

# Discharged from the Law: Paulos, Anarchy and Spirit

## Exploring Romans 6-8 With Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin

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### Abstract

This essay is a brief sketch on Paul's writings about law and Spirit in the book of Romans. Christian theology has historically understood law as basically synonymous with Judaism, and Paul's discourse on law is largely taken to be the reasoning of a superior religion over and against its failed or expired predecessor. In spite of the correctives of E. P. Sanders, it has been said that New Perspectives theologians are still describing some, albeit more nuanced, version of the same old picture.<sup>1</sup> This has tended to reduce the complexity of the primitive messianic movement to a religion preoccupied with its supposed supremacy over another religion, all the while remaining quietist regarding the law of the Roman Imperium. We may wonder if this, in the weave of the world, hasn't helped to create favourable conditions for the marriage of imperial Christendom and white supremacy.

It is proposed here that, in Romans 6-8, Paul describes *all* kinds of law as a self-defeating attempt to hold a broken world together by threat of violence. Messianic redemption is to be lived out in a field of social and political anarchy beyond this deadlock, unobliged to the powers and laws of the present age: a life held together, not by the violence of law-imposing hierarchies, but by *pistis* and *pneuma*; that is, by relationships good enough to trust, rooted in the divine presence in creation.

Paulos<sup>2</sup> never seems more out of his mind than when he talks about *nomos*. He cannot speak on the subject without appearing contrary, circular and generally in conflict with himself and his imagined opponents. I'll be looking to the historian of Judaism Gershom Scholem, and the critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin, to see how they might shift the field of questions and offer alternative perspectives on the matter. Scholem's essay *Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea* describes the tension that is always present in Judaism between the "anarchic breeze" of messianism and iterations of Jewish religious law. Benjamin's essay *The Critique of Violence* analyses law as a general

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Paul Within Judaism* reader, Nanos et al consider New Perspectives sensibilities "still too beholden to traditional theological positions, including the questions asked, the courses pursued to answer them, and the consistency of their answers with fundamental views attributed to Paul in various traditional Christian theologies, not least the way Jewish identity and Judaism are portrayed." Cf. Nanos & Zetterholm, 6.

<sup>2</sup> I am in the habit of calling him *Paulos*, because that is his name – but not all the time, because we all carry the complex baggage of having more than one name.

category and its relationship to violence. With these in mind, I'll be suggesting that Romans chapters 6-7 is a call to a kind of social and political anarchy. The mountaintop text of chapter 8 thereafter, which focuses on the Spirit, comes as Paul's answer to the implied question, "*If we reject all law, how will we not then fall into chaos?*"

### **Scholem on the Law**

In his essay *Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea*, Gershom Scholem identifies three energies at work within the historical journey of rabbinic Judaism: the conservative, the restorative and the utopian.<sup>3</sup> This first of these is primarily concerned with the preservation and vitality of the community in the present fallen age; so the *halakhah* - Jewish religious law - is central as something that guards the community against loss of identity and moral degeneration. The restorative and the utopian energies lean more toward the messianic idea. The former seeks a perfected restoration of a past golden age. The latter seeks, in the messianic age, a redemption of history that is a more radical apocalypse, an event of total healing for the whole creation. This kind of vision is at once mystically obscure and also politically potent.

There is an anarchic element in the very nature of messianic utopianism: the dissolution of old ties which lose their meaning in the new context of messianic freedom. The total novelty for which utopianism hopes enters thus into a momentous tension with the world of bonds and laws which is the world of *halakhah*.<sup>4</sup>

This tension may well strike us as being powerfully at work in the madness of Paulos whenever he talks in circles about the law. Sometimes law and redemption are antagonists, and yet sometimes they are friends.

Messianic utopianism presents itself as the completion and perfection *halakhah*. It is to perfect what cannot yet find expression in the *halakhah* as the law of an unredeemed world [...] The one calls for the other.<sup>5</sup>

"Do we overthrow the law?" Asks Paul. "By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law,"<sup>6</sup> he concludes (though elsewhere he makes various other conclusions). Why is he sometimes fighting the law off and other times wanting to accommodate it? There is a sense in Scholem's thought, in which there is a continuity between *halakhah* and the messianic age. They are not at odds with each other. The former leads us to the latter and the latter somehow transfigures the former. Paul's regular

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<sup>3</sup> Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Scholem, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Scholem, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Rom 3:31. All biblical quotes from the NRSV.

use of the verb *katagesis*, which Agamben translates as *to render inoperative*,<sup>7</sup> is important here. This word is sometimes misleadingly translated *to abolish*, as in "He [the messiah] has abolished the law."<sup>8</sup> In fact, *katagesis* does not abolish, but brings to rest. There is a resonance of sabbath about it. On the other hand, the tension between law and messianism is real.

