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Canon as an Act of Creation: Giorgio Agamben and the Extended Logic of the Messianic

Colby Dickinson

Loyola University Chicago, cdickinson1@luc.edu

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The term 'messianic' has recently become one of philosophy's most appropriated religious terms, yet one apparently now bereft of its historical religious particularity and instead placed at the service of a secularized universal ethics. Hence, its initial association with such theologically inflected terms as 'redemption' or 'salvation' has seemingly been pushed aside. In this light, a genealogical approach to certain contemporary reworkings of the 'messianic' might prove most helpful in uncovering the reasons for this transformation from the theological to the philosophical, and what role, if any, theology still has in determining the meaning and usage of this highly significant term. Accordingly, I will here attempt to do just that by tracing the term through the work of the German Jewish critic Walter Benjamin, who wrote mainly in the interwar period, see the term significantly modified through the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, who utilized it between the mid to late-century, before being returned to in the Italian literary and political theorist Giorgio Agamben, whose usage runs up to the present.

Accordingly, I will proceed as follows. First, I will begin by briefly looking at the formulations of Benjamin on the theo-political dimensions of the 'state of exception', which is a state called into existence through a decision of the reigning sovereign (akin perhaps to a president's power to pardon). This is a notion completely intertwined for him with the theological as it is an action that takes place external to the normal 'rules' of order. This state, however, is yet unfolded by Benjamin in fuller historical terms than is traditionally the case for a general political theory, a move he seems to borrow from the Judaic tradition's critique of political sovereignty. Indeed, he envisions this state as the obverse partner to the messianic, hence as a reworking of this originally Judaic term into an historical (immanent) call to remember what has been repressed (by sovereign power). The messianic becomes then, for Benjamin, a form of remembrance issued as a bid for justice to be disclosed within an alternate (non-sovereign) horizon of history.

Second, though in modified form, this same expression of 'remembrance as justice' returns as the force of the 'messianic without messianism' revealed along similar eschatological horizons in the work of the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Indeed, Benjamin is often invoked by Derrida who, for his part, presents a thematic he only emphasized as more and more central to

¹ This essay has already been accepted for publication in *Bijdragen: International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* (2010).

his work as it progressed over the years. In essence, Derrida is able to utilize Benjamin's reworking of the messianic in order to develop a notion of justice as a 'bloodless' violence as the outcome of our inevitable interaction with those cultural norms which will always be associated with some form of sovereignty. In his reformulations of Benjamin, however, Derrida will also hold to a more strict separation between the universal structure of the messianic and the historical, religious particularity of a messianism (i.e. the truth claims of the Judeo-Christian tradition).

By uniting the adaptations of Benjamin and Derrida with regard to the messianic, I am hoping to pave the way for a more sustained, and rigorous account of the messianic given in the work of Italian theorist Giorgio Agamben, an analysis of whose work will dominate the remainder of the essay. Hence, third, and following a logic already developed by Benjamin and Derrida yet to its end, though stopping short of attempting a full genealogy of the term in its more recent usage, I intend to move to the most recent exposition of the messianic in politico-philosophical terms, that of Agamben. This development is necessarily made in order to arrive at the theological implications for this contemporary (re)conceptualization of the messianic, something perhaps best seen against the backdrop of a religious term which indirectly (and almost unconsciously) pervades the work of all three authors: the canon.

Though their treatment of canons, the canonical form (of history, of scripture, of political representation, etc), the desire for canonization to take place (its 'canonicity' as it were) or of religious scripture in general, is rarely a theme taken up directly, as it otherwise might be in the work of someone like Paul Ricoeur, for example², it nonetheless lingers on the margins of every contemporary messianic discourse. Therefore, despite the occasional reflection upon scripture or canonization which does crop up in each author's writing from time to time³, the role of the canonical form is limited in their work at best and needs to be explored further *in the context of* their work in order to perhaps provide a fitting foil to these otherwise 'purely philosophical' encounters with the force of the messianic, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows. Indeed,

² Cf. Paul Ricoeur, 'The Canon between the Text and the Community' in P. Pokorný and J. Roskovec (eds.), *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2002); 'The "Sacred" Text and the Community' in Mark I. Wallace (ed.), *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (trans. David Pellauer, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1995); 'Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation' in L.S. Midge (ed.), *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA, Fortress Press, 1985).

³ Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as such and on the Language of Man' in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Selected Writings* (vol. 1, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Jacques Derrida, 'Canons and Metonymies' in Richard Rand, ed., *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties Today* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (trans. Patricia Dailey, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

even in the discipline of theology, beyond any minor exceptions⁴, the role of the canonical is normally studied solely within an historical framework, leaving its dynamic engagement with the messianic either entirely mute or in great need of elaboration. As I will show, however, the dealings with the messianic that each author before us here considers actually calls forth a more rigorously defined conceptualization of the canonical form, something which neither philosophy nor theology has yet entertained as a serious theoretical re-envisioning of how both disciplines currently operate. By doing so, however, I am hoping that a renewed engagement with the particularity of religious experiences (as perceivable through an historical-canonical form) might be recalled in the midst of philosophical endeavors which would otherwise universalize a messianic impulse for justice yet bereft of its particular historical-religious platform.

The necessity for invoking the canonical form will become especially clear as my analysis is extended to the work of Agamben in particular, in order to determine how the canonical form remains the unstated factor in his attempt to eradicate all representation from a more just ethical paradigm. It is thus by juxtaposing these two elements, that of the messianic in relation to the canonical, that certain messianic discourses reveal their commitments to a representational scheme which Agamben hopes to move beyond in his advancement of a paradigmatic one. In this attempt to articulate a model of understanding (epistemology) that goes beyond the universal/particular divide, he will in fact advance a movement from particularity to particularity which can be profoundly read as a genuine paradigm for articulating a theological principle of creation. Hence, by taking up his remarks on the relationship between creation and redemption, I will try to formulate the most basic contours of what a theology of creation beyond representation might look like. By doing so, I hope to point toward two related conclusions: first, that the triad of canon-creation-representation might be understood as a necessity for cultural intelligibility, yet one that must also be seen in relation to its messianic-redemptive-unrepresented elements (as both Benjamin and Derrida advance); and, second, engaging with Agamben's reflections upon Saint Paul, that even this epistemological framework can be undone, as it were, through a bid to end all representations which nonetheless allows us to return to creation in order to perceive it for what it is. Only then, I would suggest, can the justice which all three authors clamor for be locatable in our world today.

