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The Dialectics of Feeling: Hugo Bergman's and Gershom Scholem's Political Theologies of Zionism

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Abstract: The current article has several aims. First, it seeks to underscore the importance of Hugo Bergman's and Gershom Scholem's late critiques of Zionism, and to argue that they should be understood as politico-theological commentaries on the Israeli political reality in which they lived. Second, it argues for the relevance of approaching these critiques through the theoretical prism of political theology. Third, it aims to chart the overlaps and differences between the Bergmanesque and Scholemian theological interpretations of Zionism by charting their common premises and differences. I argue that the former derive from their shared view of Zionism as a *religious* project, and the latter derive from their arrival at polar conclusions: Bergman seeking a positive potential; Scholem identifying a destructive potential. Hence, their political theologies of Zionism are understood as a "dialectic of feeling".

Keywords: Bergman; Hugo Shmuel; Scholem; Gershom; Zionism; political theology; messianism; redemption; nihilism; antinomianism; moral autonomy



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1. Introduction

Hugo Bergman's (1883–1975) and Gershom Scholem's (1897–1982) interest in their Jewish heritage followed their decision to become Zionist activists, in Prague and Berlin, respectively. Both came of age, intellectually and politically, in Zionist youth groups that groped for a new Jewish identity linked to national aspirations in the Land of Israel. The scholarship on Bergman's and Scholem's Zionist affiliations, as activists and ideologues, has focused on their youth in Europe and on their deep involvement in the Brith Shalom movement ("peace alliance", 1925–1933), which advocated the founding of a bi-national, Jewish-Arab state in Palestine. This short-lived escapade marked the end of the two thinkers' political activism but did nothing to curb their interest in the present and future of the Jewish people, in Palestine and worldwide. This may have contributed to the scarce research conducted on either Bergman's or Scholem's political agenda, and its links to their intellectual work, from the late 1930s onwards. It is particularly striking since not only are they two of the most prominent Israeli Jewish intellectuals of the twentieth century; both lived long enough to witness the aftermath of the Zionist project of founding a Jewish polity in the Land of Israel. As religious thinkers, this placed them in a unique position to reflect on the links (or lack thereof) between Jewish messianic ideas and Israel's political reality. A link whose pragmatic potential was exemplified by David Ben Gurion's use of messianic rhetoric before and after the founding of the State of Israel, of which he served as the first prime minister.

Equally striking is the two thinkers' deliberate avoidance of the language of political theology. Since its coining in Carl Schmitt's eponymous book in 1923, the term has become a field of research in its own right, which covers a broad range of contexts and implications for the study of theology and the study of politics alike. Bergman's and Scholem's policy in this respect becomes yet more intriguing when one considers their close relationship with Martin Buber, who coined the term "theopolitics" as a counter-response to Schmitt's phrase.¹ The current article does not seek to resolve this historical-biographical riddle.

Rather, it seeks to reconstruct a political theology that is based upon and directed at Zionism as a *fait accompli*. The personal relationship between Bergman and Scholem and their proximate political ideology provides a useful context to examine late texts that display their political theologies of Zionism: *Heaven and Earth* (Bergman 1968), and *Nihilism as a Religious Phenomenon* (Scholem 1977 and 1984). Bergman presents a humanist conception of Judaism whose echoes he finds in a *mélange* of textual sources. Scholem develops a phenomenology of nihilism by looking at sects—from antiquity through early modernity—that represent the evolution of this approach in Judaism and Christianity.

The current article has several aims. First, it seeks to underscore the importance of Bergman's and Scholem's late critiques of Zionism, and to argue that they should be understood as politico-theological commentaries on the Israeli political reality in which they lived. Second, it argues for the relevance of approaching these critiques through the theoretical prism of political theology. Third, it aims to chart the overlaps and differences between the Bergmanesque and Scholemian theological interpretations of Zionism by charting their common premises and differences. The former, I argue, derive from their shared view of Zionism as a *religious* project, and the latter derive from their arrival at polar conclusions: Bergman seeking a positive potential he identifies in an original notion of moral autonomy; Scholem identifying a destructive potential in the attraction to antinomianism. Hence, their political theologies of Zionism are understood as a “dialectic of feeling”—critical reflections shaped by, and giving rise to, contradictory sentiments: optimism and pessimism.

2. Zionism as a Holy Mountain of Paradoxes

The battles of the Six-Day War were still raging when Israel's military and political leaders flocked to see the Western Wall, which had been held by the Jordanian army for nineteen years. On 7 June 1967, a reporter of the daily *Ma'ariv* described a scene in which Religious Affairs Minister, Zerah Wahrhaftig, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, and Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin arrived at the narrow stone platform of the Western Wall, as Chief Military Rabbi, General Shlomo Goren, presided over an extempore prayer service. The report said. Even though the site was captured by the army of a civil democracy, in the scene described the religious leaders—the military rabbi and the religious minister—figure as the dominant actors. Dayan, the report continued, performed the common ritual of writing a request on a note and placing it between the Wall's ancient slabs. The gesture was befitting of the defense minister, an emblem of Israeli secular *realpolitik*, as a salutation to tradition that does not amount to a religious ritual. The *Ma'ariv* journalist reported that immediately thereafter the Minister of Religious Affairs having finished praying, kissed defense minister, Dayan did same with Chief of Staff Rabin (Harif 1967).