Apocalypticism and its inherent mythology tore open a window on a world which the *halakhah* preferred to leave shrouded in the mists of uncertainty. The vision of messianic renewal and freedom was by its very nature inclined to produce the question of what it would do to the status of the Torah and of the *halakhah* which was dependent on it. [...] The greater the assumption of changes in nature or of revolutions in man's moral character—which latter were determined by the extinction of the destructive power of the evil inclination in the messianic age—the greater did the modification also have to become which under such circumstances affected the operation of the law. A positive commandment or a prohibition could scarcely still be the same when it no longer had for its object the separation of good and evil to which man was called, but rather arose from the messianic spontaneity of human freedom purely flowing forth.<sup>9</sup>

It needs to be marked well here that the critique of law is not a critique of Judaism. Rather, it is a dialectic which is intrinsic to rabbinic Judaism (as it was to first and second temple Judaism). Judaism carries within itself a generative tension between law and messianism, between preservation in the present age and the life of the age to come, between the now and the not yet, to use the old Christian phrase. Here we should note that Scholem's discussion of law in fact transcends questions of Jewish religious law, as does Paul's. The common good purpose of any law (though not all laws are purposed for good) is to preserve the world from falling into chaos in what Paul calls "the present evil age."<sup>10</sup> So the superfluity of law applies to all such law in the messianic age. Where evil and loss are no longer possible, however obscure such an imagination may be, the law of the state is as superfluous as any religious law. The point is that, if we follow Scholem's lead, the critique of law has nothing to do whatsoever with which religion is right or wrong or better or worse (as though Christianity, catholic or protestant, were not full of its own law); the critique of law is about living in the tension between the present evil age and the life of the age to come.

At this point there arises the possibility of a turning from the restorative conceptions of the final re-establishment of the reign of law to a utopian view in which restrictive traits

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<sup>7</sup> Agamben, p95

<sup>8</sup> Eph 2:15

<sup>9</sup> Scholem, p20

<sup>10</sup> Gal 1: 3.

will no longer be determinative and decisive, but be replaced by certain as yet totally unpredictable traits which will reveal entirely new aspects of free fulfilment. Thus an anarchic element enters messianic utopianism.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike restorative messianism, messianic utopianism looks through a glass, darkly. That mystical or apophatic openness has a social and political resonance. Paul is working out, in real time, how to live between the blessed commandment of the present age and the transfiguring anarchy to come: "the messianic spontaneity of human freedom purely flowing forth." If one lives toward the mystery of a redeemed age of eros, one begins to feel for the posture of a good beyond the field of law; that is, law of any kind at all. In fact, law, in the general sense, begins to present itself as a particular kind of trap. We become stuck in a dialectic between law and sin and death - or between law and violence, as Benjamin will describe it below. How does one lean in an authentically messianic direction in the light of all this?

Interestingly, Scholem thinks of Paul at this point. But it's the Paul of Christian theology that he finds:

The Pauline "freedom of the children of God" is a form in which such a turning meant leaving Judaism behind. But this was by no means the only form of these conceptions, which appear in messianism again and again with dialectical necessity.<sup>12</sup>

Extraordinarily, it is only, to my knowledge, a recent line of study (since the 1990s: Mark Nanos, Paula Fredriksen and others) in which Paul is being rethought within Judaism. Paulos is, I believe, the apostle against conversion. No one ever expended more energy persuading people not to convert to his religion. Neither did he ever try to persuade a Jewish person to leave Judaism behind (quite the opposite). For Paul, the messianic event gathered a religiously diverse political body around the hope of an odd messianic figure of a crucified Jewish peasant. Judaism for Paul never envisaged the conversion or eradication of all others. Its messianic *telos* has always been a universal and diverse redemption.

In any case, Scholem's interpretation of Paul falls within the category of messianic utopianism. Paul's critique of law is not a critique of Judaism, or any other religion, per se, but a critique of law as a form of violence which appears to us, at best, as the noble necessity of the present age, but must finally be transfigured into *lore*, as we abandon conformity to the present age and lean into the benign anarchy of the age to come.

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<sup>11</sup> Scholem, 20-21.

<sup>12</sup> Scholem, 21.

## Benjamin on The Law

While the Scholem essay considers the anarchic elements of messianism in relation to the religious law of Judaism, the *Critique of Violence*, written by Scholem's friend Walter Benjamin, explores questions around state law. Though he begins with wholly different questions, Benjamin's line of thought ultimately follows a similar path to Scholem's, and indeed, in my view, to that of Paulos also.