On the contemporary origins of the messianic in the work of Walter Benjamin

⁴ Cf. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

Pursuing the concept of the ‘messianic’ genealogically would mean to engage it in its philosophical, political and, perhaps ultimately, theological dimensions. All three dimensions, in fact, seemed to coalesce in the first part of the last century, at the height of tremendous upheavals then occurring around the world. It is therefore perhaps most appropriate that a figure caught up, and ultimately destroyed, by such forces becomes the starting point for these reflections. In the work of Walter Benjamin, then, we find a deployment and usage of the term ‘messianic’ that found a deep resonance with later interpreters. From its proliferation among certain members of the Frankfurt school to those who would mine its theological heritage even further, both within Jewish and Christian realms, and from its deconstructionist appropriations to its general theoretical applicability in terms of a concept of universal emancipation, the messianic has become a central pivot upon which both politics and ethics are said to revolve today.⁵

Indeed, it was initially Benjamin’s break with a Marxist teleological reading of history that gave rise to, and fostered his insistence upon a ‘weak messianic force’ working *through* history in order to redeem those who had seemingly been forgotten *by* history.⁶ This was something no doubt on his mind as he raced, ultimately in vain, to escape some of the darkest forces known to history.⁷ In response to the German political theorist Carl Schmitt’s delineating of a ‘political theology’ which would unveil the figure of the (political) sovereign as theologically legitimated in some sense, Benjamin sought to demonstrate how the sovereign’s power to declare a ‘state of exception’ to normal rule was in fact countered by the subtle, and therefore ‘weak’ messianic forces that moved against such an inherently violent (because unjustifiable) reign.⁸ In this manner, Benjamin sought to revolutionize historiographical methods (i.e. the feigned objectivity of historicism) in order to de-stabilize the exercise of sovereign power in the modern era, something which he is often credited for having paved the way toward.⁹

No matter whether one reads this entrance of the messianic into the political realm as indebted to a strictly Jewish perspective (Scholem) or as opening to a Pauline-Christian one (Agamben), the religious roots of its general usage offer a suggestive reading of contemporary philosophy’s ‘return to religion’ as perhaps truly being a ‘return to the messianic core of religious

⁵ In addition to what follows, see the use of the term in such theorists as Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009) and Judith Butler, ‘Afterward’ in Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (eds), *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁶ Cf. Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’ in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Selected Writings* (vol. 4, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al, Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003).

⁷ Cf. the prominence given to his personal tragedy in Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York: Harper, 2007) 127f.

⁸ Cf. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (trans. George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁹ Cf. Matthias Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

thought'.¹⁰ Indeed, such a core seems to be at the heart of those who are currently engaged in such a renewal of religious thought, or even theology. Writers as diversely identified with deconstructionism (H. de Vries) and the emergence of 'weak thought' (J. Caputo, G. Vattimo) or with Hegelian-Lacanian leanings (S. Žižek, E. Santner) have all claimed a certain messianic horizon to be the backdrop against which their thought forms.¹¹ In some sense, then, each author, most typically in defiance of the totalizing rubrics of sovereign power, like Benjamin before them, issues a call to remember what has been repressed by the 'victors of history' in order to serve the promotion of justice within the messianic horizons of history.

The centrality of Benjamin's 'weak messianic force' to today's thinkers seems primarily to stem from the juxtaposition of his views on formulating a potential for 'pure' or 'divine violence' taken in light of his conceptualizations of history and redemption. In contemplating movements beyond the violence of the state, Benjamin chose to highlight the role played by the victims of history, the marginalized elements within any given cultural, canonical memory. It was their ability to 'strike' or suspend the governing norms, he would say in his 'Critique of Violence', that would give these masses a power over against the sovereign's ability to declare his own exceptions.¹² This was the closest Benjamin was to get in formulating what a truly 'divine violence' might in fact be. In doing so, he staunchly opposed any totalizing presentation of history, offering up instead the 'pure means' of history without any ideological ends, a breaking open of a mythical (cyclical) violence through a sense of responsibility to past generations of oppressed peoples. Thereby, a 'messianic cessation' of historical representations ensues, providing an alternative history beyond the tragic-mythical orientations of society.¹³

In this movement away from the tragic-mythic narratives which have dominated societies for centuries, Benjamin utilized the Hebraic notion of the messianic as a disruptive force that introduces difference itself into our canonical representations of history. Just as the messiah was envisioned to be the redemptive figure of political liberation for the Jewish people (as the one

¹⁰ On the Jewish indebtedness of Benjamin, among others see Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (trans. Barbara Harshar, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) and Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991). On the suggestion of a Pauline lineage, see Agamben, *The Time That Remains*.

¹¹ Cf. Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God* (ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* and Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹² Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence' in Eiland and Jennings, eds., *Selected Writings*, vol. 1.

¹³ Cf. the remarks on methodology in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999) 458f.

who would ultimately come to overthrow the ‘false’ sovereign powers that oppressed them), Benjamin found a way to generate an alternative meaning to historical events through a ‘messianic cessation’ of the way in which they were violently narrated for ideological ends. This manipulation which tries to pass itself off as objective fact was a reality with which he was no doubt more than familiar, and which likewise most likely caused him to emphasize the messianic forces at the complete expense of the sovereign (canonical) norms. It was for this reason that Benjamin maintained a paradoxical relationship with scripture, at times seeming to rely most heavily upon its cultural influence and relevance (i.e. the ‘messianic’), and at others, muting its influence almost entirely due to its sovereign claims (i.e. its ‘canonical’ form).¹⁴

‘Bloodless violence’ as messianic outcome in the work of Jacques Derrida

Though the basic contours of Benjamin’s messianic reading of history have survived somewhat intact, subsequent developments upon these initial themes have provided occasion to modify or deepen the consequences of his thought. In the work of Jacques Derrida, for example, Benjamin’s attempt to establish a ‘non-violent’ means without ends meets against the reality of formed cultural identities and the ‘necessary violence’ it could be said to enact in terms of subject formation.¹⁵ Though Benjamin had downplayed the necessity for any sovereign-canonical form in relation to the messianic, Derrida found himself unable to entirely follow suit. Utilizing the practice of circumcision as a concrete illustration, Derrida himself has provided comment upon the attempt at a ‘bloodless violence’ which any cultural transmission is guilty of performing in its most basic essence.¹⁶ Representations (as the basis for any formed identity) must be culturally established in order to provide some form of legibility.

Yet, despite this slightly revised critique of violence, Derrida does not depart from Benjamin’s overall portrayal of the messianic forces. He more or less simply expands Benjamin’s claims to embrace the necessity of what I am here calling the ‘canonical form’, as the identifiable manner in which content is appropriated. In fact, he seems at times only too content to analyze the structures upon which this pre-announced messianic force depends, hence juxtaposing and contrasting the messianic with a Marxist eschatological project, as Benjamin

¹⁴ Cf. Brian Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* (New York: Continuum, 1996)

¹⁵ Cf. the conclusions drawn in regard to the ‘least violence’ in Leonard Lawlor, *The Is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Cf. Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law’ in Gil Anidjar, ed., *Acts of Religion* (trans. Mary Quaintance, London: Routledge, 2002). See also Shane Cudney, “‘Religion without religion’: Caputo, Derrida, and the violence of particularity’ in James H. Olthuis, ed., *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London: Routledge, 2002).

once did, in order to highlight the unique role of ‘messianic thought’ in relation to justice and history.¹⁷ This deepening of Benjamin’s thought becomes therefore at once a step away from directly invoking a religious tradition and yet a step towards realizing what religious import it could have in a modern context, perhaps much like Gershom Scholem’s attempt to save religion (or redemption) by thoroughly secularizing it.¹⁸ For Derrida, explicitly, the cost of allowing the sovereign-canonical form to re-enter into a relationship with the messianic is that all mention of a religious, historical particularity (i.e. its ‘messianism’) must be bracketed, though not necessarily done away with.

