gnostic ideas. Based on a reading of Buber's heretofore unpublished lectures on Judaism and Christianity, the study outlines the nexus between the German tradition of scientific research, religious ideology and political visions, in order to show that Buber's treatment of Gnosticism in the lectures is belied by an implicit critique of Schmitt's dualistic distinction between friend and foe that legitimizes the subversion of liberal democracy. The Gnostic canon that Buber identifies in certain parts of the New Testament is shown to be based on the very same scientific research that fed Schmitt's fascination with Gnostic teachings.

Keywords: Buber; Martin; Gnosticism; Theopolitics; Schmitt; Carl; Science; Baur; Christian Ferdinand; Harnack; Adolph von; Bousset; Wilhelm; Reitzenstein; Richard

1. Introduction

Intellectual historians often face a contradiction inherent to their discipline. The historical dimension of their research requires them to dwell on circumstantial specifics, while the "intellectual," or perhaps more accurately, the "ideational" dimension of their work entails more abstract reflection on the subject matter (Lovejoy 1940). The current study took shape in light of this contradiction: as its title suggests it focuses on Martin Buber's (1878–1965) perception of Gnosticism; but at the very same time, it broaches themes as deep and wide as evolving conceptions of "science," politics, theology, and their charged interrelationships. Though historical, it also unveils the subterranean dynamics at play between abstruse fields of knowledge and different facets of politics, including: knowledge, power, statism, and religion.

My discussion of Buber's perception of Gnosticism will be based on a virtually unknown part of his oeuvre, lectures on Judaism and Christianity (*Vorelesungen über Judentum und Christentum*), delivered in the first half of the 1930s in Germany (Buber 2017). In those lectures Buber offered the most comprehensive and detailed account of his understanding of this late-antiquity religious phenomenon. Some of the observations in these lectures were later incorporated into *Two Types of Faith* (Buber 2011, pp. 202–312), his best-known discussion of Jewish-Christian relations. Several studies have examined Buber's approach to Gnosticism,¹ but none of their authors addresses the lectures in question. The lectures' publication therefore gives occasion to re-evaluate his views on Gnosticism and to re-frame them in the context of contemporaneous discourses on scientific research, Protestant theology, and political theory. What is more, the lectures offer an opportunity to rethink the historiography of the study of Gnosticism in the modern era, as scholars' attention tends to focus on

¹ (Brague 2002; Feller 2013; Stroumsa 2002), and most recently (Mendes-Flohr 2018).

Adolf von Harnack (1850–1931) and Hans Jonas (1903–1993) as two arrowheads in the evolution of the discipline.² Since Buber’s lectures were delivered either before or exactly when Jonas’ *Gnosis and the Spirit of Late Antiquity*³ was published, the *Vorlesungen* were written in the context of the discourse that preceded this breakthrough study. Therefore, this paper will use Buber’s lectures to mark the conclusion of a historiographical account of Gnosticism research *before* Jonas, and will reach farther back than Harnack for its point of departure. In addition to the historiographical insights this move might yield, it will also shed light on the links that the modern study of Gnosticism had from early on with concerns such as Christian faith, systematic and scientific research, and political questions. Chronologically, our point of departure will be Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), founder of the Göttingen school of historical theology; from there we will move on to his intellectual progeny Harnack and Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920), and to Buber’s response to their work; and we will end with political thinker Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). The common ground that the discussion will stake out will be the (un)holy matrimony of theology with politics, which Schmitt coined with the title of his 1922 treatise *Political Theology*, and Buber countered with a neologism that inverts his Catholic counterpart’s phrase: theo-politics. This reversal of the order of the two words comprising the terms—either God or theology (this distinction is less clear in Schmitt) and politics—reflects an inversion of the hierarchy between them. If Schmitt announces that, “All terms in political science are secularized theological terms” (Schmitt 1922, p. 37), in order to argue that modernity wrested the absolute powers traditionally attributed to the deity and placed them in human hands, Buber coins his own counter-term not only to re-establish God’s total sovereignty, but also to anchor it in the historical reality of the Hebrew Bible (Buber 2014). It will be argued here that this movement in opposite directions—away from the Bible in Schmitt and back to the Bible in Buber—is the result of the two thinkers’ opposing views on the political potential of a Gnostic worldview.

The current article delineates an intricate, if not convoluted, constellation of personae, historical processes and ideas, framing it with a very broad question: In what ways do religious knowledge and politics influence one another? The common ground for religious knowledge and politics delineated here is that of “science,” which should be read here as a direct translation of the German term *Wissenschaft*: an ideal for the acquisition of knowledge through rational, systematic and rigorous thinking associated with the legacy of early-modern thinkers such as Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) and G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831). That Bousset and Schmitt, for example, could call their respective researches “scientific,” and were committed to what they viewed as the same scholarly standards as that of the natural sciences meant, among other things, that the insights each of them developed could migrate and impact their counterpart’s respective discipline without raising methodological concerns.

2. *Vorlesungen über Judentum und Christentum* in Context

Readers of Buber’s 1950 study of early Christianity, *Two Types of Faith* (Buber 2011), will feel familiar with the *Vorlesungen*, as the historical and theological premises of the monograph overlap with a substantial part of his earlier studies on Christianity. Until now, *Two Types of Faith* has been read as a late reflection on Jewish-Christian relations written in the shadow of the Holocaust. The publication of the *Vorlesungen* demonstrates, however, that his thesis regarding the parting of ways between the two faiths was fully formulated before the Second World War.

Buber delivered two lecture cycles in 1934 and 1935 at the *Freies jüdisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt, the adult education institution founded by Franz Rosenzweig in 1920 and reopened in 1933 under

² Harnack is considered as the scholar who almost single handedly introduced Gnostic interpretations of Christianity to the mainstream theological discourse. See (Lazier 2003; Rudolph 2002; Wiese 1999; Wiese 2015). Jonas marked a watershed in Gnosticism research, which was recognized immediately after the release of his magnum opus. See (Lazier 2003; Rudolph 1983, Rudolph 2002; Waldstein 2000).

³ (Jonas 1988).

Buber's directorship (Scharf 2017). Surprisingly, very little is known about the circumstances surrounding the lectures' composition and delivery. They are not mentioned in seminal biographies of Buber (Friedman 1981–1983; Weltsch 1961), or in Ernst Simon's long essay on Jewish adult education in Nazi Germany (Simon 1959). More recent studies about the Lehrhaus contain few details about the lectures, while some of them even neglect to mention that they ever took place (Buber 2017, pp. 328–32).