"The task of a critique of violence can be summarised as that of expounding its relation to law and justice."<sup>13</sup> So he begins; and immediately we are amidst a constellation of Paul's favourite concepts: *law*, *justification* and we might find that corresponds well to that couplet, *sin* and *death*. There is, for Benjamin, an unbreakable relationship between violence and law.

All violence as a means is either lawmaking or law preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates it forfeits all validity. It follows, however, that all violence as a means, even in the most favourable case, is implicated in the problematic nature of law itself. And if the importance of these problems cannot be assessed with certainty at this stage of the investigation, law nevertheless appears, from what has been said, in so ambiguous a moral light that the question poses itself whether there are no other than violent means for regulating human interests.<sup>14</sup>

All state law, then, implicates violence, in two respects. First there is an originary (lawmaking) violence by which the law was imposed in the first place: some founding mythical violence, some conquest or colonisation or revolution, or some coming to power, that justified one party in imposing law upon the rest. Second is the threat of (law preserving) violence by which that law is upheld thereafter - a violence which the state keeps a monopoly on. This of course creates a fascinating paradox. We are implicated in a system of violence, though we are not allowed to wield the violence (unless we are employed as the muscle of the state). There's a faultline. The issue for the lawmaking powers who keep a monopoly on violence, is not so much the damage a subject's violence might cause, but the power that subject might then gain to become lawmakers themselves. The hierarchy is rigid. The one who holds the monopoly on law holds the monopoly on violence, and vice versa. Law is inseparable from violence as it is impracticable without hierarchies.

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, 277.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, 287.

It should be noted that Benjamin's definition of violence seems to reach beyond mere physical attack and harm, and includes other forms of forced obligation and subservience. He observes, for example,

A totally nonviolent resolution of conflicts can never lead to a legal contract. For the latter, however peacefully it may have been entered into by the parties, leads finally to possible violence.<sup>15</sup>

Why? Because a contract is guaranteed by state law, and state law is guaranteed by violence. At the other extreme, Benjamin notes that there is always a special tension around questions of capital punishment, because "where the highest violence, that over life and death, occurs in the legal system, the origins of law juts manifestly and fearsomely into existence." He continues "In this very violence something rotten in law is revealed..."<sup>16</sup>

Here we might gain a deeper insight into why, for Paul, law, though possibly honourable in purpose, is inseparable from categories of sin and death. The messianic age must, ultimately, be the *telos* of the law. Law, as Benjamin understands it, and shalom, cannot co-exist. The Roman peace is not really peace, but dormant violence.

Benjamin ultimately and rather shockingly concludes that the destruction of "all legal violence", that is to say, of state law itself, is "obligatory".<sup>17</sup> Shocking, why? Because deep down, this grim analysis is not unknown, but we have our reasons for putting up with it, mostly along the lines of security, "realism" or lack of alternative imaginations. Also shocking because "obligatory;" not preferable, or desirable, but "obligatory;" a humanising responsibility. Is this task really a human obligation? Where do we look for alternative visions?

Is any nonviolent resolution of conflict possible? Without doubt. The relationships of private persons are full of examples of this. Nonviolent agreement is possible wherever a civilised outlook allows the use of unalloyed means of agreement. Legal and illegal means of every kind that are all the same violent may be confronted with nonviolent ones as unalloyed means. Courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust and whatever else might here be mentioned are their subjective preconditions.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin will ultimately point in two directions for alternative visions. One shocking and strange; and the other, exemplified above, is ordinary and underwhelming. Paul points in the same

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, 288.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, 286.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, 296-7.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, 289.

two directions. Here we have a justice (*dikaio synes*) that comes about via good faith, (*kata pistis*), or as I would like to put it, via *relationships good enough to trust*. Law is deemed necessary in the present age to precisely the extent that we lack relationships good enough to trust. A political body, rooted in a praxis of the life of the age to come (this is my understanding of Paul's understanding of the messianic mission) can only exist by the praxis of *good faith*. As Benjamin puts it: "we can therefore only point to pure means in politics as analogous to those which govern peaceful intercourse between private persons."<sup>19</sup>

The other direction Benjamin points in for alternative vision is considered by some to be best left alone, and yet it is of course particularly fascinating and disturbingly resonant with the lines of thought we see in Paul. Having spoken of violence as means, Benjamin speaks, in his enigmatic fashion, of violence as ends: of divine violence:

If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings about guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood.<sup>20</sup>

Here, the word violence, again, holds broader connotations than merely aggressive physical force. It seems to roll into the realm of the divine freedom to act, immediately and shockingly without warning or justification, to alter a situation (not to found or preserve one). The extremely puzzling example given is the story in Numbers 16 where the company of Korah are swallowed up by the ground.