It has been said that Benjamin’s break with Marx opens up a path for Derrida and others to pursue Benjamin’s thoughts in relation to a non-teleological messianic horizon of justice, bringing to center stage images of the victim and the marginalized, being always singular instances of representation even when collectively assembled in writing.¹⁹ These figures become, in fact, for Derrida, the ghosts (or ‘revenant’) which ‘haunt’ our world riddled with injustice, forming the background for a ‘hauntology’ of which Derrida outlines only the most basic contours.²⁰ Benjamin’s refusal to incarnate his principle of justice in relation to history, thus *contra* Marx’s fully embodied working-class, or communist utopian ideals, comes to mirror Derrida’s conception of a ‘spectrality’ which likewise refuses to become historically, and thus empirically, incarnate.²¹ This refusal is also reflected in Derrida’s insistence upon a non-teleological, non-eschatological messianic form, or that which resists being identified with any historical messianism, as he puts it, and which in fact gives rise in no small measure to the easily identifiable ‘relation without relation’ formula which Derrida often repeated.²² Thereby, the structure of a ‘messianic without messianism’ comes to reflect the ‘X without X’ structure in general, an attempt to comprehend a ‘religion without religion’, or under what conditions one might today ‘belong without belonging’. Seen as such, this could perhaps be defined as a philosophical universalizing of a particular religious terminology, a treatment of form over content and a highlighting of the problematic nature of determining one’s identification with particular traditions, religions, nations, etc.

¹⁷ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (trans. Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge, 1994) 74f.

¹⁸ Cf. Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory*, 17-8.

²⁰ Cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 202f.

²¹ Cf. Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory*, 55.

²² Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas* (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). The formulaic ‘X without X’ structure itself originates in Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

With this condition of the ‘X without X’ structure, and perhaps more than analogous to Schmitt’s understanding of the political norm being based upon a ‘state of exception’, Derrida posits a pre-condition of ‘undecidability’ as what grounds any decision, promise or responsibility, and yet which itself remains a state that resists historical embodiment or incarnation.²³ It is this same grounding which thus ensures that a horizon of justice be without teleological foundation, as any such conceptualization would preempt the justice possible in a democracy, albeit one that is always yet ‘to come’ and hence never fully foreclosed upon historically. This messianism without need of religious legitimation would, as Derrida terms it, be a form of the ‘messianic without messianism’, as the structure of the messianic which lies behind every religious messianism and which presents the call for justice as existing without an historical, empirical religious edifice.²⁴ This is also what guarantees that justice will always remain possible and will never be fully exhausted. Taking the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas as a starting point for these later reflections in his own career, and in many ways echoing a general Kantian sensibility for comprehending the structure of religious thought, Derrida conceives of messianicity, or the structure of the messianic claim to justice, as a form of ‘hospitality beyond all revelation’.²⁵ Hence, it is in-determinate, beyond all (religious, national, ideological, or canonical) particularity of content.

It should come as little surprise then that the discussion of messianism in Derrida’s work, as a structural form which intends a horizon of non-teleological justice (in a democratic form always yet to be realized), proceeds quickly to intermingle with issues of political representation found within today’s globalized society. Thus, questions of refugees and exiles play more than a periphery role in his thought; indeed, these marginalized figures become central examples of where contemporary understandings of political (canonical) representation break down.²⁶ These figures in fact serve to deconstruct our notions of justice and democracy which otherwise drift toward some form of representational totalization. These are the temptations to ‘label’ persons, or ‘put them in a box’ as it were, in order to secure their intelligibility within the public sphere. These labeling actions, however, also perform a certain violence to these persons, a violence which Derrida ultimately seeks to lessen. As one recent deconstructivist has put it, any attempt to name something (the generation of a canonical form then) must likewise be accompanied by its

²³ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 94.

²⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 74.

²⁵ Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 66-7.

²⁶ Cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 101.

disruptive accomplice, the event which cannot ever fully be named.²⁷ This acknowledgement comes as both a confirmation of the necessity for naming, but also its most destabilizing element; it is the structure of a ‘name without a name’ which underwrites every act of naming. This is what those marginal figures of our world today, such as the exiles and refugees who increase in number every year, remind us of, and what also highlights our inability to accurately address their situation. This is the outcome, then, of perceiving those messianic forces which are capable of reading history ‘against the grain’ and producing an alternate account of sovereign canonical narratives, though both remain entirely within the realm of representational conflict.

Giorgio Agamben on the theopolitical dimensions of the ‘messianic’

Though not as familiar to many scholars of contemporary theory as his predecessors, the work of Giorgio Agamben has seen a dramatic rise in interest over the past several years.²⁸ Despite this fact, and for some time now, Agamben has come to stake out his philosophical positions in both stated and unstated relation to that of Derrida, certainly as regards his usage of Benjamin and the ‘messianic’ forces of history, but also in relation to determining a ‘threshold of undecidability’ which can be said to prop up any sense of authority, as we have just seen.²⁹ Despite Agamben’s multiple attempts to nuance his position in relation to deconstructive thought in general, however, his proximity to it seems only to increase over time.³⁰ As one such salient example of this, the formulation of a ‘pure potentiality’ in relation to a ‘threshold of indecision’ as foundational thoughts in Agamben’s work bears a certain resemblance to the conceptualization

²⁷ Cf. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006) 8f.

²⁸ Cf. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli, eds., *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009); Alex Murray, *Giorgio Agamben* (London: Routledge, 2010); Alex Murray, Nicholas Heron and Justin Clemens, eds., *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Andrew Norris, ed., *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); C. T. Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1999); William Watkin, *Literary Agamben: Adventures in Logopoeisis* (London: Continuum, 2010); and, Thanos Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben: The Idea of Justice and the Uses of Legal Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2010).

²⁹ Cf. Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 103f, his essay on Derrida entitled ‘Pardes: The Writing of Potentiality’ in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), and his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 54f.

³⁰ Cf. Adam Thurschwell, ‘Cutting the Branches for Akiba: Agamben’s Critique of Derrida’ in Andrew Norris (ed.), *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

of ‘undecidability’ as the precursor to a justice always yet ‘to come’ (always, in this sense, ‘potential’) in that of Derrida. This is a reality for both authors which can in fact be said to ground every decision, but which cannot be foreclosed into becoming-content.³¹ This is said here over and against the fact that Agamben’s critique of deconstructionism as a ‘thwarted messianism, a suspension of the messianic’ does seem to have a certain validity.³² His basic contention is that deconstructionism calls into question the primary precedence of both origin and presence, but not of signification itself.³³ In essence, Agamben’s claim is that deconstructionism never escapes from the realm of representations, merely aligning itself with the messianic forces at work within them. Agamben’s main critique is that Derrida’s work, as we have briefly intimated above, does attempt to address the issue of cultural signification in terms of identity constitution and its performative violence, with both issues falling most directly under the rubric of the messianic; but it does not yet find a way beyond the implicit hold of representation.