Victory in a war that broke out in the wake of escalating tensions between Israel on the one hand, and Egypt, Jordan and Syria on the other, immediately became a cause for religious celebrations that charged it with theological meaning. The journalistic report itself tells its readers that the Old City remained an active warzone (Harif 1967). Rabin and Dayan, non-practicing and radically secular Jews, were the commanders in chief of this no-man's-land. As such, they had the legal authority to prohibit civilian access to this battlefield. But not only did they allow Wahrhaftig's visit to take place, they joined the minister's celebration and permitted an aging general commanding a non-combat unit to perform religious rituals, replete with artefacts, pomp and circumstance. Though anecdotal, this newspaper story captures the primeval bond between politics and theology: the necessity to rationalize divine presence in matters of state produces explanations aimed at systematizing this intersection, i.e., political theology.

To take Ernst Kantorowicz's classic study as an example, “the king's two bodies” served in Elizabethan England as a legal construct that sustained a high-functioning system of government. As Kantorowicz painstakingly demonstrates, this construct harks back to the Roman Empire and medieval Europe and assumed different garbs in different places and eras. By ascribing the sovereign a singular ability to be simultaneously corporeal

(human flesh and blood) and eternal (wielder of power in perpetuity), politics on their subjects, clerks, clergy, jurists and political elites were able to come to terms with the godlike power of monarchs (and church leaders) and their quotidian fragilities. And so, for example, the handover of government from king to heir took immediate effect upon the monarch's death but could be marked with a coronation ceremony at a later time (Kantorowicz 1957, pp. 336–42). Despite its flaws, this contrast facilitated the paradox's accommodation. In modernity, however, this equilibrium seems to have been replaced with constant agitation. In the Age of Disenchantment, the implausibility of stasis leads to flux. The paradoxes of political theology cannot be contained, absorbed or dissolved like in the past, and, according to Hent de Vries, instead of causing political theology to implode, the sharp contrast between the this-worldly nature of politics and the empirical elusiveness of religion, spawns endless possibilities: "[...] the complexity of the relationship between the two terms goes deeper. Are they distinct, interchangeable, alternative, parallel, polar, complementary or supplementary?" (de Vries 2006, p. 26).

Zionism, I would like to argue, seems to cater to all the possibilities de Vries raises, due to the one-sided incursion of the theological into the political. The advent of secularism in the modern age veiled, but did not sever, the historical bond between land and language on the one hand, to Jewish religion on the other hand. In contradistinction from all national movements in Europe,² Zionism's identity, territorial claim and national language derived from holy writ; any attempt to present them as strictly secular concepts and contents was doomed to fail. The use of religious vocabulary by secular politicians is indicative of the rootedness of the Zionist project in political theology. The founding of Israel not only sustained the paradox, but actually sharpened it further. "Statist Jews", to borrow Ya'akov Yadgar's term, perceive and employ Jewish religious practices to express their Jewish-Israeli ethnic-national identity, which is broadly perceived as utterly secular (Yadgar 2022, p. 108).

According to Anita Shapira, the Labor Movement in Palestine (the embryonic antecedent of Israel's first ruling party, the Labor Party), which affiliated itself with International Socialism, "had a markedly ethnic identity and a dominant national sentiment, was rooted in the world of passions, myth and mysticism as much as in with world of reason and cold logic. The Zionist and Socialist links of the Labor Movement in Palestine arose from the world of Jewish myth and were woven from the fabric of dreams of absolute redemption, messianism, the Land of the Forefathers and the mending of the world under the kingship of God [*tikkun olam be-malchut Shaddai*]" (Shapira 1994, pp. 305–6). Arye Naor demonstrates how Labor's political antithesis, the Revisionist Movement, adopted a very similar theological approach to frame their pragmatic ideology: Their [Revisionists'] views ostensibly constitute a political theology whose main interest is not God but history, nationalism and land. This theology assumes the form of myth that frames the interpretation of politics in theological terms even though its context in reality is secular. The ideology that sanctifies political needs while secularizing originally religious values reveals the potency of, 'the sacred that has undergone secularization.' And thus, at the very core, the politics of the Land of Israel are preoccupied with a sacred issue." (Naor 2009, pp. 444–45).