Among the *Vorlesungen's* salient contributions is Buber's extensive commentary on Gnosis, the most comprehensive in his entire oeuvre. His analysis of Gnostic beliefs is framed by his grand thesis on the relations between Judaism and early Christianity. As will be shown below, the *Vorlesungen* offer a revealing testimony about Buber's conception of Gnosticism as formed by his reception of contemporary research and religious ideology. Buber maintained a tangled relationship with the so-called "scientific" study of religion. If in *The Kingship of God* (1932–1935) he was abreast of the latest discoveries in the literature,⁴ by 1950 *Two Types of Faith* shows that his interest in the scholarship waned.⁵ In the introduction to the first edition of *The Kingship of God* Buber cites Max Weber to distinguish the science of religion (*Wissenschaft von Religion*) from his own research, which is "knowledge" (*Wissen*), as it were (Buber 2014, p. 99). Nonetheless, in the same introduction, as well as in the two that he added to the book's subsequent editions, Buber replied to scholars' criticisms of his study, in a clear attempt to acquire academic legitimacy (Brody 2018).

The *Vorlesungen's* contemporaneity with *The Kingship of God* indicates, then, that they reflect the culmination of Buber's dialogue with the community of religious studies scholars in general, and Protestant Bible scholars in particular.

Buber isolates the teachings of Jesus as the only bridge between Second Temple Judaism and the New Testament. According to the fundamental premise of his conception of Christianity, the New Testament should be divided into sources containing the genuine teachings of Jesus—the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke—and the sources that draw the faith away from its Jewish origins—Epistle to the Hebrews, The Gospel according to John and the Epistles of Paul.

The shared origins of Judaism and Christianity are also responsible for the shared concerns of the faiths: the clash between them on certain fundamental issues is of value precisely because they share certain fundamental premises. This is why Buber chooses to conduct a comparative analysis within the framework of three thematic studies: Judaism and Christianity share similar motivations but reach utterly different conclusions. Another important consequence of this position is Buber's pointing out of two non-Jewish elements in nascent Christianity: Hellenistic and Egyptio-Mesopotamian. Though both cultures were pagan, Buber emphasizes the rational dimension of the Greek influence on Christian *Glaube* (faith) (p. 68); on the devotional dimension of Babylonian, Persian and Egyptian cultures on the Christian concepts of *Messianismus* (messianism); and on the influence that both Greek and Babylonian cultures exerted on its concept of *Erlösung* (redemption).⁶

3. The Gnostic Enigma

Gnosticism is one of those terms that seem to become more confusing the more is written about them. To begin with, it has two etymologies—an ancient and a modern one—whose interrelationship seems to have sown seeds of confusion more than generated clarity.⁷ One must also take into account the dissonance between the suspicion and disgruntlement which the term encounters among historians of ancient religion of the past five decades, and the popularity it enjoys outside those circles—among scholars and non-scholars alike (Quispel [1992] 2008). And finally, the plurality of

⁴ Evident from his introductions to each of the three editions of *Kingship of God* (Buber 2014).

⁵ The literature Buber cites in this later study dates to the mid-1930s.

⁶ pp. 81, 124, 251, 259–60.

⁷ For the usage of *Gnostikon* in antiquity see (Smith 1981); for a recent, conservative definition of Gnosis in antiquity see (Aland 2009); for the uses and abuses of Gnosis in modernity see (Williams 2001; King 2005).

contexts, applications and definitions of Gnosticism has rendered it almost impossible to pinpoint (Couliano 1992; Hanegraaff 2012).

In the contemporary study of religions, Gnosis is understood as an umbrella term for heretical religious sects among Judeo-Christian communities in the Hellenized Near East that thrived in late antiquity (ca. 2nd–4th centuries CE). According to Edward Moore and John Turner, “. . . the binding thread connecting the disparate texts so often called ‘Gnostic’ is the idea that, although this world is the product, not of the highest God or One, but of a lower entity of lesser power, it is possible for humans to transcend this world through the insight (gn̄osis) from which the divine human self originates, and can re-assimilate itself to the highest God.” (Moore and Turner 2001). Thus, the most salient feature of Gnosticism is dualism: a clear-cut division between fallen corporeality and its evil creator, the lower demiurge; and a transcendent reality of the benevolent redeemer. Today, the religious groups of Persian provenance that used to be considered a part of Gnosticism—Manichaeism and Mandeism—are considered as later, and farther removed examples of Gnostic teachings. Yet, until 1935, and even later, they were seen as integral to the Gnostic corpus. Therefore, the scholars under consideration here all shared the premise that there are four competing narratives of the origins of Gnosticism: Jewish (originating in Philo’s Alexandria); Christian (as recorded in Patristic literature); Greek (mystery religions, Platonism), and Persian (King 2005; Quispel [1992] 2008; Rudolph 1983). The literary corpus based on which this conception of Gnosis changed dramatically is a relatively recent discovery: a library of thirteen Coptic codices found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945, of which the *Apocryphon of John* is probably the best known.⁸ Between the 2nd and 4th centuries CE, Christian Gnostic sects contested the hegemony of the Church Fathers and were henceforth perceived as heretical. The Gnostics’ defeat was so sweeping that for nearly 1500 years the content of their teachings was preserved almost exclusively in Christian polemical texts written *against* Gnosticism, which recorded and even cited the very works that the Church Fathers sought to refute. In an ironic historical twist, the teachings that were banned and almost extirpated by the Church Fathers re-entered Christian discourse in the early modern era. Beginning in the late 17th century, scholars combed Patristic literature for details on these heretical groups and compiled “histories” about them.⁹ A decisive shift in the research on Gnosticism occurred with the publication of two studies by Ferdinand Christian Baur¹⁰: *The Manichaean System of Religion* (Baur 1831), and his seminal *Christian Gnosis* (Baur 1835). In his preface to the latter work, Baur announces a new stage in the study of Gnosticism, in which “the study’s subject matter will [be examined] not only in its external appearance [*außern Erscheinung*], but in relation to all of its internal connections, in the internal progression of its own respective concept [*Begriff*], and to actualize [*ausschaffen*] the totality of their moments.” (Baur 1835, p. iv). The methodological challenge Baur sets for himself is to provide an account of Gnosis not only as an historical phenomenon, but to search for the “inner organism of the system of Gnosis.” Once established, this system will allow him to assert the history of Gnosis in reference to the specific historical phenomenon in question, as well as in relation to the history of the philosophy of religion writ large (pp. vii–viii). In the introduction of the voluminous study, Baur reviews the work of his predecessors, from René Massuet to August Neander, emphasizing their methodological shortcomings that culminate in their failure to transform their historical study into a philosophy of religion (pp. 1–9).¹¹

Baur embarks on an impressive historical journey in the footsteps of religious groups from the four competing narratives: Jewish, Christian, Greek and Persian. True to his promise, Baur proceeds by delimiting the scope of the term “Gnosis,” both in its historical manifestations and its systematic

⁸ For a compelling description of the discovery and recovery of the Nag Hammadi papyri see (Pagels 1979).

⁹ Gottfried Arnold (*Unparteiischen Kirchen und Ketzerhistorie*, 1699); Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (*Ketzer Geschichte*, 1739–1758); August Neander (*Genetische Entwicklung der vornehmsten gnostischen Systeme*, 1818).