Agamben’s distancing of himself from the deconstructionist project, however, does not always seem so clear, as the following examples will illustrate. Like Benjamin before them, Derrida and Agamben are committed to messianic projects that are without a *telos* or an aim which would otherwise attempt to render the messianic as something to be realized in a concrete empirical-historical fashion. This reading is perhaps here evidence as well of an inclination toward a particular Judaic formulation of the messianic in contrast to the Christian tradition of incarnating its messianic elements.³⁴ This distinction becomes a central recurring problematic, though often indirectly approached. It certainly plays a role in Agamben’s reading of Saint Paul as, for Agamben specifically, it is in Paul’s writings that a weak messianic potentiality most definitively develops, though it is one that is still Judaic in the sense that it is without incarnation, as he reads it.

For Agamben, the doctrine of the Incarnation is understood as Christianity’s attempt to reconcile the particular, historical and the universal by bringing God into humanity.³⁵ Further in line with Benjamin’s refusal to accept an incarnational logic, Agamben, however, describes how

³¹ See also Agamben’s comments on the condition of ‘undecidability’ opened up by the ‘state of exception’ in his *State of Exception* (trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 29f.

³² Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 103.

³³ Agamben’s work often makes reference to Derrida and the project of deconstruction; cf. his *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (trans. Liz Heron, London: Verso, 1993), 9f; Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (trans. Karen E. Pinkus and Michael Hardt, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 39f; and also *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (trans. Ronald L. Martinez, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 155-7.

³⁴ Cf. the remarks on the distinction between the Judaic messianic and the Christian in Mosès, *The Angel of History*, 12f.

³⁵ See Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content* (trans. Georgia Albert, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 82.

the interruption of linear time does not necessarily create an opening beyond itself, that is, toward the transcendent, and thus he again retains a Jewish conception of messianism in favor of a Christian one.³⁶ Completely immersed in the logic of the immanent realm of time's remaining, Agamben reads Paul's fundamental intuition concerning the reality of Jesus Messiah as such: 'Paul's faith starts with the resurrection, and he does not know Jesus in the flesh, only Jesus Messiah'.³⁷ Here, the structure of historical faith is laid out before us: to know Jesus Messiah as the logic of the incarnation, yet at a certain (absolute) distance from Jesus 'in the flesh', center of the Incarnation. The refusal of the copula 'is' between 'Jesus' and 'Messiah' in Paul's writings is at this point only further evidence for Agamben that the historical reality of Jesus, 'in the flesh', is of little concern. Jesus' historical reality is truly not necessary to know or understand. It is solely this stress upon the 'logic of the incarnation' which strikes Agamben as the reality which must be adhered to by faith. In fact, this is a faith that is faith only through the act of looking at itself, devoid of all particular content. In the end, it therefore runs the risk of presenting an incarnational logic that is yet removed from the Incarnation, an 'incarnation without Incarnation' which seems to function as an extension of a deconstructionist logic. This would be to read the Derrida of *The Politics of Friendship* and *Specters of Marx* as much closer to Agamben than Agamben himself has, or may be willing to recognize, as I will now unfold further.

In this framework, the messianic does not speak *per se*, but rather exceeds all that is said, and it is this strand of thought that he detects in (or as some might say, 'reads into') Benjamin's work. As he summarizes it *apropos* of our discussion:

The word of faith manifests itself as the effective experience of a pure power of saying that, as such, does not coincide with any denotative proposition, or with the performative value of a speech act. Rather, it exists as an absolute nearness of the word. One therefore understands why, for Paul, messianic power finds its *telos* in weakness. The act itself of a pure potentiality of saying, a word that always remains close to itself, cannot be a signifying word that utters true opinions on the state of things, or a juridical performative that posits itself as fact.³⁸

Potentiality, as Agamben names the ontological grounds of this threshold of 'undecidability' under discussion here, becomes for him the basis for understanding the workings of a 'weak messianic force' in both Paul and Benjamin. The messianic thus becomes that basic condition which renders the law inoperable and which can be said to 'deconstruct' the origins of law itself, or the (political, and hence canonical) representations which accompany it.

³⁶ Agamben, *The Man without Content*, 113.

³⁷ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 126.

³⁸ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 136.

This is the remnant of potentiality that is not consumed in the act, but is conserved in it each time and dwells there. If this remnant of potentiality is thus weak, if it cannot be accumulated in any form of knowledge or dogma, and if it cannot impose itself as a law, it does not follow that it is passive or inert. To the contrary, it acts in its own weakness, rendering the word of law inoperative in de-creating and dismantling the states of fact or of law, making them freely available for use.³⁹

For Agamben, as for Benjamin, it is of the essence of messianism that it is a theory of the ‘state of exception’, or that which interrupts (‘de-creating’) the normal significations of law, though without becoming itself the sovereign power which is typically posited through the existence of such a state. On the contrary, Agamben states that messianism is in fact that which subverts the sovereign’s power, that which is constantly engaged in acts of ‘de-creation’ and thus cannot become a constructive principle in and of itself.⁴⁰ Any attempt by the sovereign to totalize (forever concretize) the power to signify completely would be upended by its accompanying messianic elements. This, then, would approach being a messianism that truly never reaches a point of creation, or incarnation, but instead forever remains a specter upon the margins of (canonical) representation. This reading of the messianic would certainly seem to bear at least a minimum resemblance to the definition of what Derrida considered deconstruction to be. It is likewise, Agamben notes, a possible entrance of the ‘sacred’ into our world, deliberately posited in contrast to the banning of the sacred under the conditions of which the *nomos* (‘law’) of the sovereign appears.⁴¹ That is, if the sovereign, whether embodied as a ruler of a state or as a canonical reading (of history, of culture, etc), can only appear in the terrain cleared by the absence of the sacred, and thus as the secular order in which politics is performed, then it is the messianic elements which offer to reinstate sacredness into our world (our history, our culture, etc). Redemption therefore arises from within the messianic interruption of a canonical history.

Yet, as with his deconstructivist tendencies, the theological leanings in Agamben’s work, are not always so clear either. Concerning the latter, the messianic, employed in his work as a ‘de-creating’, ‘de-constructing’ force working within a religious context, seemingly goes beyond being merely ‘theological’.⁴² Indeed it would seemingly disrupt theology’s attempt to posit a particular content of faith as eternally and universally true. The messianic, for Agamben, is rather that which de-stabilizes the acts of naming within any particular religious tradition. It is, as it was for both Benjamin and Derrida, a structural feature of religious thought, pregnant with social, political, historical and ethical consequences, leading us to further inquire as to whether this

³⁹ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 137.

⁴⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 57-8.

⁴¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 111.