But perhaps the greatest paradox of Zionist political theology is the absence of the term from contemporaneous discourse. This is striking because the rise of pragmatic Zionism in the wake of the Balfour Declaration and the end of World War I coincided with the emergence of Carl Schmitt's coinage and of an intellectual discourse on political theology in Weimar Germany.³ The emigration of German-speaking intellectuals to Palestine in the 1920s (Scholem, Bergman, Hans Kohn, Max Brod) and in the 1930s (Buber) left the discourse outside of the Hebrew republic of letters, and out of the public debate in Israel. Only at the turn of the 21st century did Israeli academics begin to employ political theology as a critical category for the analysis and interpretation of Zionism—both as an historical phenomenon and a contemporary political question.⁴

Political scientist Arye Naor applies political theology as a critical category to the study of mainly right-wing political activism, both before (Naor 2004) and after (Naor 2009) the founding of Israel. The Hebrew anthology *God will not Stand Still* (Schmidt and

Schonfeld 2009) is an important milestone in the emerging discourse of political theology and Zionism. In addition to assembling studies that address a broad array of issues arising from the juxtaposition of political theology unto Zionist history, it points out the lacuna and announces the need to address it. Schmidt preceded Naor by nearly a decade in applying political theology to the analysis of Zionist ideology.⁵ *God will not Stand Still* provided him an opportunity to reflect on what he describes as an inherent resistance within Israeli academia to include political theology as a critical category, reasoning that, “Israeli academia’s disregard for political theological discourse derives not only from historical amnesia: it embodies [scholars’] stance in relation to the ambivalence of secularism” (Schmidt 2009a, p. 11). Schmidt also makes the proactive declaration that, “This book is a first attempt to present Jewish modernity and Zionism from the viewpoint of the politico-theological problem.” (Schmidt 2009a, p. 11).

This collection contains studies by two of Schmidt’s colleagues at the Van Leer Institute: David Ohana and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, who have also made significant contributions to the discourse. Ohana’s primary research interest in this respect is David Ben Gurion (Ohana 2003, 2009, 2019; Barell and Ohana 2014). Ohana consistently shows how the shrewd statesman systematically employed a terminology steeped in Jewish redemptive theology in the service of Zionist ideology to harness its followers to the movement’s cause, and to infuse its pragmatic goals with spiritual (albeit strictly secular) meaning. Raz-Krakotzkin’s work straddles the fields of intellectual history and contemporary socio-political analysis (an approach Ohana adopts in Ohana 2019). Specifically, Raz-Krakotzkin looks at the historical-ideological impact of the early politic-theological discourse in Germany primarily, on recent Israeli history, employing a decidedly de-colonial terminology.

All three scholars are heavily indebted to Scholem’s work, not only as a resource but also as an object of study. With a slight shift of emphasis, Nitzan Lebovic has directed his scholarly attention at the broader circle of Jerusalem intellectuals in his approach to Zionism as a political theological project (Lebovic 2008a, 2008b, 2019).

As the category gains traction, its application became prevalent in more contemporary contexts.⁶ Yet, it appears to neglect a puzzle that arose in the wake of the founding of Israel: if Zionism is steeped in a messianic language and frames its concrete actions in messianic terms, how should we conceive of Israel—politically and theologically—as a redemptive act? If it is a vision fulfilled, why are there parts in the Jewish world, including deeply religious ones, that refuse to acknowledge it as such? If the state is but another step on the road to redemption, what redemption should Jews anticipate: secular, religious, imminent, far from view? And who should be held responsible for its fulfillment: Israel’s prime minister, ruling party, parliament, its entire population or a segment thereof, or some form of divine intervention?

3. The Zionist Triangle: Prague-Berlin-Jerusalem

At the turn of the twentieth century, young Jews in central Europe flocked to Zionist organizations and movements. The revolutionary promise engulfing vague plans of action provided a seductive combination of adventure, activism and hope. In Prague, eighteen-year-old Hugo Shmuel Bergman, who came from a relatively traditional Jewish background, assembled a circle of friends around him. In Berlin, an even younger Gerhard Scholem sought refuge from the blatant, blasé assimilationist Judaism of his father.⁷ Hugo and Gershom would meet in Jerusalem in 1923, three years after the former’s arrival in Palestine to direct the National House of Books. Having made Scholem’s acquaintance in Bern in 1919, Bergman invited the new immigrant to be in-charge over the library’s Hebrew book collection (Scholem 1982, pp. 197–201). From then onwards their paths merged, professionally as well as personally: both became faculty at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Scholem upon its founding in 1925; Bergman in 1928) and contributed immensely to its formation and development—Bergman as its inaugural rector and later as head of the philosophy department, Scholem as a founding member of the Institute of Contemporary Judaism and third president of the Israel Academy of Sciences. The two

lived in adjacent homes on Abrabanel Street in Jerusalem, joined forces as political activists in the short-lived Brith Shalom circle that advocated a bi-national state for Jews and Arabs, and its later reincarnation Ihud (union).⁸ Finally, Bergman married Escha to be his second wife, after she divorced Scholem. This did not prevent them from remaining on friendly terms throughout their lives.