¹⁰ Baur’s major contributions to Protestant theology pertain to his work on early Christianity and New Testament scholarship, less so in relation to Gnosis. See (Hodgson 1966; Köpf 1988; Lincicum 2012; Rudolph 1983; Zschuber 2017).

¹¹ Part I of the book, “The Concept and Origin of Gnosis. Division of Gnosis into its respective main forms and a general analysis thereof” (pp. 10–121) contains an expanded critique of previous research.

features. He asserts that the gnostic features manifested in paganism, Judaism and Christianity (which he defines as “the three positive religions”), generate the content of the religious-philosophical system of Gnosis. As in any other philosophical system, Baur’s challenge is to explain by what mechanism the historical particulars form part of the totality of the system. To this end, he avers, the “material” and “religious-philosophical” aspects of Gnosis must be recognized as necessary and complementing parts of its essence, which comprise a single whole (pp. 19–21): “The history of religion is namely Gnosis only insofar as it is at the very same time a religion of philosophy, and the peculiar manner and way [*Art und Weise*] in which the two elements and directions, the historical and the philosophical, are both penetrated and bound together to a single whole, also generates for us the singular concept of its essence” (p. 21).

The echoes of Hegel in Baur’s prose are not coincidental. In addition to the terminology, clearly borrowed from the vocabulary of the philosopher’s system, Hegel is the final stage in Baur’s account of the historical evolution of Gnosis. Indeed, Hegel’s contemporaries F.W.J. Schelling and Friedrich Schleiermacher also figure in Baur’s Gnostic continuum; but it is the Owl of Minerva who is posited as the final actualization of the system of Gnosis. As the title of Baur’s book suggests, his main claim is that Gnosticism is Christian, and hence despite his division of the Gnostic system into three elements—pagan, Jewish and Christian—his system reaches its full maturity in Christianity¹²:

All of these [Gnostic] systems, all of whose characteristics we observed [. . .], that we established as the first and third major forms of Gnosticism, the Valentinian and Pseudo-Clementine [. . .] generally bear the same characteristic in themselves, and their principle is the same, and the moments through which they progress in their development, are the same. At the apex of the system stands the Absolute Spirit [*Absolute Geist*], self-sufficient in and of itself, in its pure abstractedness and objectivity. The aeons, which in the Valentinian system are reflected in the One Archon, are none other than the pure concepts [*reinen Gedanken*], the pure essences, in which Spirit thinks its own essence, the pure self-development of the life of spirit of self-sufficient being [*des an sich seyenden geistigen Lebens*]. In the Pseudo-Clementine system it is at least Sophia, which is thought of as the soul that is identical with and bound with God, and through which the Marcionites characterize its property [*Eigentümlichkeit*]; this posits the highest, unseen God without any objective contents, as a pure abstraction of consciousness (p. 675).

Baur’s final synthesis of Gnosticism with Hegel’s system of philosophy is the outcome of wishful thinking and clearly cannot pass the test of critical scholarship today. Nevertheless, its overeager aspiration to systematize Gnosticism scientifically and to baptize it as Hegelian left a lasting impression on at least two generations of German scholars that came after him. Moreover, it staked out a common ground for the study of ancient religion with other academic disciplines that subscribed to the adulation of scientific method (Zachhuber 2013). In a commemorative essay dedicated to Baur, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) repeatedly hailed his teacher’s Hegelian scientific method as the hallmark of his legacy. Dilthey admired his teacher’s work on Gnosticism as his “ripest and deepest” (Dilthey 1921, p. 416), observing that in his oeuvre Baur made an enormous effort to subject the Christian worldview to Hegel’s laws [*Gesetzen*] of historical development and the historical grasp of the field [*Gebiet*] of history (p. 422). Dilthey’s reverence was so sweeping that he asserted that, “None apart from Hegel is of such importance for the advancement of the historical sciences [*der historischen Wissenschaften*] as Baur” (p. 423), concluding the essay with the following statement: “The future of theology and of the Christian Church in Germany throughout lies in [Baur’s . . .] creative, productive linking [of history and philosophy]” (p. 432).

¹² Note that although Baur discusses Persian and Greek manifestations of Gnosticism separately, he collapses them into a single “pagan” category in his system.

At this juncture it behooves us to recall that the studies produced by the Protestant scholars under consideration were based on meticulous readings of sources, and presented arguments grounded in detailed descriptions of the religious phenomena they investigated. Yet, our focus on these scholars' application of what they understood to be scientific method is aimed to underscore their work's susceptibility to reductionist conceptions of Gnosticism, which made the term amenable to abstract, a-historical and anachronistic uses both within and outside of their own discipline.

Nearly half a century after the publication of *Christian Gnosis*, the 35 year-old Adolf von Harnack published his own magisterial study, *The History of Church Dogma* (Harnack 1888). The volume retained Baur's commitment to scientific method, stopping short, however, of associating it with Hegel. Nonetheless, Harnack's commitment to scientific method was as deep, if not deeper, than his predecessor's. In addition to his research in theology, Harnack participated in the scientific project of German academe institutionally. As an established professor, he edited in 1900 the *History of the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin* (Harnack 1900), and in 1905 he published an essay entitled "The Great Operation of Science" (Harnack 1905). In the latter piece he considers the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) as of a piece with the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*), as he considered both as sharing a tradition initiated by Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz and maintained by Hermann Helmholtz (p. 194). All academic disciplines, he adds in the essay, are exposed to the threat of the "great operation of science" to mechanize research, by which he means "the over-appreciation of the gathering and purification of [research] materials at the expense of spiritual penetration [*geistigen Durchdringung*]" (p. 195).

Harnack's scientific program dominates both of his major studies on Gnosticism. Their structure demonstrates a clear balance between classification and analysis of specifics. His discussion of Gnosticism in *Church Dogma* is divided between two chapters¹³: in contradistinction to Baur, Harnack's description of Gnosticism is generic, as he seeks to establish an overarching concept of Gnosticism that will correspond with two premises: (1) Gnosticism made a decisive contribution to the formation of Christianity; (2) Christianity is absolute religion, i.e., an all-encompassing system of a philosophy of religion.¹⁴ To this end, Harnack distinguishes between three dimension of religious life—the speculative-philosophical, the cultic-mystical, and the practical-ascetic (p. 194)—the speculative-philosophical as exclusively bound up with the bequeathal of Greek philosophy, and the other two dimensions as given to the influence of "oriental" cultic practices (pp. 194–95). This general division is followed by a typology of the Gnostic philosophy of religion. For the purposes of the current discussion it will suffice to note that this typology completely erases cultural influences that stand on his way of designating Gnosticism as "the acute Hellenization of Christianity" (pp. 195–96).