This part of Benjamin's essay rings very awkwardly as some sort of enigmatic and disturbing expiation or atonement text. In any case, there are a number of things here which will, I think, be instructive to an interpretation of Paul's thought. First is that a kind of violence, in some broader sense of the divine freedom to act shockingly and decisively, is implied wherever we see the word mistranslated *righteousness* in Paul's letters. The root *diké* implies a future *act* of *arighting*, or setting right. In fact, the word translated "vengeance" has the same root.

Second is to note that divine violence is violence as ends, not means. Violence as means is always lawmaking or law preserving. The elusive idea of divine violence does not make or preserve law but destroys it, because law is part of the passing power of the present age. In other words, it leaves no law after the event. This is crucial, because atonement theories in Christian theology have

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<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, 290-1.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, 297.

often tended to view God's violence or justice, in the image of state violence. It views God's violence as a violence of means, not ends. It views God's violence as having a law making or law preserving function (for example, the new law is that you must all be Christian and not be Jews... or, Jesus pays off the divine judge in some law court scene, so that the law is preserved). All this suggests an inability to think beyond the powers of the present age, which are "doomed to perish,"<sup>21</sup> says Paul.

Last is to note that there is an inherent religious mystery to the vision of divine violence, in that law and violence as means is a sort of cyclical trap that does not carry within itself the means of escape. Liberation must involve some kind of external grace.

All that said, Benjamin's religious mysticism flows in and out of the ordinary and practicable. He expects to find these mysteries in lives lived in the course of history:

[Manifestations of divine power] are defined, therefore, not by miracles directly performed by God, but by the existing moment in them that strikes without bloodshed and, finally, by the absence of all lawmaking [...] On the breaking of this cycle, maintained by mythical forms of law, on the suspension of law with all the forms on which it depends as they depend on it, finally therefore on the abolition of state power, a new historical epoch is founded. If the rule of myth is broken occasionally in the present age, the coming age is not so unimaginably remote that an attack on law is altogether futile.<sup>22</sup>

### **Paulos on The Law**

While Scholem and Benjamin both approach the question of Law from different angles and with different categories, both make a common path of thought: the tension around law is what it is because law is at odds with the world in its redeemed state. Law is at odds with the age to come, toward which we are drawn, either by faithful obligation or just by the *telos* of things. Naming this trajectory and setting our face to the wind means approaching a breaking point with what is for the sake of a vision for which language fails. It seems to me that it's the same path of thought that Paulos follows in Romans chapters 6–8. These knotty chapters (and indeed, Paul's whole scheme) reveal themselves along the faultline, the breaking point, between the present age and the life of the age to come. This faultline runs its path over "the stage of history, within the community,"<sup>23</sup> though our translation conventions have, as we will see, obscured it in certain ways.

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<sup>21</sup> 1Cor 2:6

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, 299.

<sup>23</sup> Scholem, 1.



There are two clear upshots to recognising this path of thought. First, that Paul's thought here is not a critique of Judaism, any more than anything else that is involved with law (and everything is involved with law). Second is an obligation toward some kind of anarchy; an idea for which he obviously draws a lot of fire.

The prelude to chapter 6 is Paul's startling thought that after, and as a reaction to, the fallenness of the present age, "law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied."<sup>24</sup> As Jacob Taubes sees it, the language of law here, whatever the particular may be, is "hypostatized."<sup>25</sup> That is, it considers law, here, is a general category, meaning any law that attempts to mitigate the violence of the fall by upholding and enforcing moral boundaries. The principle case here though, for Taubes is the law of the Roman Imperium. I concur. Our inability to see anything but a critique of Judaism here is, to my mind, another tick of the anti-Semitic tendencies of European Christendom, or the self-justifying guilt of religious parricide. Here, Paul agrees with Benjamin, that while law attempts to mitigate violence it can only do so by making a treaty with it; by being subsumed by it, since it must be founded and upheld by it. It gains a handle on the chaos of sin and death by enshrining them in a system.

He furthermore sees that this system somehow *reveals* the deathliness and violence of the present age. Our ailment is enshrined before us; it "juts manifestly and fearsomely into existence." More startling still is Paul's belief that this exacerbation, this grim subsumption, is somehow itself gathered toward redemption. Even the fall is part of the recovery, as they say; "so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death [this, I would suggest, is what Benjamin describes], so grace might also exercise dominion through *dikaio synes* [divine violence, in the Benjaminian sense] leading to the life of the age. ["eternal life" is a misleading translation convention, I think] through Jesus messiah/kyrios."<sup>26</sup> Note that designating the crucified peasant messiah as *kyrios* at this point in particular jolts the hearers out of the jurisdiction of Roman law, and into the messianic space beyond.