In an insightful biographical essay, Avraham Shapira traces the affinities and differences between Bergman's and Scholem's personal quest as young men to the Land of Israel (Shapira 2004). Its opening is emphatic:

The question of *Eretz Israel* is not a theological, philosophical or mystical matter in the writings of Shmuel Hugo Bergman and Gershom Scholem. The deep-rooted commitments each of them maintained with the Land of Israel were first and foremost existential links that led to their decision to immigrate and shaped their Israeli biographies to the last of their days. (Shapira 2004, p. 504)

This observation fleshes out the dominant religious dimension in Scholem's and Bergman's Zionist ideology. As thinkers, they relied on their personal religious experience (which Shapira euphemistically calls "existential") in formulating politico-theological theses on the Zionist project. As already mentioned, scholarly interest in their Zionist legacies—biographical and intellectual—has focused to date primarily on their pre-state years. Quite plausibly, the anticipatory air of the era and the theoretical constructs it inspired have a strong appeal, definitely when contemplated under the sign of messianism and/or redemption. Crucially and paradoxically, the founding of Israel stretched Bergman's and Scholem's identification as Zionists to the limit; viewing the political enactment of an ethical and historical ideal, they found themselves time and again at odds with the acts and decisions of the Jewish state's leadership; often they were grateful for the stability and security it provided; but remained ever wary of its volatile potential.

Bergman's and Scholem's Zionism shared two fundamental features: an overtly religious conception of Jewish presence in the Land of Israel, and patent apprehension about the character that Jewish sovereignty assumed. Translated into the language of political theology, their conceptions gave unequivocal precedence to the ethical ideals they extracted from Jewish teachings and treated the political reality with utmost suspicion, as a necessary evil at certain moments, one is almost tempted to say.

Scholem's autobiography *From Berlin to Jerusalem* stretches this tension to its utmost. Early on he explains:

I did not turn to Zionism because the founding of a Jewish state (that I defended in arguments) struck me as a primary, urgent and absolutely clear goal [. . .] in contradistinction there was a substantial influence of the trends that came to encourage Jews' self-reflection on their predicament and history, and turned into a revival of a spiritual, cultural as well as social nature. (Scholem 1982, pp. 58–59)

While the autobiography's opening sentence dryly states the author's intention to record youthful memories ending in 1925, its cathartic conclusion does not lead to the founding of Israel, but to its author's settling in Jerusalem and joining its newly founded university: "The Jerusalem I came to live in, was hence a heavenly gift, or at least felt as if it was meant for me and I felt there at home" (Scholem 1982, p. 205).

Noam Zadoff convincingly shows that while 1925 may be seen as marking the zenith of Scholem's attachment to Jerusalem, in the aftermath of World War II he underwent a slow but decisive process of reconnecting with German sentiments toward the *Heimat* and retracting from public, non-academic affairs in Israel. Zadoff argues that Scholem was overtaken by deep disappointment with, and disillusionment from the promises of pre-state Zionism.⁹ An attempt to distill a consistent political position from Scholem's post-1948 writings is no easy task. Contrary to Zadoff, Amir Engel identifies a dramatic shift from a spiritual, non-statist Zionism before Israel's founding, to an almost conformist identification with the newly-founded state's political establishment as embodied by Ben Gurion (Engel 2017). Engel stresses the impact of the Holocaust on the one hand, and

Hannah Arendt's lambasting of Israel's prosecution and execution of Adolph Eichmann on the other hand, as decisive factors in Scholem's ideological transformation. As already mentioned, the scholarly literature on Scholem is vast, and so is the catalogue of his own writings. Hence, the reconstruction of a comprehensive, detailed and accurate Scholemian Zionist position is a challenge that exceeds the scope of the current study. By approaching this question within the framework of political theology, however, we may point out the persistent core of Scholem's Zionism as religious.

In this sense, a consideration of Scholem's references to the religious dimension of Zionism as a young activist in Berlin alongside those he made as a veteran scholar in Jerusalem, are revealing. For example, in a 1916 letter to Siegfried Lehmann, he forcefully asserts:

But according to the words of the prophets, the Torah goes out from Zion; and this is something I understand intuitively—namely, that the inner point of departure for the Torah must be Zion, Zion taken as a religious symbol; that Zion, both internally and eternally, is the innermost center of the Torah; that he who calls himself a Zionist must strive not for an experience but toward the Torah, toward life; and that Zionist can hear the words of God only from Jerusalem. (Scholem 2002, p. 37; italics in the original)