This latter statement, by far Harnack's most quoted adage in recent historiographies of Gnosticism, is complemented by a yet-more dramatic assertion: "The major difference [between Gnosticism and Catholicism] is that the Gnostic images present the acute secularization [*Verweltlichung*], and respectively, the Hellenization of Christianity, which in the Catholic system occurs gradually" (p. 190). By equating Hellenization with secularization (literally in German, "making worldly"), Harnack argues that the adoption of philosophy's systematic and universal standpoint by Gnosticism rendered its claim to the inherently evil nature of reality unstoppable.

This outright paradox—Gnosticism secularized Christianity—actually served Harnack to re-assert the absoluteness of Christian faith and its rejuvenation by Gnosticism. To complete his move, however, Harnack projected this system unto the legacy of an historical figure, who in his eyes, epitomized the Gnostic revolution and its rejuvenating potential for Christianity. Marcion of Sinope (ca. 85–160 CE) has become almost synonymous with Harnack's theology. Presented as the culmination of the Gnostic

¹³ "The Gnostics' Attempt to Create an Apostolic Teaching of Faith, or: The Acute Secularization of Christianity" (Harnack 1888, pp. 186–226); "The Undertaking of Marcion to Eliminate the Grounding of Christianity in the Old Testament on the Basis of the Pauline Gospel" (Harnack 1888, pp. 226–43).

¹⁴ Again, echoing Baur without mentioning Hegel.

movement already in *Church Dogma*, it was in *Marcion: The Gospel from the Alien God* (Harnack 1921)¹⁵ that Harnack unfolded in full detail his interpretation of Marcion's teachings as the ultimate form of Christian theology. The evil essence of this-worldly reality is explained by Marcion as the outcome of the division of divine powers between the lower demiurge who created this evil world, and the transcendent God who will ultimately redeem this earthly world from its misery. The current state of affairs, however, alienates the benevolent redeemer from our world and hence His is the unseen, higher God residing in Heaven (pp. 158–59).

Possessing similar motivations to Harnack in relation to the rejuvenation of Christian theology, Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920) adopted a different historical thesis regarding the origins and nature of Gnosticism. Together with Richard Reitzenstein (1861–1931), he advanced the claim that Gnosticism evolved from ancient Persian religions. Like Baur and Harnack, Bousset demonstrated a similar commitment to scientific research standards: “Like Geologists and Paleontologists who reconstruct a portion of Earth's history from rocky and rigid remains of a long-gone world era, the historians in the field of Gnosis face very similar tasks. They attempt to bring back to life the ancient remains of a lost religious past and let them speak” (Bousset 1907, p. 8). But in contradistinction to his predecessors (Harnack in particular), Bousset showed he is aware of the challenge posed by the scientific requirement of systematizing knowledge, and the plurality and disparity of an historical phenomenon such as Gnosticism: “[. . .] a quintessentially syncretistic phenomenon such as Gnosticism,” he says, should not force us to forgo describing it from a general perspective. For, one will run the risk of failing to secure an overall viewpoint on this phenomenon in its entirety. Therefore, “only when one overlooks the question of Gnosis as the future are of religion in its entirety, and does not remain with the arbitrary comparison of this or another religion, one will make progress” (pp. 6–7).

With this in mind, Bousset embarks on a comprehensive survey of Gnostic themes, linking them with myths and teachings of Persian and earlier Mesopotamian religions. Again, like Baur and Harnack, the historical processes he outlines culminate with the assimilation of those themes into early Christianity. To return to the image of the redeeming God, instead of following the historical evolution of the myth, Bousset (p. 238) backtracks from its appearance in Patristic literature as Docetism (i.e., the notion that Jesus' presence on earth was an incorporeal appearance of the heavenly redeemer). The inversion of Jesus' story—from the flesh-and-blood, woman-begotten son who rose to join his Father in Heaven, to a redeemer who descended from on-high—is traced back to Mandaean myths of the struggle between the daemon of darkness that rose from the abyss of Hell and the god of light that descended to earth. This myth, in turn, is traced further back to the Babylonian myth of the clash between Marduk, the god of light, and Tiamat, the goddess of Chaos (pp. 246–47). Bousset unfolds an elaborate genealogy of the redeemer myth which replaces the origins of Christian theology from semitic-hebraic teachings to a potpourri of Hellenistic, Mesopotamian and Persian myths. Yet, from this strange mix he distills an essence that is uncannily similar to the ones we have encountered in the work of Baur and Harnack: a dualistic, pessimistic, radically spiritualized theology that is surprisingly compatible with certain parts of the New Testament and certain elements in mainstream Christian theology.

The focus on form at the expense of content in our historiographical survey was intentional. It aimed to show that the details-heavy studies of the founders of modern Gnosticism research suffered from a reductive bias, which in the name of “science,” i.e., the systematization of knowledge by constructing essentialist concepts from discrete historical phenomena, produced a set of simple premises that could be appropriated in a range of contexts that have little or nothing to do with responsible scholarship in history, philology, theology, or philosophy. Hence, in its highly reductive version, Gnosticism offered neat binary divisions between good and evil, darkness and light, earth and heaven, fallenness and redemption. One needn't fly too far on the wings of imagination to envision the application of this conception in support of radical, revolutionary or subversive causes.

¹⁵ This work was a revised version of Harnack's dissertation submitted in 1870. See (Harnack 1921, pp. iii–v).

4. Carl Schmitt and the Rebirth of Political Theology

The history of the term “political theology” somewhat resembles to that of “Gnosis.” With Greek (stoic philosophy) and Latin (Roman political theory) versions in antiquity, an important appearance in the title of Baruch Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Tractate*, its pervasiveness in the past century owes to the title of Carl Schmitt’s enormously influential *Political Theology* (Schmitt 1922).¹⁶ The similarity between the reception of the terms Gnosis and political theology also extends to the wide range of meanings they acquired. To take the *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* as an example, the term is applied to scriptural traditions (the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament), theories developed by individual thinkers, a variety of discourses and cultures (black, Asian, Feminist), and the list goes on (Scott and Cavanaugh 2004).¹⁷ By considering the publication of Schmitt’s work as the moment of its modern rebirth, we will be in a better position to contemplate a genealogy of the tangential evolution of political theology.

Light and darkness are such fundamental representations of good and evil that it is almost impossible to separate the metaphor from the idea it represents. The association of this metaphor with reductive versions of “Gnostic” dualism was particularly useful for enhancing the effect of the bifurcated world-views that these Gnostic reductions espoused. Martin Buber’s Jewish audience at his 1930s lectures on Judaism and Christianity hardly needed any guidance to see their to the political reality they were living in.¹⁸ By the time of the Nazi seizure of power in January 1933, almost fifteen years of bitter disillusionment from the failed promises of the modern world had elapsed. The First World War was an insidious catalyst for dichotomous perspectives on the reality, as well as in the realms of critical thinking.