The symbols and metaphors that then follow are three attempts to address the sorts of objections that all apologists for anarchy have to answer: "why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), "let us do evil so that good may come"?<sup>27</sup> Or, to open the present passage, "should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?"<sup>28</sup> In other words, if law is a problem, and

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<sup>24</sup> Rom 5:20

<sup>25</sup> Taubes, p23

<sup>26</sup> Rom 5:21

<sup>27</sup> Rom 3: 8.

<sup>28</sup> Rom 6: 1.

fallenness only provokes divine grace, shall we all just please ourselves? Would we not fall into lawless chaos?

In the first pass, Paul gives us the ritual of baptism. He understands this as a death ritual, or even a ritual death: "for whoever has died is free from sin."<sup>29</sup> This is to say (as will become clearer in Paul's third pass at the issue) that once a person has died they are no longer subject to the laws or the powers of the present age. A dead person is beyond the jurisdiction of the law. In the death ritual of baptism a person passes through the messianic death by capital punishment (and it is instructive to recall here what Benjamin notes about capital punishment as the unmasking of law), thus a person passes beyond the jurisdiction of law. And so the messianic death is an event which tears a hole in the law of the present age; an act of divine violence. The baptised person declares themselves "wholly unobliged," as H. Waetjen put it,<sup>30</sup> to the powers and the law of the present age. Baptism is ritual entry into anarchy.

This study of Paul's anarchy obviously begs the wearying old question of Romans 13: what about submission to the powers that be? A proper look at that chapter is beyond the remit here, but to give brief soundings, I wonder, why do we lack the imagination to hold this sort of complexity together? Whoever redacted the book of Jeremiah was able to hold together a savvy call to pray for the prosperity of Babylon,<sup>31</sup> that violent imperial *nomos* of the ancient world, alongside prayers of longing that Babylon would be set on fire and rolled into the sea.<sup>32</sup> There is nothing remotely novel about this kind of tension in the Jewish imagination. For Jacob Taubes it is too obvious to waste more than a few words on.<sup>33</sup> Jewish people know how to keep their heads down, and outlast one beast or another - the powers of this world, which, says Paul, "are doomed to perish."<sup>34</sup>

Now, Paul is answering a particular question here in Romans 6–7, and it is the usual charge against the anarchic imagination. After law, what stops my wrongdoing? As Benjamin sees it, law and violence are contingent upon one another. As Paul sees it, law is contingent on sin, which is contingent on death. The age to come is about resurrection to life (*zoe*). To maintain freedom to sin after freedom from law is to remain enthralled to the present age of violence and law, and not to the coming age of

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<sup>29</sup> Rom 6: 7.

<sup>30</sup> Myers, 129.

<sup>31</sup> Jeremiah 29.

<sup>32</sup> Jeremiah 50-51.

<sup>33</sup> "We're living in the evil Roman empire, so how are we living there? What, should we still be rising up against something that's going down anyway? [...] I know this sort of mentality. It's not foreign to me. I have a passport. But what do I have to do with my country beyond my passport. My president's name is Reagan. Do I strike you as very American?" Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of St Paul*, 40-41.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Cor 2: 6.

life, arighted, or "the messianic spontaneity of human freedom purely flowing forth."<sup>35</sup> Why? Because sin begets law, which begets sin.

It is worth noting that for Paul, the person of faith has already passed through this window of the messianic death, the Friday event. But the person of faith is still awaiting resurrection; the Sunday event. The person of faith is, invariably in Romans, in the ambiguity of Saturday:<sup>36</sup> in the present age, but not of it; of the age to come, but yet in it. For this reason, messianic anarchy is a posture held in tension.

In the second pass Paul uses the rather problematic metaphor of slavery, and we might well wonder how that was received by those of his hearers who were, or had been, slaves. "I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations,"<sup>37</sup> he says, partly by way of apology, perhaps, but also to clarify that metaphors taken from the present age may well be a little ill-fitting for the age to come. Here the metaphor says that liberation from slavery to law does not lead to freedom but to another slave-master, that being *dikaiosyne*. One does not renounce one's obligations to law and sin and death and come out wholly unobliged to *anything*. Rather, one emerges wholly obliged to the *arightedness* of the age to come. "Now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the fruit you get is sanctification [*hagiasmon*, set-apartness, otherness... as in, otherness from the *nomos* of the present age]. The ends (*telos*), is the life of the age."<sup>38</sup> I have altered the translation here in the light of our schema. I think *eternal life* is much better translated "the life of the age [to come]."