More than twenty years later, at a gathering in Jerusalem of the short-lived forum *Ha'ol* ("the yoke") on 13 July 1939, Scholem vigorously reiterated the fundamental importance of the Torah for Jewish life: "Torah has different meanings: it is the outlining of a path, it is also the transmission of a message [*Davar*]. Anything in the world, even humans, can be 'Torah.' But never will there be Torah without ultimate authority. Torah is the Creator's conversation with humans; prayer is humans' conversation with their Creator." (Scholem 1989, p. 95). The meetings' minutes conclude with Judah Magnes' request to add the following statement: "At the end of his speech, Dr. Scholem said: I believe in God, this is the foundation of my life and faith. Everything else is doubtful and debatable." (p. 97) And an interview with Muki Tzur and Avraham Shapira in the early 1970s includes the following confession:

I have always considered secular Zionism a legitimate way but rejected the foolish declaration about the Jews' becoming 'a nation like all the nations.' If this should materialize it will be the end of the Jewish people. I share the traditional view that even if we wish to be a nation like all the nations, we will not succeed. And if we succeed—that will be the end of us. (Scholem 1976, p. 34)

To Tzur's question, "Were the major decisions in your life—to be a Jew, to come to *Eretz Yisrael*, to deal with Kabbalah—linked to the religious dimension", Scholem dryly replied "Yes" (p. 35).

To be sure, the religiosity of Scholem the person and Scholem the Zionist ideologue is of a particularly complex nature, stemming, among other reasons, from a substantial overlap between his scholarship and personal convictions.¹⁰

It is apt, perhaps, to think of his withdrawal from political activism from the 1940s onwards in terms of a mystic's isolation from the outside world in order to effect positive change on sensate reality, by becoming immersed with supra-sensible reality through the study of arcane lore. Indeed, on occasion of Scholem's fiftieth anniversary, Bergman identified this precise tendency in Scholem, ending his congratulatory piece in the *Davar* daily newspaper as follows:

Here, I believe, lies Prof. Scholem's great mistake. The People of Israel, in its current spiritual and physical state, cannot afford the bifurcation into 'professors' and 'prophets.' We cannot accept that a man like Gershom Scholem will be an historian and linguist alone and will train his students to be historians and linguists—with all our respect to G. Scholem's masterful research work. We feel, that upon passing the threshold of his fiftieth year a new and bigger responsibility falls upon his shoulders. Until now he was permitted to study the thoughts of

others and keep silent or be evasive when we asked him about his own thoughts. This is no longer possible. (Bergman 1947)

Bergman's involvement in official Zionist affairs until the early 1920s was substantially more significant than Scholem's.¹¹ In this sense his critique rested on firm ground. Doubtless, however, Bergman's most substantial contribution to the Zionist cause as he understood it is to be found in his work as educator, scholar and public intellectual. His legacy, however, had long been eclipsed by Scholem's international profile.¹² The timing of this critique of Scholem is of particular significance, having been published a mere six days after the United Nations' vote in support of the founding of a Jewish state in Palestine on 29 November 1947. By that time, it was clear to all that Zionism was facing its hour of reckoning: the moment when plans and hopes must transfigure into a functioning state facing a war of survival with neighboring countries and parts of its local population. From the politico-theological perspective, this hour of reckoning meant something else: it posed the ultimate test for intellectuals' ability to transform ideas into reality. Bergman and Scholem alike were quick to acknowledge their failure in this test.

In the mid-1950s, Bergman used a commemorative volume to a fellow Zionist activist from Prague, to lament the failure of what he calls "Western Zionism" (an epithet for spiritual Zionism, led by central- and west-European activists), to actualize its spiritual vision, and this failure's upshot: leaving in the hands of "Eastern Zionism" (an epithet for political Zionism, led mainly by east European Jews), to shape the cultural, social and spiritual character of the Jewish state:

The direction and intention of the circle of Western Zionists were right, but lacked the power of genuine, formative synthesis [. . .] The Zionists did not see [. . .] the great danger posed by the 'intelligentsia' that led the political movements of Judaism and Zionism, an intelligentsia that aspired (as [Nathan] Birnbaum says in his essay in the volume *Vom Judentum*¹³) "to remove from the People of Israel its momentous genius, sanctity, and the consciousness that we are the People of God." (Bergman 1955, p. 206)¹⁴

Bergman concludes by identifying the major challenge facing Israel as, "finding a uniform religious-metaphysical foundation for the life of the People of Israel, for the sake of ensuring that our new history is an organic continuation of the annals of the Eternal People." (Bergman 1955, p. 207). This journey throughout history, Bergman argued, had a clear telos: the Eternal People are entrusted with the task of redeeming humanity as a whole in the name of the Blessed Holy One. Immediately after the founding of Israel, Bergman advised that understanding the historical moment as signaling Jews' reentry into world history to partake of international politics "like all other nations", is a gross misinterpretation of the very essence of Judaism, and the meaning of Jewish existence:

The State of Israel is faced with the decision, whether it wants to be a state like all others, along with the cunning of politics, in which case the State of Israel lacks any importance and its founding is merely an ordinary historical event, of no consequence to the whole of humanity. Or whether this small country, of miniscule size, would like to be the genuine carrier of messianic longings of all Jewish generations, the beginning of the mending of the world under the kingship of God [*tikkun olam be-malchut Shaddai*]. (Bergman 1976, pp. 57–58)