Carl Schmitt’s political theory as he formulated it in his post-World War I publications comported with this very dualism. Despite the fact that he coined the term political theology in the 20th century, and employed it to support a radically dichotomous view of the functions of sovereignty and state, Schmitt’s writings are seldom associated with Gnosticism. Even before presenting substantive evidence that might link Schmitt to Gnosticism—either as a sophisticated worldview or a reductive version thereof—the binary distinctions on which he bases his theory are redolent of light and darkness metaphors. The famous opening words of *Political Theology* offer a useful example: “The sovereign is whoever decides on a state of emergency” (p. 9). An inordinate number of presuppositions support this assertion: The sovereign by definition has subjects. Who are they? Do they become subjects by choice or by force? Indeed, it will later emerge that Schmitt presupposes absolutist sovereignty as the only political formation relevant to the reality he portrays. The designation of the state of emergency as the single factor that determines sovereignty is crucial—both to the exposure of Schmitt’s unsubstantiated presuppositions and to the binary perspective framing his political theory. Are all political formations subject to a potentially existential threat entailing an emergency? Unless the answer to this question is positive by default, then the following question immediately arises: is it possible to define the sovereign in any way other than in relation to emergencies if a given political formation is not exposed to the possibility of such an emergency occurring?

The answer I propose to these questions is that within the framework of a reductive version of Gnosticism, Schmitt’s presuppositions turn from groundless to necessary. Once reality is taken to be organically and fundamentally evil, the assumption of an existential threat to the polity becomes inevitable. And evil can only be overcome by a radical transformation, which in politics entails

¹⁶ For the history of the term see (Assaman 1992). Schmitt’s modern inspiration for coining the term was Mikhail Bakunin’s *La théologie politique de Mazzini et l’Internationale* (Paris: Commission de Propagande Socialiste, 1871). See (Meier 1992).

¹⁷ See also (Lazier 2008; Gordon 2007).

¹⁸ Buber’s friend and colleague Ernst Simon (1900–1988) described this technique of encoding the messages of spiritual resistance “New Midrash,” whereby interpretations of ancient texts, as well as new pieces, were adapted to make oblique allusions to the horrific reality faced by Jews without arousing the attention of Nazi censors. This technique, Simon relates, was applied in both published works and verbal presentations (Simon 1959).

a leadership in possession of absolutist power. Based on this logic, Schmitt argues that a state of emergency requires unlimited capability [*unbegrenzten Befugnis*] and the suspension of the prevailing order: “Here [in the state of emergency] the [sovereign’s] decision concerning the legal norm isolates and the (paradoxical) authority proves that the [political] authority that generates the Law, does not need to use the Law” (Schmitt 1922, p. 14). Once more, the facility with which Schmitt is prepared to shut down state mechanisms in order to grant unbridled political power to the sovereign has little to do with what we know about the rule of law in non-absolutist and non-dictatorial states. Schmitt’s eagerness, not only to justify an authoritarian regime, but to do so literally overnight derives from a dualistic worldview (either the state functions under the rule of law or the rule of law is suspended) that is likely linked to a radically pessimistic perspective on the world (political sovereignty is defined by its response to existential threats).

Schmitt reserves the presentation of his recasting of the hybrid concept “political theology” as a modern analytical category for the third part of his four-part monograph. This rather odd and bold decision, in light of the fact that the term also serves as the book’s title, no doubt piqued the curiosity of many a reader. The postponement of the discussion of the term so far into the book not only generates suspense; it establishes a clear hierarchy between its two constituent parts. Schmitt reads the adjective Political literally, as the field of discussion (epitomized by the question of sovereignty), and reads figuratively the noun Theology, as a notion that had lost its grip on politics with the advent of modernity. This is made clear by the part’s opening statement: “All terms in political science are secularized theological terms” (p. 37). That is, the figurativeness of theology plays a constitutive role in the study of politics as it provides the terminology and the imagery that comes along with it. And at the very same time, the extraction of this terminology from its original context once it is “secularized,” makes the return to thinking about theology in literal terms impossible.

To substantiate this claim, Schmitt embarks on a survey of relevant scientific literature, which outlines the history of the bond between theology and politics and its dissolution. “In the positivistic age,” he declares, “one readily accuses one’s scientific opponent that he is driven by either theology or metaphysics. When the accusation becomes outright abuse, the question rarely arises whence the approach to this theological or metaphysical erroneous paths [*Entgleisungen*] truly stems from [. . .]” (p. 38). Retracing the historical process that led to this final outcome, Schmitt describes the rise of modernity throughout the 17th–19th centuries as the gradual change of guards between God and flesh and blood sovereigns as the wielders of unbridled power. Schmitt points out the irresistible attractiveness of the image of the omnipotent deity as sovereign for thinkers of that era: “‘Imitation of the immutable decree of the divine’ [*Imiter les décrets immuables de la Divinité*] was the ideal legal reality of the state that 18th century Rationalism did not clarify any further” [. . .] “in 17th century political theory, the monarch was identified with God in a way precisely analogous with the position God occupied in the world in the Cartesian system [. . .]” (p. 43). Thus, the literature survey constituting the third part of *Political Theology* offers an historical explanation why theistic imagery remains inescapable for Schmitt himself. Political omnipotence is a fact in the world that the political scientist is called upon to explain; yet the secular age in which he lives does not allow him to erase the theological origins of omnipotence, but only to secularize them, at best.

Harnack’s presentation of Marcion as the bearer of a message from the Alien God provides an interesting parallel to Schmitt. For both men, the advent of a new (and hopefully better) reality is possible only through a radical break with the past, by simultaneously overcoming it and clinging to its traces. Similarly to Schmitt’s portrayal of the relationship between modern political thought and theology as an inversion of hierarchy between the two disciplines, Harnack describes Marcion as proclaiming of, “the alien and good God, Father of Jesus Christ who released alien, wretched men from heavy shackles to the redemption of eternal life,” (Harnack 1921, p. 19). And in the same way that for Schmitt sovereignty cannot simply be posited as secular and requires the secularization of theology, Marcion’s redeemer must be contrasted with the figure of God in the Old Testament who is also, “[. . .] the Creator of the world, the author of Mosaic legislation, the sovereign who directs the

course of history, and most of all the wrathful and vengeful Old-Testament Judge who stands at the doors on the final Day of Judgment” (p. 18).