⁴² Cf. a parallel formulation of this thought in Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 32.

conception of the messianic is then an almost Kantian gesture to confine religion, or canons, or all acts of naming, to their structural limitations alone, rendering any content within as superfluous.⁴³ This then raises the seemingly insurmountable *status quaestionis*: Does the ‘X without X’ formula thereby imply the absence of *any* appropriable content within a religious tradition, especially if it is to remain faithful to the messianic core of religious thought, an exceptionality that in fact defines its functioning and authority (or perhaps even its sovereignty)? In short, is the universal form of religious thought to be favored over the particular content or praxis of a religious tradition?

It would seem, at times, that for Agamben, as for Derrida, it would imply exactly that. This explicit challenge to the discipline of theology as a fundamental refusal to posit any religious or dogmatic content *per se* is certainly picked up by Agamben as a directly applicable theopolitical principle severed from any historical religious tradition and yet discerned as the core of what constitutes any given tradition in the first place. It is the pure kernel of faith devoid of content.⁴⁴ Therefore, in a work devoted to developing the conceptualization of the ‘messianic’ in the context of a Pauline theology, he has leave to remark that

There is no such thing as a content of faith, and to profess the word of faith does not mean formulating true propositions on God and the world. To believe in Jesus Messiah does not mean believing in something about him...and the attempts of the Councils to formulate the content of faith in *symbola* can only be taken as a sublime irony.⁴⁵

To what degree then can a member of a community, or that which inscribes its members with its narrative, exist or have an identity that is yet deprived of any potential for content? This would seem to be the lasting legacy of the messianic bequeathed by Benjamin, modified through Derrida, and brought to the threshold of an increasingly secular age. We might, however, also inquire as to whether this is simply another manner in which to rework the problematic relationship between performative and ‘natural’ (or national) identities.⁴⁶ Or is there another dynamic at work within the foundations of identity formation which in fact exceeds the performative/natural (ontological) dichotomy? Is there then, as Agamben’s later work may indicate, a way to move beyond the universal/particular dichotomy which would isolate the structures of religious experience at the expense of any religious content and that so haunts all

⁴³ Cf. on Derrida’s relationship to Kant, Philip Rothfield, ed., *Kant after Derrida* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2003).

⁴⁴ This same maneuver can be found in Benjamin’s essay ‘On Language as such and on the Language of Man’ where he speaks of the absence of content in language, something which Agamben seems to have appropriated on the whole. See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 66.

⁴⁵ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 136.

⁴⁶ The use of ‘performative’ here is indebted in many ways to Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990) as well as to Derrida’s own later use of the term.

attempts to critically discern what lies at the heart of the messianic impulse? It is at this point that Agamben, though seeming himself to arise from within a parallel deconstructionist framework, illustrates his distance from it as well.

Distinguishing canons: Between more or less violence

From a theological perspective, a central question is thereby opened up through this line of inquiry in Agamben's thought that I now want to address directly. It is a question, indeed, which in the end will illustrate Agamben's attempt to distance himself from a deconstructionist approach. The question runs as such: what then is the task of theology, if not to safeguard and, in some sense, defend (or offer an apology for) the particularity of its 'content of faith' over and against a stripped-down universalization of its most significant concepts? Or, are the actions of 'safeguarding' and 'defending' simply an attempt to enact those powers of sovereignty which theology should otherwise resist becoming? Or, from another angle perhaps, we could ask: If the canonical scriptures have often been seen, alongside a canonical form of tradition (*its* history), as that bearer of truth for those religious peoples who gather to identify *with*, and be identified *by*, those particular forms, then how might their conscious de-stabilization, through the messianic elements which accompany them, affect those same identities? If their 'content' were dissolved, as Agamben at times seems to indicate it should, what would be the living reality of a 'whatever' community, or a 'whatever' person, if they are not to slide into the relativistic soup which those (religious, national, ideological) communities often fear looming on their peripheries? This quandary presents itself, in fact, as more than a small problematic within Agamben's work. Indeed, it could be said to constitute the fundamental aporia of his thought, as it were, one which I intend to frame more precisely through what follows.

A first potential answer to these questions might involve the role that theology would play (as at times it definitely *has played*) as a central actor in how we conceive of the political, certainly if read through Agamben's lens, and especially if it lets go of its attempt to formulate and contain a monolithic, universalized content and admits of its position as being already in-between (religions, cultures, etc). From Agamben's perspective, if religion can admit the contingency of its (canonical) content, taking on instead the 'whatever' form that best displays the medium of love, then humanity might find itself immersed within a completely different political reality, something over and beyond the legitimating of sovereign power.⁴⁷ If Carl Schmitt was correct in asserting that political concepts are secularized theological ones, then, to

⁴⁷ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, 'Bartleby, or On Contingency' in *Potentialities*.

acknowledge theology's perpetual (continuous) hybrid and 'weak' nature is thereby potentially an act of theology to reveal its place at the roots of what constitutes political identity in the first place, at the crossroads of cultures and beliefs, within the quotidian junctures of 'whatever' relationships. From this angle, this formulation might be another way to say that rather than simply reading the use of the messianic as an attempt at Judaizing thought as some have done⁴⁸, this is rather to read the appropriation of certain religious terms as indicating the situatedness of a particular religious identity as being at the crossroads between other identities (religious, historical, national, ethnic, etc). Thus, it is a play upon borders and identities which provides a salient critique of stabilized norms at the same time as offering new modes for the (re)configuration of both religious and political identities.⁴⁹ A genealogy of terms such as the messianic then could serve as an act that strives to recognize the 'historical tensions' at the roots of all representative identity formations.⁵⁰

Tensions such as these, in fact, have recently been read into the origins of the canonical form, its history and subsequent usage. Canons, by this count, can be seen as having historically introduced a new conception of religion into our world: the idea of religion as signifier, as the entrance of separation into the world, a division of reality into true and false. This characterization, of course, does not depart from what has already been said thus far concerning the nature of sovereignty which the canonical form manifests in its ability to craft cultural manifestations. This transition, however, is something particularly indebted to the (monotheistic) canonical form of writing, though this is not necessarily to grant the canonical form a particular, ineffaceable content as such.⁵¹ It is rather the structure or form of the canon itself which guarantees the nature of its interaction within the community it governs. Central to these claims is the role which violence plays in relation to the canonical form, whether it can be said to actually bring new forms of violence into our world (e.g. in the condemnation of 'false' religions/gods) or whether it condemns violent acts through its 'less violent' revelations of the

⁴⁸ Cf. Vassilis Lambropoulos, *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁴⁹ I would suggest that this reading bears a certain affinity with the work of Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

⁵⁰ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, 'Philosophical Archaeology', *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (trans. Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Attell, New York: Zone, 2009) 111.