In the next paragraph, Bergman stresses that this redemptive role pertains "not only to national redemption, but more so and most of all, toward the complete redemption of humanity" (58). Notably, these observations were made shortly after Israel reached ceasefire agreements that brought its War of Independence to a close.¹⁵

At this point, we may pause to summarize the affinities and differences between Bergman's and Scholem's mature views on Zionism: both saw the movement as primarily religious and considered its political dimension as ancillary to the spiritual goals it is to attain; both refused to understand the founding of Israel in redemptive terms and refused to accept the attainment of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel as the fulfillment

of the Zionist cause. In terms of differences, while Bergman was committed to public advocacy, understood the end goal of Zionism in redemptive terms and had a detailed practical catalogue of actions that can and should be taken, Scholem refrained from direct involvement in Israeli politics, discussed the messianic or redemptive dimension of Zionism in almost abstract terms, and stopped short of stipulating concrete courses of action.¹⁶

We may summarize their views as close to one another, with Scholem being the recluse and Bergman the activist, both experiencing grave dissatisfaction with many of Israel's actions, and insisting on a spiritual vision that draws inspiration from traditions of Jewish thought and strives to rectify the distorted reality. But while personal interviews led them to address broad, political questions and to speak in slogans, their scholarly work enabled them to specify the terms, textual sources and ideas that they considered as the bricks from which a spiritual vision is to be built.

4. Zionist Responses to the Word of God: Between Autonomy and Antinomianism

Any serious discussion of Bergman's and Scholem's Zionism will remain incomplete without reference to their scholarship. A philosopher and a scholar of religions, respectively, they could argue their positions in full only in their learned publications, which provided the scope and systematic framework that would do justice to the penetrating depth and far-reaching breadth of their thought and knowledge. Hence, a reconstruction of their political theologies of Zionism at their most mature stage requires focusing on their late work.

Heaven and Earth (Bergman 1968) is a slender volume consisting of less than 100 pages, containing assorted pieces that Bergman penned in the earlier part of the 1960s. Although the pieces are thematically discreet, they have a similar structure of presenting a brief quotation from a Jewish source followed by commentary and reflection on an ethical and spiritual dilemma faced by Jews in Israel.¹⁷ The book's thematic structure is wholly uncharacteristic of Bergman, an expert on Kant and the philosophy of science. Although it likely reflects the author's advanced age and the young publisher's urgent wish to bring the essays to the printer's press, it also provides an opportunity to extract a rather comprehensive position by aligning text-based and philosophically articulated arguments that appear in abbreviated form in Bergman's non-scholarly publications.¹⁸ A theme that Bergman appears not to have written about in popular stages, however, is discussed in the book's first two chapters. Moral autonomy is the subject of analysis in interpersonal contexts, and in the contexts of human-divine relations. Following the textual exposition, chapter 1 presents two cases of military orders to commit murder of unarmed, helpless individuals: two Russian captives of the Austro-Hungarian army in World War I, executed for complaining of hunger and inhuman living conditions; and the massacre of dozens of innocent residents of the Palestinian village Kafr Qasim for violating curfew on 29 October 1956.¹⁹ The legal and ethical dilemma Bergman distills from these examples is the following:

Written Law cannot be the highest and absolute authority for one's deeds. In a clash between written law and conscience, the highest authority is the conscientious individual. The lawmaking state is not a living personality with a moral backbone. Only human individuals can take orders from their conscience and therefore only individuals possess moral responsibility. (Bergman 1970, p. 19)

The moral-legal dilemma becomes a theological case study thanks to Bergman's introduction of three Jewish texts in the opening, midpoint and ending of his essay. The Talmudic dictum, "In the entire Torah there is no agent of transgression" (BT Bava Kama 79a),²⁰ is read by Bergman (p. 13) to mean that the teachings of Moses apply directly to each and every individual, and their fulfillment is expressive of one's moral autonomy, and reflects one's moral responsibility.²¹ This reading diverges from traditional commentaries that focus in their interpretations of the dictum as pertaining to the legal question of respondent superior.²² While exegetical discourse is preoccupied mainly with the superior's responsibility, Bergman focuses the discussion on the agent's culpability. Cognizant of

the tremendous emotional challenge of refusing to execute commanders' orders, even if they are grossly unethical and are intended to inflict brutal violence, Bergman cites Maimonides²³ to assert the moral virtue of agents who refuse such orders, willing to pay a personal price for this decision: "For this reason history admires the champions of morality who rebelled against the law for the moral expectation throbbing in their heart." (p. 19). This statement is immediately followed by a citation from Psalm 119:126: "It is time to act for the sake of God, they have broken Your law". That is, Bergman extrapolates from the verse the moral assertion that in the clash between the law and ethics the latter should prevail, and that violation of such laws is the virtuous choice—by ethical standards and by divine standards.