For the third round Paul forms a metaphor from marriage. This re-works the same idea explored in baptism. "The law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime."<sup>39</sup> In this metaphor, a woman is freed from the law of marriage because her husband dies (a little flexing with the image here, since it's not actually the woman who dies), and so she can marry another. The two husbands are the two ages as seen in the messianic utopian schema.

While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Scholem, 20.

<sup>36</sup> "For we *have been* United with him in a resurrection like his, we *will* certainly be United with him in a resurrection like his." (Rom 6: 5, italics mine). This formulation recurs throughout Romans.

<sup>37</sup> Rom 6: 19.

<sup>38</sup> Rom 6: 22.

<sup>39</sup> Rom 7: 1.

<sup>40</sup> Rom 7: 5-6.

There is of course a gap between this language and lived experience. Anarchy is easy to talk about. Paul in his theatrical way is very able to embody the despairing inability to realise a way out, or indeed to experience anything besides a despairing world of law and loss. We might well stand in awe of the spectacular spin the thread finally collapses into:

I find it to be a law that when I want to do good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am...<sup>41</sup>

So many laws, and none of them helping. Why? Because all law, in the sense above, is alloyed with violence; with sin and death. If this text were to imagine a world without law it could only imagine all the wrong it would then be free to do. It certainly cannot, from this ground, imagine "the messianic spontaneity of human freedom purely flowing forth."<sup>42</sup>

I take a certain significance from the inescapable bog of chapter 7:14–25. Here the letter seems to come into a dead end. The usual device of the "*what then?*" Which follows one section with another by addressing the question it raises, doesn't work here. Law and violence cannot solve one another. They endlessly beget one another over and over. There are neither answers nor even questions within that cycle that lead beyond it. Paul must simply stop that tape and speak of something entirely else; entirely other; a sort of divine violence, in that it is a total break of narrative; an absolutely outside imposition on the situation.

### **Spirit Against Lawlessness**

At the same point in their respective thought journeys on the law, Scholem and Benjamin both allude to some distant obscurity, to some possibility beyond language. There is no good language for the order of things after law. It is at the same point that Paulos speaks of Spirit, and we might note that he finds perhaps a little more language for this phenomenon beyond the law than most, but theology has always ploughed around the Spirit. Even if Paulos found good words for what follows law, we cannot find good words for what he found words for. There is not so much pneumatology in the theological world.

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<sup>41</sup> Rom 7: 21-4.

<sup>42</sup> Scholem, 20.

It is worth noting two things as we come to the mountaintop text of chapter 8. Firstly we should note that whatever language of triumph there is here exists in paradoxical tension with the language of sufferings present and sufferings to come; with the language of pathos, and incompleteness and groaning and longing, and of social, material and political precarity. Paul locates his listener in Saturday space. We will return to this. Second is to note that the vision here centres, not on the death and resurrection of the messiah, but on the Spirit. Anyone who's been beaten by the dull club of the protestants' book of Romans might well be quietly puzzled. This is not to downplay the death and resurrection of the messiah in Paul's thought, which is present as a constant referent throughout the letter, by which the hearers would again and again re-orient and re-situate themselves in Saturday - beyond the reach of the present age but not yet in the age to come. But when we arrive at the deeply beloved ground of chapter 8, it is the Spirit we are shown. And why? In order to address the question that all anarchists must answer: what could this possibly look like, besides chaos?

The assumed antithesis of law would probably be lawlessness. Paul thinks not. (He doesn't use that language here, but elsewhere. He uses the language of *sarx* here in the same sort of way). Though he doesn't elaborate on the matter, it seems in keeping with his thought, and with Benjamin's, that the lawless will-to-power is inescapably a lawmaking activity anyway. Just as law multiplies the transgression it seeks to reduce, so transgression multiplies the law it seeks to escape, because the one who triumphs in power inevitably becomes the law. Lawlessness is just a continuation of law by other means. The antithesis of law, then, is something else.

What then? Rather than "the law of sin and death" from which the messianic subject has been liberated, Paul speaks of "the law of the Spirit of life (*zoe*)."<sup>43</sup> *The Pneuma of zoe* is his answer to the question of what, besides chaos and disorder, might lie beyond the field of law. The noun *zoe*, which Paul ever pits against *thanatos* (which characterises the present age of law and sin), is potent. Here, it is possible to live life in the mire of sin and death, just as it is possible to carry one's death with oneself in order to walk in the Spirit of life. In other words, *thanatos* and *zoe*—life and death—are qualities of being as much as things that happen to a being. Giorgio Agamben often pits the Greek word *zoe*, meaning bare creaturely life, against *bios*, meaning social, political, economic life—the constructed life of human beings.<sup>44</sup> Since chapter 8 takes the reader ultimately into the very womb of the ecological whole—into the zoetic longing of All Things—it would be as well to allow the full resonance of *zoe* to emerge in Paul's vision.