⁵¹ Cf. the role of the canonical work as historically presented by Jan Assmann in his multiple writings of extreme relevance here. See, for example, Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (trans. Rodney Livingstone, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); *The Price of Monotheism* (trans. Robert Savage, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

violence already at work in our world.⁵² Derrida, for his part, certainly seemed at times willing to embrace the terminology of the canonical as a necessary contrast point to the work of the messianic-deconstructionist project.⁵³

In the midst of this potentially confusing role which canons play in signifying cultural, political and religious norms, Agamben, apart from this discussion and yet circling on its periphery, foresees that the coming community will be a community of justice without teleological aims, of a humanity united without the need for political representation. Indeed, presumably then they would exist without the need for a separation which normally defines the space of symbolic signification. In this sense, he would appear to be going beyond the deconstructionist project, intimating a realm of social existence which does not rely upon the representations which deconstructionism aims to take apart. In this line of thought, at times he has even referred to this state of signification as the ‘spectacle’ of original sin, a state to which our politics is bound.⁵⁴ Could it be then that what Agamben truly seeks is a community absent of all canons, and thus without (scriptural) religion or national-ideological markings as we know them?⁵⁵ Would this be to espouse a form of religious nihilism to parallel his alleged politically nihilistic claims? If this were so, it would certainly seem to be contrary to those deconstructionists who would somehow salvage the particularity of religious canonical claims.⁵⁶

Despite the ease with which we might be able to summarize his views as such, I believe that his thoughts contain yet another reading, as I have been suggesting throughout, and which I here intend to formulate. One potential solution to this problematic could perhaps be found through the insertion of a difference into the types of representations performed as judged through their relationship to violence. Hence, we could attempt to recover the criteria by which he defines the coming community, a community for which, according to his analyses, the ‘only truly political action ... is that which severs the nexus between violence and law’.⁵⁷ Hence, we might infer, any canon aligned with a violent, teleological representation of our world is to be dismissed *tout court*. Reading his work this way would leave open a space for a canonical form to exist

⁵² Cf. Mark S. Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004) as well as his *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008). See also Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵³ Cf. Derrida, ‘Canons and Metonymies’ in Rand, *Logomachia*.

⁵⁴ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (trans. Jeff Fort, New York: Zone, 2007) 59.

⁵⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 85f.

⁵⁶ Cf. John Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁵⁷ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 88.

which might in fact develop *another* relation to violence. In this sense, it would come to mirror Derrida's insistence on a 'bloodless' violence which some canonical forms might be able to maintain. In the place of the first type of canon, then, a 'pure violence', as Benjamin once termed it, could thus be said to result from this severance, a means without ends which would seem to fulfill the messianic hopes that Paul once clamored for and that seemingly stand excluded from all violence-profiting canonical claims. And this reading would also seem to express what Agamben visualizes as the original driving force behind Benjamin's conceptualization of history: to find a way to express the inexpressible within history that has otherwise been violently oppressed.

If we were to read the solution to this problematic in Agamben's work this way, it would be to develop a notion of canonicity as the counterpoint to Derrida's messianicity. In this fashion, a dichotomous system of polarized universal representations would appear upon the horizon, and we would be returned, once again, to the foundations of deconstructionist thought. Despite Agamben's proximity to such thoughts, as when he muses on Paul's development of the messianic, for example, I believe that there is yet another way to perceive of the canonical form in Agamben's work, a form which he potentially extends beyond the realm of representations. As I have been hinting all along, there is no championing of an alleged universal messianic bid for justice (a messianicity) apart from its accompanying universal desire to bind representations into culturally intelligible forms (a canonicity, as it were). Despite this apparent abstraction from any particular, historical messianism or canon, what I want now to demonstrate is that this inevitable pairing of polarized terms is in fact only understandable through the always particular manifestations in which they occur. Indeed, by aligning things thus, we may actually be closer to Agamben's understanding of how knowledge moves, not from the universal to the particular, or vice versa (as representations flow), but from particularity to particularity, a bold departure from deconstructionist thought, as we will see. This is a transition from the world of representations, littered with its exceptions, to the example as a contrast figure, found stated in the model of the paradigm. Hence, Agamben may provide us with yet another angle from which to view the unique, and often unstated role, which canons provide in our world by reformulating how we see canons in the first place.

The paradigm 'beyond representation'

With this more than problematic relationship between the universal and the particular before us, it begs to be asked how we are to cross the divide between them, a divide which has

remained at times the muted point in Agamben's work, just as it was in Derrida's for that matter. Recently, however, Agamben has articulated his growing interest in resolving the aporetic state of a binary universal/particular divide that results from dwelling in a realm of representations. The shift to be made, he will ultimately state, is not one that moves from the universal to the particular or vice versa, but rather from a world of representations to one of paradigms. This is the manner in which to comprehend how Agamben's work seems at times to reveal two seemingly contradictory formulations: the first, as I have demonstrated repeatedly above, is that the (universal) form matters much more than the (particular) content, but this is true only in terms of (cultural-canonical) representations. The second proposition, which attempts to break free of the representational mold and which I will now explore directly in relation to creation, is that our understanding of paradigms, however, moves only from particularity to particularity. What becomes manifestly clear in this transition from representations and their exceptional elements (i.e. the grounds for sovereignty to appear) to paradigmatic examples, is that the significance of the canonical form does not dissipate, but, in fact, undergoes a parallel transformation. In essence, and with this historical instance always before us, Agamben will make the same fundamental gesture of 'fulfillment' in moving from the representational model to the paradigmatic as Christianity once made in moving from an formulation of the canonical as legal-judicial to its 'renewal' as an 'imitation of Christ' so to speak. Understanding this change of definition in canons, then, can actually introduce a distinction into what the canonical form is capable of being in our world today. It likewise underscores Agamben's 'theological' reading of history and can also begin to introduce us to another way in which to view a potential theology of creation beyond representation, something which has not been explored as such in its theopolitical dimensions.

For Derrida, and perhaps for most of the history of western theology, a triad of canon-creation-representation was effected as a nexus of historical tensions wherein the religious (or political, or cultural) subject was identified. This was, and in many ways perhaps still is, a violent imposition of representative norms upon those subjects who would claim allegiance to a particular canonical community. And, in this fashion, many patriots and devout believers alike have historically been stamped with the mark of their 'faith', whether they fully accepted it or not. The work of deconstruction, in this context, can be seen then as an attempt to 'lessen' the violence of representational claims, but not, however, as an effort to move beyond the world of representations. For Agamben, however, the task seems to be just that: to eclipse representations in a bid to undo the violence which they cause through their very existence.