As a self-standing piece, the book's first chapter can be said to address moral questions that do not encompass the overarching scope of political theology. The two chapters that follow, however, touch on one of the major ethical challenges faced by the State of Israel: whether to give precedence to Jews over non-Jews in life-or-death situations, and whether it is possible to involve the teachings of the Jewish tradition in support of such ethical particularism. These questions are directly related to Bergman's caveat (which Scholem enjoins) that Israel should follow ethical standards befitting the role of the Eternal People entrusted with the task of ushering in divine redemption to the whole of humanity. Forming a nation like all others, Bergman cautioned, would lead to failure of the redemptive task.

The chapter was originally published as an essay in a short-lived journal of a faction within the Israeli Labor Party (Bergman 1965). Hence, though theological in substance and abstract in nature, the piece was written for the organ of a political organization formed in the wake of a leadership crisis that proved in time to be of tectonic significance in Israeli politics.

The journal's title, *Min Ha-Yesod*, is named after the political faction, which literally translates as "from the ground up". The faction was formed in 1962 following a bitter conflict between Ben Gurion and the chairman of the powerful Histadrut union, Pinchas Lavon, triggered by the latter's involvement in an espionage debacle in Egypt that came to be known as "The Lavon Affair". The head-on leadership struggle between Ben Gurion and Lavon ultimately led to the former's resignation as prime minister and secession from the ruling party Mapai to found the short-lived political platform Rafi. Bergman's disciple, Nathan Rotenstreich was a founding co-editor of *Min Ha-Yesod*, a bi-weekly journal, and a firm supporter of Lavon.²⁴

Read in this context, Bergman's essay assumes the mantle of political analysis by means of theological commentary, or in other words, the articulation of a political theology. The following statement summarizes its key insight: "[...] we trust the light of reason [...] Out of this faith in humanity and the natural light of its reason, arises the duty to critique". (Bergman 1970, p. 28; emphasis in the original). A few paragraphs later, Bergman concludes: "Needless to say, the same duty to critique holy books is also the duty to critique holy human beings, greater teachers and any form of human authority." (p. 29; emphasis in the original).

The political reality within which Bergman wrote the essay (but refrains from mentioning therein) is the challenge to Ben Gurion's leadership, carried out in the political arena by Lavon and endorsed by a broad circle of intellectuals (Bar-Or 1994, pp. 480–83). The Lavon Affair, Kafr Qassim Massacre and Suez Crisis were dramatic events that raised sharp moral dilemmas and cast a long shadow over the ethical backbone of Israel's leadership and its use of military power. Rotenstreich's public endorsement as editor of *Min Ha-Yesod* of Lavon came in the wake of the professor's recognition that, "the question of the moral authority of the leadership [of the State of Israel] had become an acute political problem. In his view, the nation's leaders, and most of all the one at the helm [Ben Gurion], lacked moral authority throughout the [Lavon] Affair." (Bar-Or 1994, p. 482). Therefore, Bergman's publication of the essay in *Min Ha-Yesod* is a de facto support of Rotenstreich's view, and the piece should be read also as containing implicit commentary on current events.

I would like to suggest that once contextualized this way, the essay emerges as an uncompromising moral critique whose highpoint is not its titular subject—the Binding of Isaac—but rather its discussion of King Saul’s sparing of Agag King of the Amalekites (I Samuel 15). A brief reference to this biblical story as an example for the way in which, “In quite a few instances our moral sentiment cannot tolerate the biblical narrative.” (Bergman 1970, pp. 28–29) becomes the basis for a more comprehensive discussion in the chapter following.

According to the biblical account, God orders Saul to attack the Amalekites in retribution for their ambush of the Israelites at Sinai (Exodus 17:8) and to annihilate them without leaving a trace²⁵. Saul complies, but decides to spare their king, Agag, and the loot’s finest specimens:

He [Saul] took King Agag of the Amalekites alive, but utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed. (I Samuel 15:8–9)

Note the double mention of Agag’s sparing (his capture alive in v.7, and the decision not to execute him in v.8) in the brief account of Saul’s raid. The reasoning behind this emphasis emerges when Saul reports to Samuel on the task’s completion. Explaining the decision to take the finest Amalekite cattle as loot to bring sacrifice before God, he is met with harsh rebuke:

Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. The sin of divination is rebellion, and iniquity and idolatry are obduracy. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king. (I Samuel 15:22–23)

Samuel’s admonition of Saul singles out his disobedience as transgression of the highest degree but identifies two distinct categories within it: rebellion (*meri*) is the raw fact of the king’s disobedience, whereas obduracy (*haftsar*) is Saul’s repeated attempts to persuade the prophet that his actions actually did follow God’s command (v. 15, 20–21).