Throughout Schmitt’s long life, several thinkers receptive to the potency of Gnostic ideas on the modern mind became outspoken critics of his views: Erik Petersen, Eric Voegelin, and Hans Blumenberg, among others. Neither their critiques nor the extensive secondary literature on Schmitt, however, appear to have linked his thought with Gnostic influences. Ruth Groh, who was also personally acquainted with Schmitt, is probably the first to have pointed out this connection. Her first study of this dimension of Schmitt, *Acting on the Irredeemability of the World*, suggests this possibility mainly in its title.¹⁹ With the publication of rather early personal diaries in the early 2000s, Groh felt compelled to present Schmitt’s gnostic connection, which his diaries display with clarity and precision. According to her account, Schmitt was attracted to the Gnostic disillusionment with the world and the hopes for a transcendent, redeeming God in the early 1910s. She shows how self-deprecating thoughts and existential anxiety bordering on suicidal tendencies on Schmitt’s part were replaced by enthusiasm about the Gnostic teachings he encountered in Harnack’s *Church Dogma* in 1913 (Groh 2014). An additional source of influence was Schmitt’s friend and poet Theodor Däubler and his epic poem *Nord Licht* (Groh 2014, pp. 35–38). The diary entries Groh cites reveal Schmitt’s assimilation of a Gnostic worldview, which accounts of his close friends corroborate. Statements such as, “The evil Creator has set this world in this [evil] way,” “Earth is hell,” “Nature is hostile, man is evil by nature,” appear in Schmitt’s diary in 1913–1914, the same years he read Harnack with avidity (p. 34).²⁰ That he identified himself as a Gnostic at that time may be gleaned from a comment he made after meeting an ordained Benedictine priest who refused to shake his hand: “Clearly this is an instinct that the clergy have against the Gnostics” (p. 34).

If we recall Harnack’s declaration of “the acute secularization of Christianity” by Gnosticism, Schmitt’s grounding of political theory in secularized theological concepts (Schmitt 1922, p. 37), appears suspiciously close to the mindset of the famous theologian. For, Schmitt does not exclude the possibility of redemption by the transcendent, benevolent God à la Harnack; he simply limits his discussion to the political reality: “Any systematic analogy between theological and jurisprudential concepts assumes a consistent and radical ideology. It is an egregious misunderstanding to believe that [this analogy] posits a spiritual philosophy in opposition to a materialistic one” (p. 40). Nonetheless, Schmitt’s discussion of the presuppositions concerning human nature as either good or evil, shows that he is very close to Harnack’s. Schmitt’s survey of this issue is a thin theoretical veil that barely covers his firm conviction in the inherently evil nature of human beings. After dismissing anthropological theories, pedagogical approaches and moral theories, the position he endorses is the following: “The fundamental theological dogma advancing the sinfulness of world and humans [. . .] turns the distinction between friend and foe into a division of humans, into a ‘distancing’ [*Abstandnahme*], and turns the indiscriminate optimism regarding the inherent goodness of human nature] of an all-encompassing concept of humanity is impossible” (Schmitt [1932] 1963, p. 64). Over and against the secularization of theology he himself advocated in *Political Theology*, and all-pervading involvement in human activity he accords to the state “in virtue of its political character” (Schmitt [1932] 1963, p. 44), Schmitt resorts to basic church dogma that shares the Gnostic identification of the world, and by extension of humans, as inherently evil.

Granted, one should not expect a sophisticated and self-conscious thinkers such as Schmitt to give away so easily the agenda underlying his position, all the more so when it draws in part on a theological worldview explicitly advocating a redemptive scheme like Harnack’s Gnosticism. And yet, Schmitt’s fascination with Harnack’s work in the 1910s, the neat correspondence between the features of the reductive conception of Gnosticism—dualism and pessimism—, the binary of Schmitt’s political reasoning, and finally his reliance on original sin—one of the doctrine’s most receptive to Gnostic

¹⁹ And also in a brief reference to Schmitt’s debate with Blumenberg, see (Groh 1998, p. 159).

²⁰ In late 1913 Schmitt wrote in his diary: “Reading Harnack on Gnosis with great enthusiasm and copiously excerpting him until late in the evenings” (pp. 32–33).

pessimism—in grounding the view of humanity as inherently evil, indicate that his assimilation of Gnostic ideas—reductive, distorted and anachronistic as they may be—should be taken seriously.

5. Buber and the Birth of Theo-Politics

Buber had a way of connecting abstract discussions with the social-political reality with threads that are sometimes fine to the point of invisibility; and yet, they are there to bind together ideas with experiences, concepts with concretes. His engagement with Gnosis offers an important example to the oblique, yet powerful way in which his scholarship provides tools for grappling with real-life dilemmas and historical tragedies. What is more, they highlight some of the more subtle ways in which Buber enriched discourses on social, spiritual and intellectual Jewish identities in modern times. After decades of scholarly disinterest or disregard for the political aspects of Buber's thought, several studies published in the recent years began addressing the problematics and potential of his notion of theo-politics: addressing the relationship between divine kingship and human politics within the framework of studies of the Hebrew Bible, which restricts the discussion to the spiritual in terms of substance and to the ancient in terms of chronology. Brody (2018), Lesch (2018) and Schaefer (2017) unpack the beguiling mixture of concord and dissonance between Buber's and Schmitt's conceptions of sovereignty. Lebovic (2008) and Schmidt (2009) examine Buber's engagement with Schmitt's concept of political theology within the context of the rapidly changing political reality of the 1930s and Buber's idiosyncratic version of Zionism. The current study joins this scholarly conversation, albeit by advancing along a different trajectory. At this point, it places Buber's historical-theological analysis in the context of Protestant Gnosticism scholarship and its possible impact on Schmitt, intentionally creating the artificial isolation of the terms "Gnosticism" and "political theology" in order to lay the groundwork for a future genealogy of greater clarity (and it is hoped, accuracy) of the two terms.

When Buber undertook a comprehensive study of Gnosis, which he first shared in his 1934 lectures at the Frankfurt Lehrhaus, the scholarly myth of Gnosticism had already fully matured. Harnack published *The Alien God*, his seminal study Marcion, in 1921, while Bousset and Reitzenstein published their own major studies on the Iranian roots of Gnosticism in 1907 and 1921, respectively. Buber's references to the historical context of Gnosticism indicates that like the majority of his contemporaries, he accepted the work of Bousset and Reitzenstein as authoritative and did not suspect or doubt their findings. The insights Buber shared with his Lehrhaus audience had already coalesced as early as 1909–1910, in speeches he gave to the Bar Kochba circle in Prague, first published in 1911 as *Drei Reden über das Judentum* (Three Speeches on Judaism). Some two decades before delivering the *Vorlesungen* Buber was already speaking about the Gnostic dualism of Paul's version of Christianity, and of its usurpation of Jesus' own teachings as framing the theology of the early Church.

Buber's disinterest in the historical roots of Gnosis is evident from his repeated reference to its "ancient Persian" origins, without additional details or mention of evidence to support that assertion. It is particularly noteworthy that his historical account provides Judaism a watertight defense against the infiltration of Gnostic influences. Yaniv Feller has already made note of Buber's slightly hysterical reaction to the suggestion that Judaism had played any part in the genesis of Gnostic ideas, and the *Vorlesungen* certainly confirm this observation (Feller 2013). Buber's account creates the impression that the migration of ideas from Persian pagan religions to Paul's epistles was seamless, almost natural, as he completely ignores the question *how* those ideas were transmitted across such a large geographical distance; and what is more, how it is possible that Gnosticism gripped Paul's attention so powerfully and left his Jewish contemporaries indifferent to its allures.