Briefly, I wish here to sketch out a basic outline of this epistemological difference in thought models (the rule-based norm of representation versus the paradigmatic example) before reviewing what significance these conclusions hold for the theological adherence to the canonical-messianic form. Paradigms, and here borrowing a good deal from Michel Foucault's genealogical elucidations, Agamben asserts, are based not on a rule-bound movement from the universal (norm) to the particular (application), as is the case with representational models, but rather on the manifestation of an example upon which others construct their own unique, always singular, identities. As he puts it, '...while induction proceeds from the particular to the universal and deduction from the universal to the particular, the paradigm is defined by a third and paradoxical type of movement, which goes from the particular to the particular'.⁵⁸ Breaking free of the dichotomies which have bound our thinking to representational forms through the use of analogy, the paradigm rather presents (not *re*-presents) an originary 'form of life', neither 'original' nor 'copy', but a singular 'whatever' form of being that is always its own point of origin. The consequences of this shift in thought are nothing short of revolutionary, for, in this manner, the apparent aporias of western thought are eliminated:

'...analogy intervenes in the dichotomies of logic (particular/universal; form/content; lawfulness/exemplarity; and so on) not to take them up into a higher synthesis but to transform them into a force field traversed by polar tensions, where (as in an electromagnetic field) their substantial identities evaporate'.⁵⁹

Derrida's logic of the messianic, his insistence upon a movement from a 'general' to a 'restricted' economy, or from the 'economic' to the 'aneconomic' as it will elsewhere be defined⁶⁰, remains caught up in this fundamental aporia which Agamben is here seeking to undo. Indeed,

The aporia may be resolved only if we understand that a paradigm implies the total abandonment of the particular-general couple as the model of logical inference. The rule (if it is still possible to speak of rules here) is not a generality preexisting the singular cases and applicable to them, nor is it something resulting from the exhaustive enumeration of specific cases. Instead, it is the exhibition alone of the paradigmatic case that constitutes a rule, which as such cannot be applied or stated.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Agamben, 'What Is a Paradigm?' in *The Signature of All Things*, 19.

⁵⁹ Agamben, 'What Is a Paradigm?', 20.

⁶⁰ Cf. Andrea Hurst, *Derrida Vis-à-vis Lacan: Interweaving Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). See also Jacques Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve' in *Writing and Difference* (trans. A. BASS, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978) 251-277.

⁶¹ Agamben, 'What Is a Paradigm?', 21.

With the paradigm, there is only the manifestation of an ‘example’, that which is excluded from a set by being included, in contrast with the ‘exception’ which is included by being excluded.⁶² It is the latter, of course, which is also responsible for producing the force of sovereignty, itself established through the exclusion of ‘oppressed’ sets.⁶³

What I have been asserting all along, then, is that it *is* still possible to speak of the rule in this context, insofar as the rule can also be conceived as a canon. Agamben in fact seems to use the two terms interchangeably in this setting.⁶⁴ In some sense, then, whereas Derrida’s work, will always be bound to a dichotomous working between the messianic and the canonical within the domain of representation (hence, a reliance upon presence/absence, etc), Agamben is here hoping to find another way in which to conceptualize thought. He is attempting to re-invent the way in which rules or canons are perceived, as well as how they function in society. Hence, for him, the centrality of the paradigm arises wherein it seeks to move beyond any representational content usually attributed to a canonical normativity. As he will illustrate within the context of monastic life, ‘at least until Saint Benedict, the rule does not indicate a general norm but the living community (*koinos bios, cenobio*) that results from an example and in which the life of each monk tends at the limit to become paradigmatic—that is, to constitute itself as *forma vitae*’.⁶⁵

Though he does not clarify how the transition from representation to paradigmatic example affects his earlier conclusions surrounding religious content, what Agamben is really pointing toward is the alteration of the canonical form itself, from being understood as rule (as law) to its re-emergence as paradigmatic example (as a ‘form of life’). Agamben is, without saying as much, fundamentally altering our definition of what the canonical is, something which I will not hesitate to confirm as a ‘Christian’ lineage surfacing within his work.⁶⁶

It should come as no surprise, then, that his reading of Benjamin, on the whole, is a ‘Christianized’ one, wherein the specifically Judaic (Torah-bound) canonical elements are jettisoned in favor of a Pauline re-reading of the canon’s role within our world.⁶⁷ This is a reading which seems at times to eliminate all representations (‘neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek’, etc.) inasmuch as he also appears to recapture them (‘to the Jews, I became a Jew, to the weak, I became weak’), thereby mirroring Paul in his displacement of Judaic canonical

⁶² Agamben, ‘What Is a Paradigm?’, 24.

⁶³ Cf. how this motif is expressed and more fully developed in Agamben, *State of Exception*.

⁶⁴ Cf. his usage of ‘canon’ and ‘rule’ as synonymous in Agamben, ‘What Is a Paradigm?’, 18.

⁶⁵ Agamben, ‘What Is a Paradigm?’, 22.

⁶⁶ Cf. another ‘Christianized’ reading of Agamben in Lorenzo Chiesa, ‘Giorgio Agamben’s Franciscan Ontology’ in Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009).

⁶⁷ Cf. his reading of Benjamin as influenced by Paul in *The Time That Remains*, 138f.

manifestations.⁶⁸ The difference, however, is that in this ‘recapturing’ of what had once represented identity, there is now only an absolute (paradigmatic) singularity which is always an ‘originary’ presentation of the ‘whatever’ being that each person is capable of becoming, or, we might say, has been created to be.

A ‘theology of creation’ at last ... ?

Interestingly, the interrelated themes of creation and redemption have recently become a focal point in Agamben’s reflections. Though the temptation is great to make an easy identification between the canonical-creational and the messianic-redemptive elements at work in such a polarized tension, I am here arguing that Agamben is actually opening up a new path by which to understand creation ‘beyond representation’. In this sense, there is the potential for a ‘theology of creation’ to develop in the wake of these reflections which embraces the singularity of every created thing which yet is capable of embracing the canonical, particular narratives of scripture without their entering into a representational discourse of sovereignty. I will now sketch out the intimate relationship between creation and redemption as Agamben paints it, before demonstrating how the canonical form can be understood as inseparable from a theology of creation which is paradigmatic and not representational.

In Agamben’s estimation, the convergence between the three great monotheisms on the relationship between creation and redemption is not coincidental; in all three, we are told, ‘...there are two kinds of work or praxis in God: the work of redemption and that of creation’.⁶⁹ Redemption, as he unfolds it genealogically, is what gives form to creation. It is what grants the space for meaning to be affixed to creation as its ‘content’. ‘The decisive aspect of this conception is that redemption precedes creation in rank, that the event that seems to follow is in truth anterior. It is not a remedy for the fall of creatures, but rather that which makes creation comprehensible, that which gives it its meaning’.⁷⁰ It is a comprehensibility, then, which would seemingly be hard to sever from the world of representations, a world indebted entirely to a form/content dichotomy, though Agamben does not comment upon this potential relationship as such in this context. What is clear is that the force of messianism (as implicitly bound up with the work of redemption) is inseparable from the creation to which it imparts meaning. And in this reading, thus far, there is little to prevent us from avoiding the temptation I have already indicated

⁶⁸ Cf. Galatians 3.28 and 1 Corinthians 9.20f.

⁶⁹ Giorgio Agamben, ‘Philosophical Archaeology’, 107. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, ‘Création et salut’, *Nudités* (trans. Martin Rueff, Paris: Rivages, 2009).

⁷⁰ Agamben, ‘Philosophical Archaeology’, 107.

of labeling the creational as canonical and the redemptive as messianic all within a representational schematic.