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<sup>43</sup> Rom 8: 2.

<sup>44</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1-12.

Meanwhile, law is of course a form of *bios*. Here we see laid bare the human conceit behind the complaint that the anarchist must answer again and again: that if there is no law, then there is surely nothing to hold life together. To put it another way, if there is no *bios*, then there is nothing: no order or reason or beauty or rationality. Paul says not so. Indeed the bare miraculous life of the whole creation, of which humans are part, all awoken by the Spirit that hovered over the strange waters; this miraculous *zoe* is real. It has order and beauty and reason. It is drenched in *sofia*. It is not a chaos of violence but a dance of mutual life and mutual aid. In this light, the human task, as Rowan Williams put it, is simply to let go of our schemes and systems and defences, and become *natural*.<sup>45</sup> The Spirit, in Romans 8, is the *Pneuma of zoe*, who groans with *zoe* toward the liberation of *zoe* from her bounds. In any case, I'm convinced it means something much more than just the religious rightness or abstract saved-ness or whatever banal thing it's come to ring with from so many of the pulpits we've endured.

What follows are metaphors of situation, dwelling, movement, posture and belonging, all aimed to be a sort of field of context in which Spirit gives meaning and coherence to a life discharged from law; in which one could begin to imagine that mysterious thing: "the messianic spontaneity of human freedom purely flowing forth." The preposition *kata* appears more often in this chapter than any other in Romans; generally translated "according to," lit, *down from*. "Walking (*peripateo*), not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit,"<sup>46</sup> meaning to encircle, as a centring thing. To set the mind (*phronimos*) on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."<sup>47</sup> This denotes thought embodied from the diaphragm outwards. And then there is familial belonging:

You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry "Abba! Father!" It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs...<sup>48</sup>

And what do they inherit? The world, says Paul.<sup>49</sup> The earth, says Jesus,<sup>50</sup> and the psalmist he quoted.<sup>51</sup> A world beyond law is not, for Paul, inevitably bloody chaos. It is the Spirit that hovered over the water and awoke *zoe* who is the centring and orienting presence when the handrails of law are gone. It is by accord, or attunement to Spirit that a life beyond law can be loving, faithfully and naturally lived. In Spirit, who is subject to no law, is the attunement of anarchy and wisdom. Pauline anarchy is life in the Spirit.

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<sup>45</sup> Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 13-31.

<sup>46</sup> Rom 8: 4.

<sup>47</sup> Rom 8: 6.

<sup>48</sup> Rom 8: 15-17.

<sup>49</sup> Rom 4: 13.

<sup>50</sup> Matt 5: 5.

<sup>51</sup> Psalm 37.

## The Spirit of Divine Violence and of Being-With

As noted above, Walter Benjamin describes two visions of, or routes to, a world beyond law. One was the everyday interpersonal practice of good faith; of relationships good enough to trust, thus requiring no law (and no guarantees by violence) to police them. The other was the mysterious and rather off-the-map category of divine violence. Here I'd like to explore Paul's pneumatology through these two lenses.

But first, to speak of divine violence and atonement. Divine violence is undoubtedly a pairing of words that will disturb progressive sensibilities, and though Walter Benjamin's meaning is, to my mind, something quite at odds with what is usually meant by this phrase, he does not care at all to settle anyone's concerns. In fact he offers the puzzling example of the destruction of the company of Korah in the desert in the book of numbers. That said, the distinction he makes between violence as means, in the schema of the law (which he sees as synonymous with mythical violence), and divine violence is a crucial distinction. He wanders into the idea provoked by the puzzle: how does one exit the endless loop between law and violence?

How would it be, therefore, if all the violence imposed by fate, using justified means, were of itself in irreconcilable conflict with those just ends, and if at the same time a different kind of violence came into view that certainly could be either the justified or the unjustified means to those ends, but was not related to them as means at all but in some different way? This would throw light on the curious and at first discouraging discovery of the ultimate insolubility of all legal problems.<sup>52</sup>

The point I want to raise here is that any vision of atonement that involves meeting "the just requirements of the law," (as the NRSV mistranslates Romans 8:4) is violent, even if it tries to do so non-violently. Why? Because law is a structure inseparable from violence. God is not obliged to meet the "requirements" of the law (that word does not appear in the Greek). Atonement ideas set in law courts, with whoever paying off who, are violent, because law is violent. God owes law nothing. The question of atonement is not how to square the law, but how to render it inoperative. Divine violence is wholly outside the cycle. It ends law without then creating more law. In Romans, as in the gospels,

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<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, 293.

the crucifixion is, in this reading, understood as an act of divine violence against Roman imperial law,<sup>53</sup> as it is against all law which is contingent on violence.