Buber's description of Paul's Gnosticism is also not without faults, as it is based on highly selective employment of supporting citations from the Epistles. Critics of *Two Types of Faith*, a late and abbreviated incarnation of the *Vorlesungen*, have long noted the problematic historical-philological premises of Buber's conception of early Christianity in general, and its affiliation with Gnostic ideas in particular. In a recent comprehensive critique of the work, Ratzabi (2015) concludes that, "In the transition from the theological, historical and biblical dimension to the analysis of contemporary reality,

the theological-biblical chapters of *Two Types of Faith* should be understood as chapters designated to lay the conceptual groundwork for an analysis of contemporary reality, which is marked by the lurking threat of Marcionism" (p. 33). As for the merit of Buber's scholarly investigations of the figure of Jesus and Pauline Christology, Ratzabi observes that *Two Types of Faith* added nothing new to its predecessors, nor contributed to modern studies of the New Testament from the 18th century onwards (p. 17).

It seems, however, that Buber's work on Gnosis should be understood as doing something other than historical-philological research. Even by the academic standards of the time, his historical survey is sketchy and textual interpretations are partial. But as a study in the phenomenology of religion, Buber's work emerges as a penetrating reflection on the Gnostic ideas that circulated in the first two centuries of Church history, and their impact on modern Christian theology. It distills a "Gnostic canon," so to speak, within the Christian scriptures, and hence delineates a clear and solid historical context that allows focusing on a conceptual analysis of the "canon's" teachings; and in turn, makes it possible to import the conceptual analysis into modern contexts without compromising the historical dimension of the inquiry. That Buber himself perceived the project in phenomenological terms is implied in the opening of his first Lehrhaus lecture in 1934 (Buber 2017), where he briefly defines the scope of discussion as, "... about Jewish and Christian beliefs [*Glauben*], that is, not about Judaism and Christianity, not about the spiritual values or however else one may perceive them; rather, it is about the beliefs of the Jews and the beliefs of the Christians, and the way in which they interact with one another" (p. 52). The intention is to isolate the content of the sibling religious faiths, as it appears in their canonical scriptures; in other words, as *phenomena* that are extracted from historical, political, social and cultural contexts that fall outside their devotional *contents*.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that Buber engages with the study of Gnosis as a *Jewish* issue; nowhere does he approach it as a self-standing historical or theological object of research. Gnosis is for Buber the only *yehareg wo-val ya'avov*—a halachic term that designates transgressions that it is better to die than to perform them. Although he does not put it in those terms, Gnosis is the ultimate form of heresy because it denies the potential goodness of the world, it is radically exclusionary, and worst of all: it denies the possibility of dialogue.

Buber divided his lectures (both cycles) into three part, assigning a distinctive topic to each part: faith, messianism and redemption in Judaism and early Christianity. His references to Gnosis are strewn throughout his reflections on other topics; put together, they make up a coherent theory on the Gnostic elements in the New Testament and their unbearable tension with the Jewish conceptions of faith, messianism and redemption.

One of Buber's main allegations against Pauline theology is its suppression of the teachings of Jesus in its bid to transform the founder of Christianity from an inspiring teacher into a deified object of worship. And so, Buber opens his lectures by pointing out the tension between Jesus' view on faith in the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), and Paul's teachings in the Epistles as revolving around their approach to the Law. The Sermon on the Mount (especially in Matthew 5), posits the objectification [*Versachlichung*] of the Law as the greatest danger to religious faith, and not the Law itself, as Paul contends (pp. 75, 258, 259). Whereas, according to the Pauline conception, the primary concern of believers must be what to believe in, or in Buber's terminology, "the belief that something *is* (*das glauben, dass etwas ist*)" (pp. 68, 259). For Paul, "that *something* is not God Himself as much as His Son, Messiah, emissary: Christ." Among these various manifestations of Christ, Buber is especially beguiled by his projection as the benign counterpart to the evil deity that must be overcome in order to harbingers the redemptive future. According to Buber, this dualism was imported into Christianity via Hellenistic influences, from Gnostic teachings, specifically those of Marcion, exemplifying what Buber saw as the dangerous radicalization of Christianity by Pauline theology (pp. 113–14, 126, 297).

The Pauline reception of Marcion posited Christ as the hypostasis of the God of Grace, Who, in order to redeem humanity, must overcome the God of the Old Testament: both the creator of our

world, permeated by evil, and the wrathful avenger of transgressions of His Law. In Judaism this dualism was contained by the clear understanding, “... That here there is no opposition [*Gegensatz*] anymore, but rather an occurrence [*Geschehen*] within God himself” (pp. 87–88).²¹ The biblical paradigm of this drama, Buber avers, is to be found in the following description of God in Deutero-Isaiah: “I make light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil” (Isaiah 45:7). Post-biblical Judaism refined this concept by establishing two divine attributes, *Middoth*: Mercy and Judgment (*Rachamim* and *Din*). And so, in Judaism “there is no dualism that issues out of God and there is neither a dualism within God Himself. All there is in God is the described alternation between Judgment and Mercy in relation to humans. This drama is God’s only relation to the world” (p. 92). At this juncture Buber introduces a fascinating twist to the heretofore familiar historical narrative, by positing Jewish, pre-Christian Apocrypha as an interim link between the Old Testament and the Christian developments of the doctrine of Sonship (*Sohnschaft*), which is wholly distinct and separate from Talmudic Judaism. Buber presents passages from the Wisdom of Solomon 2:12 (pp. 99, 269) and the Book of Enoch 51:3; 69:27; 71:14; 105:2 (pp. 99–101, 104, 269),²² for the figure of a son of God who becomes the emblem of divine pity and grace. Buber pinpoints the parting of ways between the Jewish and Christian conceptions of the Son to the difference in His origin: the Jewish conception of Sonship is based on the ascension of a human-born man to the heavens, whereas the Christian conception of the Son is based on his descent from His seat next to the Father down to earth (pp. 101, 108, 273).

With the emergence of the Pauline conception of sin, which later matured into the official Doctrine of Sin of the Church, Christianity became a religion possessed by the inextricability of the human condition from sinfulness: “In the [sinful] act ... there is no ‘element’ of sin, because it partakes in sinfulness at large ... this is the image that Paul uses—and this teaching became more and more forbidding in later Christianity under the scepter of the so-called doctrine of ‘Original Sin’” (pp. 156, 241); adding that, “The fall by sin [*Sündenfall*] ... is a chasm between God and humanity” (p. 137). In his discussion of this doctrine, Buber directs the attention at two of its key features: the fulfillment of the Law as the ultimate sinful act (pp. 136, 284), and the absolute dependence on Christ as Redeemer (p. 136).²³ According to Buber, the Pauline dualism between the forces of divine goodness and the forces of evil is not derived from a tension between the spirit and the flesh. Rather, it is generated by the contradiction between the forces of evil that rule this world and the God of the world to come: “The concept establishes an eternal, daemonic power, a Satan, who is the prince, the ruler of this world; a designation that recurs time and again in the Gospel according to John: “Prince of this world” (John 16:11) (pp. 145, 287). Turning to discuss the conception of redemption in Judaism Buber asserts: “Our belief in redemption is not the belief in redemption from sin” (p. 139).