But, as I have also been indicating, this would be to misread the overall trajectory of Agamben's work, despite the fact that he himself seems not to make mention of this alluring misreading. The temptation becomes even more alluring, in fact, when we notice how both Benjamin and Derrida were constrained by projects which both sought to favor the messianic forces working within history over any canonical pronouncements. This is no doubt why both authors kept a precarious distance from any canonical affiliations, producing in effect seemingly very 'original' bodies of work.⁷¹ Here, indeed, as in his comments on the structure/form being more important than the content, messianism, as Agamben's focus on salvation indicates, takes precedence over any canonical form, which is, as we have just seen, intricately indebted to the realm of creation, the world where intelligibility is inescapable.

This (mis)reading continues as a present possibility when we read that, the utilization of the archaeological method, for Agamben, as for Benjamin whom he cites, is an act intended to 'go back' through creation in order to 'give it back to the salvation from which it originates'.⁷² This gesture is made, however, so that '...the two works are not simply separate but rather persist in a single place, where the work of salvation acts as a kind of a priori that is immanent in the work of creation and makes it possible'.⁷³ Hence, we are only beyond (or *before*) creation when we are returned to the redemption which preceded it. But instead of this being a dramatic one-sided emphasis placed upon the messianic elements within a dichotomous thinking, Agamben's plea is rather that we find a way to return to creation, to the canonical elements of our world, but only after first standing outside of them, in the place of redemption. Only then, he seems to be suggesting, would we be able to return to a creation beyond representation, much like Saint Paul once seemed to indicate, after we had first comprehended the ultimate failure underlying all constructed representations.

It is in such a manner that we are to understand Agamben when he states (rather enigmatically) that 'Only for those who will have known how to save it, will creation be possible'.⁷⁴ Only for those who have stepped outside of creation, of history and its identifications, will a revisiting of creation be possible. And it is this externality to creation

⁷¹ Cf. Benjamin's relation to scripture in Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible*.

⁷² Agamben, 'Philosophical Archaeology', 108.

⁷³ Agamben, 'Philosophical Archaeology', 108.

⁷⁴ Agamben, 'Philosophical Archaeology', 108.

which immediately marks this viewpoint as ‘theological’.⁷⁵ Only then, presumably, will an ethics beyond those governed by representations (such as Derrida’s) be possible as well. This is precisely the location to insert the paradigmatic movement from particularity to particularity as indicative of a viewpoint which in fact lies at the base of Agamben’s ethical formulations on encountering the ‘face’ before us as a ‘whatever singularity’ that presents (*exposes*, rather than represents) itself.⁷⁶ In this sense, and as a major conclusion to his work which theology has still yet to embrace the consequences of, creation may exist as a non-representational space beyond the exclusions which ground sovereignty in our world. This would no doubt secure a radical re-alignment of what constitutes any attempt to define the theo-political in the modern world.

Taking these potential indicators of the need for canonical representation into account, I want to propose that what Agamben is really seeking to say, however, is, though canonical representations may in fact be possible, they are ultimately unnecessary, bound to an outmoded way of thinking (a binary ‘dichotomous’ thinking) that has effectively been surpassed by the example of the paradigm. Hence, creation can be seen to exist as a movement beyond representation through the paradigmatic example which actually uplifts the singularity of every created thing. And it is in this profound recognition of the singularity of ‘whatever’ thing that exposes its face to us that an equally profound ‘theology of creation’ would be discernable. What is thus placed before us is a theology of creation then that produces new canonical forms beyond the violence of representational schemes. In this nearly paradoxical formulation, we perhaps capture the essence of what Agamben has been driving at: for those who know how, creation (as paradigmatic example) is a possibility ... but only after all forms of representation have first been destroyed. This would be nothing short of a radical re-envisioning of what canons can be in our world, how they might assist in creating the ‘original’ beings who stand before us all, and not as ‘subjects’ who stand marked by the sovereign representations to which we must conform. It also might illustrate, if we are prepared to accept it, a profound difference in understanding the types and function of canons, even ones potentially bound between the same cover.

Conclusion

⁷⁵ This reading of the theological as external to history bears a strong affinity with Benjamin’s remarks on the place of theology in his own work. See, for example, Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999) 471.

⁷⁶ Cf. Agamben, *The Coming Community*; Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics* (trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

There are two conclusions that I have been working toward throughout this essay, and which now only need bear repeating. The first can be glimpsed through the dynamic tensions between the messianic and the canonical, those polarized forms which western thought has operated under for centuries and which even a philosophy as radical as Derrida's was not able to work beyond. The relationship between them, however, can now be conceived as a working through of what is given in order to establish and legitimate cultural-canonical representations which can yet acknowledge their messianic elements working from within to de-stablize (deconstruct) their tendencies toward totalization. This is certainly a beneficial insight into how politics and religion intersect today, and one potentially most helpful for producing 'less violent' representational canonical forms. Indeed, it is a place where we might begin to contemplate the (re)formulation of the content of faith as a whole. By refocusing the use of potentiality within the canonical form, we might be able to demonstrate its resistance to totalization at the same time as it serves to signify cultural identities and representations. And this can be done simply by acknowledging the messianic elements working within the canonical form at all times, listening to their voices and performing less violence to them in an always incomplete bid for justice to arise within history. A theology of creation as both creation and de-creation, as a 'becoming-pure-potentiality', must validate the happening of the canonical, its canonicity, at the same time as it recognizes the messianic elements working from within that consistently undo its representational logic. There is no genuine canonicity without its accompanying messianicity, a truth whose concealment or revelation can serve to indicate the levels of violence present in varying canonical forms.

This model, it is important to stress, is never really surpassed as such: it is more or less only 'fulfilled' by the second conclusion which Agamben also points toward. This is no doubt why Agamben's work will seem so close to Derrida's, as he does not negate its work, but rather only seeks to 'fulfill' its most basic claims. If we can say that the Kingdom of God is to resemble such a community always yet 'to come', one without need of separation or representation, then perhaps we are better able to comprehend the theological framework upon which Agamben relies in constituting his political formulations. This theological horizon demonstrates how the messianic works from within given representations to de-stablize them, as an eschatological horizon against which all particular identifications are rendered null and void. There is some sense then that Agamben's project is a certain form of political nihilism, the foreclosure of representations in a pure potentiality, the shape of the coming community and the political-philosophical task to come; but perhaps it is also what Paul once sought after in rendering all distinctions likewise void ('neither male nor female', etc, truly then engaged in creation of a

‘whatever’ being if ever there was one) a fruitful theological principle of creation *as* de-creation, as the eventual grinding of representation to a halt, as the coming of another community that is a strange Kingdom, an example from which countless other ‘originals’ can spring without an accompanying notions of sovereignty.

This is to say, perhaps there is a way to affirm both Agamben’s bid for a world ‘beyond representation’ as well as the necessity for canonical norms here and now, emphasizing only the manner in which we ‘learn’ (hence, ‘know’) how to return to creation after first encountering redemption. For when ‘the coming community’ actually arrives, there will be no need for the processes of canonicity to create the various subjectivities which dot the horizons of representation. Likewise, there will be no need for a messianic force which undoes each instance of identification. If this sounds more than a bit like a rich theological description of the ‘Kingdom of God’, then perhaps it is no coincidence.