The reason for this excursus is to show that divine violence, for Benjamin, does not serve or preserve or satiate any system of law, and nor can it be a power move which instates more law or a new law. Divine violence is an event or act of divine freedom wholly outside of and free from all such systems. It renders the law/violence dialectic inoperative.

I suggest that Paul points to Spirit in Romans 8, because the divine violence of the Spirit is something he had *experienced* along with the primitive messianic community, partly in the form of spontaneous collective euphoric experiences, which, crucially, made people of difference comprehensible to one another,<sup>54</sup> whilst rendering people of sameness incomprehensible to one another.<sup>55</sup> In one jarring event after another, the Spirit disarmed and passed over laws and boundaries and divisions that the community were loath to cross. They followed after with fear and trembling. Associations were formed across boundaries that never would have been possible under the *nomos* of the moment. And when people find themselves in the places they don't ordinarily go, conspiring with people with whom they'd not before had dealings, everything starts to change. This is the divine violence of the Spirit, and Paul concludes from the experience, that the Spirit, even in the throes of scandalous anarchic transgression, yet holds life in a way that can be trusted in the realm of endless and open improvisation beyond law.

Here the awesome and the mundane are contingent. Law always exists to make up for a deficit in good faith; in relationships good enough to trust. Beyond law is *pistis*, a re-forming of relationships from law-based paradigms of debt, transaction, obligation and possession, to gift-based paradigms of love, trust, empathy and familial belonging; or mutual aid, we might say. The fruits of the Spirit, then, are relational capacities: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." And Paul concludes, with a wink, "there is no law against such things."<sup>56</sup> Benjamin mentions "courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness and trust,"<sup>57</sup> as preconditions for the shape of non-violent life apart from law. "We can therefore point to pure means in politics as analogous to those which govern peaceful intercourse between private persons."<sup>58</sup> I take it that here, Benjamin is envisaging a political imagination which might develop from the good faith of interpersonal

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<sup>53</sup> "...A transvaluation of values: it isn't *nomos* but rather the one who was nailed to the cross by *nomos* who is the emperor!" Taubes, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Acts 2: 1-14.

<sup>55</sup> 1 Cor 14: 1-22.

<sup>56</sup> Gal 5: 22-23.

<sup>57</sup> Benjamin, 289.

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin, 290-91.



relationships, rather than the faithless and non-relational realm of law. For Paul, the intuition for such a relational political imagination works down from (*kata*) the Spirit. Here we recover a sense of the political potentiality quietly bubbling in the ordinary; in the ilk of our interpersonal relationships. These are the building blocks of life beyond law. We also begin to see how Paul's category of *pistis* - good faith - is understood in an anarchic theo-political framework. Such a political body, or way of life, can only be formed of relationships good enough to trust, and never from transactional works within policed or managed frameworks.

To conclude the Romans 8 vision, of Spirit as the guiding presence for the anarchic messianic community, we come to the vision of empathy and ecology in the second half of the chapter. This vision draws together the themes of divine violence and relationships of good faith in what Paul describes as *sustenozo*, or *groaning*.

Marijke Hoek pointed out to me the many *syn*-compounds in this passage; that is, *being-with* words. Creation groans with, labours with; the Spirit takes hold with, intercedes with; All Things work together with, and so on. Law is a system of divisions, boundaries and borders, a sort of binding by which a violent and fragile age must be held in check. It separates; it walls one thing from another to mitigate possible catastrophes, conflict and dissonance. The messianic *telos*, on the other hand, that births the age to come is, in Paul's language, all things reconciled.<sup>59</sup> It is the relatedness of everything to everything that the Spirit characteristically transfigures.

When the law of sin and death is no longer needed to hold the world in check, the law of the Spirit of life becomes the music everything moves to. It is the being-with, the relationality, that gradually renders law as superfluous and meaningless. Then it either passes away, if it isn't worthy of preserving, or it is transfigured and becomes *lore*. The Spirit, for Paul, enacts the divine violence that sees boundaries of law suddenly dismantled by the torrent, and All Things then confronted by a transforming encounter with itself, in its many *one-anothers*; a sudden and alarming experience of *being-with*. It is the Spirit, for Paul, that resonates with divine relational wisdom; the unspectacular relational practices and virtues which build an alternative political body of *being-with*. It is the Spirit, for Paulos, that is groaning and travailing with creation toward the divine violence of its rebirth, into a creature beyond law. But for now, it is still only Saturday, and anarchic communities of good faith must continue to improvise through complexity in the Spirit.

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<sup>59</sup> Col 1: 20.

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