Brody dates Buber’s preoccupation with a conception of theopolitics as early as the mid-1910s, noting that he coined the actual term only by 1933 in *The Kingdom of God* (Brody 2014). The monograph, which is Buber’s first foray into academic Bible research, not only coincided with the preparation of the *Vorlesungen* but also contains many overlaps with it (Scharf 2017). The biblical study precludes references to Gnosticism, and the survey of early Christianity makes no use of the neologism. And yet crucially, the two studies share a common cause: reclaiming the vitality of the God of the Hebrew Bible, that is, demonstrating the deity’s indispensability for the spiritual and physical well-being of humanity. Naturally, in the context of Schmittian political theology, this position assumes very concrete ends.

In characteristic fashion, Buber offers an explicit definition of theopolitics in *The Kingdom of God* only in the introduction to its third edition (published 22 years after the first edition): “By Israelite theopolitics I mean [...] the public affairs arising from the striving [*Tendez*] for the actualization of God’s rule [*Gottesherrschaft*]” (Buber 2014, p. 276). In this brief passage, as well as in all other

²¹ Compare “This drama within God is open to the world” (pp. 89, 264).

²² The Second Cycle lecture also includes a reference to Enoch 62:7 (p. 269).

²³ Buber cites ad loc. 2. Corinthians 5:18: “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”

references to the concept, Buber emphasizes the elastic nature of the political intervention of the divine. The nature of God's sovereignty depends on the nature of His human partners: "In the transition from the era of sheer charismatic leadership (Moses), over to the beginning of institutionalization of charismatic leadership where the theopolitical task changes, which, in turn, will later on shift to hereditary charisma in the House of David" (p. 276). Buber never tires of emphasizing the covenantal nature of the theopolitical institution founded at Sinai, which intertwines the religious with the political (p. 163).²⁴ In a later study, Buber hedges the eschatological potential of his theopolitical model, which the title of his earlier work *The Kingship of God* also implies, explaining that theopolitical kingship, "is a kingship whose power and means are political, only that its *raison d'être* is the political actualization of the will of God for the nation [Israel] and all other nations" (Buber 1950, p. 130). On Buber's interpretation of the biblical narrative, the God-King-nation hierarchy is disrupted by the king's insubordination, rather than the people's; and the grim outcomes of this insubordination (failure to realize God's political program and the fall of the kingdom) lead to a clear articulation of the divine political plan by the prophets (pp. 140–41).

Going back to Schmitt's understanding of the function of divine rule in the formation of modern sovereignty, several striking differences from the theopolitical model emerge: (1) if *Political Theology* suggests that the sovereign wields absolute power, and modernity marks the conversion of the divine origins of such power into its secular application in the modern state, theopolitics posits collaboration as a necessary condition for the actualization of power. The necessity of collaboration arises from the division of power between two parties—God and human leadership; (2) Schmitt's secularization of divine power removes any and all barriers between the sovereign's will and its implementation, whereas Buber asserts that in the absence of a successful partnership power remains a potentiality awaiting actualization; (3) by describing modern sovereignty as a concept that sheds its theological origins Schmitt actually creates an intense and irresolvable tension arising from the inextricability of the theological from the political. In contradistinction, Buber repeatedly points out the insufficiency of religious interaction for God's involvement in human affairs and the organic connection between the divine plan and politics.

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The direct line the *Vorlesungen* draw between Persian Gnosis and Pauline theology leads to the nexus between the science of religion, political science and theopolitics. Baur's journey from ancient Gnosis to Hegelian philosophy, Harnack's interpretation of Christianity as reducible to Marcionite dualism, both resonate with Buber's delineation of a Gnostic canon within the New Testament. Suffering from similar methodological flaws, Baur's, Harnack's and Buber's theses hail the research on which their conclusions are based as scientific (and hence "objective") findings, in order to advance a religious ideology. This observation would not have been intriguing had they not shared the very same Germanic faith in the inevitable triumph of science over doubt and dogma, but led to diametrically opposed conclusions. The academic lineage that runs from Baur to Harnack, Bousset and Reitzenstein was endorsed in Buber's casting of Gnosticism as Persian lore that inspired Pauline dualism. And yet, it reinforced Buber's conviction that Jewish messianism paves the path toward the transcendence of political strife and advancement toward a complete and utter redemption from the tragedy of the human predicament.

Schmitt's political theology partook of both the scientific hubris and ideological blind spots of Gnosticism research of his time. The Gnostic dualism permeating his theory of the state of exception rendered it amenable to the type of oblique political commentary that Buber embedded in his study of ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Hence, the latter's interpretation of Gnosticism as a toxic

²⁴ See (Brody 2014, p. 28).

theology and his elastic model of divine-human political collaboration may be read as an implicit critique of Schmitt. Unlike conventional political commentary, it enabled Buber to set up an ideal, and therefore overwhelmingly positive agenda for countering Schmitt's bleak vision for the present political reality.

In his discussion of the Kingdom of God in Judaism, which makes up the larger part of the third lecture cycle entitled Redemption, Buber casts Isaiah 53 not only as the most explicit formulation of the arrival of the redeeming individual as the figure of the suffering servant, but also as providing the shared stepping stone for Jewish and Christian messianism, from which the latter gradually drifted away from the former to develop an independent, and contrarian, conception of the Messiah, incarnated in Jesus Christ. Here as well, Buber's emphasis of the contribution of Gnostic dualism to the formation of the Christian conception is of particular note, especially since it serves as an anticlimactic conclusion of the entire lecture cycle:

This is the moment when, through the questioning [*Verzweiflung*] the agitated ground becomes receptive of another conception: *Iranian-dualistic messianism*²⁵ [. . .] Out of the clash between the two kingdoms resulted in world history. The human being [*Der Mensch*] as an essence with soul and body is along with all other creatures a pawn in the colossal clash between these forces—a pawn that is already manipulated between the two forces in the bifurcation between elements of light and darkness, between elements of body and soul, a bifurcation of their very being, which is made clear by humans' pendulous existence between the two elements. Nowhere in classical Judaism was there such a conception of humanity. Those two kingdom are now clashing with one another and the victory of light is prescribed to a designated time. The Kingdom of Evil will be annihilated, the world will arrive at a resolution of this clash and will be purified in the Kingdom of God, that is, the Kingdom of God is truly and actually there to be had and its only future is victory. *The World to Come is victorious over this world* [*Das Jenseits siegt über das Diesseits*]. (Buber 2017, p. 322).²⁶

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²⁵ Emphasis in the original.

²⁶ My emphasis.

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