In characteristic humble fashion, Bergman presents the interpretations of Martin Buber and Ernst Simon for I Samuel 15 to point out the intolerable moral transgression that the Hebrew Bible ratifies by relating Saul’s rebuke by Samuel the Prophet in God’s behalf. But in fact, Bergman adds a crucial dimension to the critique. First, he places it in a contemporary context: “Could there be a link between these passages and our actions in [events] such as Kafr Qassim? No ethical acrobatics, no interpretation, as bold as it might be, will extract us [from this moral impasse]. And we ask ourselves: Could it be true that God sanctioned this genocide?” (pp. 37–38). Second, he leads to the ultimate ethical challenge that the Agag narrative invokes: “Do humans have any form whatsoever of moral autonomy and respectively, a philosophical ethics that is independent from religion?” (p. 39). Bergman outlines in his answer to this question a delicate balance between divine authority, on which the teachings of Judaism rest, and human moral consciousness: “Indeed, we know full well, as experienced by our own generation, that the human moral conscience is (still!) very weak and unreliable. But we do not have a loftier ideal for protecting the human asset prized above all others—freedom and responsibility. Even if it appears to counteract God himself.” (p. 40).

The teachings of Judaism and moral autonomy should hence together form an intricate moral mechanism of checks and balances. Human freedom should be upheld as the loftiest ideal guiding political action, as long as it does not succumb to whims and urges that distance morality and override the dignity of fellow human beings. The Torah, understood as the religious lore sustaining Jewish life and embodying God’s presence in its midst, should serve as a buffer against such pernicious behavior. At the same time, dogmatic readings of the Torah must be counteracted by practicing moral autonomy: violence,

iniquities and chauvinism must be exposed and averted by the light of reason, even when such actions are said to be sanctioned by divine decree or human law.

If we recall that this analysis took place against the backdrop of moral catastrophes such as the expulsion of the Palestinian population from hundreds of communities in the War of Independence,²⁶ or the murder of dozens of innocent civilians in Kafr Qassim, the precedence of the theological over the political in Bergman's thought assumes very specific implications. And while he does not articulate this explicitly, Bergman endorses Saul's moral decision to spare Agag's life in light of his reading of Psalm 119:126: acting in behalf of God may entail violating God's law, if and when one's moral autonomy leads one to criticize the divine commandment and to resist its immorality.

5. Nihilism

Scholem had a lifelong interest in autonomy, albeit of a more radical nature than Bergman's. A personal aversion to conformism, which Scholem sometimes identified as nihilism, fueled and in time drew inspiration from Jewish heretical movements associated with Sabbateanism.²⁷ From a politico-theological perspective, the fundamental characteristic of these heretical movements shared, according to Scholem, was a defiance against law and customs he called antinomianism, i.e., an ingrained resistance to laws. The apogee of his scholarship on Jewish heresy is without a doubt a biography of the leader of the Sabbatian movement, *Shabbatai Sevi*,²⁸ and his essay "Redemption through Sin."²⁹ But in the current article, the foil for Bergman's argument for moral autonomy is one of Scholem's least-studied works on Jewish heresy at large, "Der Nihilismus als religiös Phänomen" ("Nihilism as a Religious Phenomenon"; Scholem 1977, 1984).

The essay comprises three parts: (1) an expository analysis of nihilism as a philosophical concept and a religious phenomenon (Scholem 1984, pp. 129–35); (2) an overview of Gnostic-nihilistic sects from the Near East in late antiquity, and Christian nihilist groups in medieval Europe (pp. 129–60); (3) discussion of nihilist aspects of the early modern Jewish movements of Sabbateanism and Frankism (pp. 161–88). In the expository section, Scholem makes clear that the study's interest lies in the religious manifestations of nihilism, and as such, in the sociological aspects of the religious groups discussed. Theology, then, is of secondary, albeit consequential, importance. That is, Scholem searches for the social characteristics of the communities in question, as he considers this dimension as the ultimate manifestation of religious nihilism. However, the essay's expository discussion of nihilism maintains a strong tension with the sociological-historical study that follows it, a tension that is left unresolved by the conclusion of the piece. In the opening exposition, Scholem presents nihilism as a modern concern arising from the dissolution of all stable authorities: ecumenical and political, as well as epistemological. The nihilist, according to Scholem is, "the fundamental antagonist [*Bestreiter*] of any and all authority, adopting no principles of faith, inasmuch as he is surrounded by such principles" (p. 130). And although this state of flux reached the natural sciences as well, "the destruction of authority", he avers, "had become a political solution". Scholem focuses on nihilist thinkers and disregards political leaders and activists: Friedrich Nietzsche, Ivan Turgenev and Mikhail Bakunin figure as key representatives of this ideology, while Karl Jaspers, Albert Camus and Max Weber (cited in part II of the essay), provide the theoretical framework for Scholem's discussion. In isolation from the historical context of the study's delivery at Eranos, one may easily be led to believe that "Der Nihilismus" was written in the days of the Weimar Republic, perhaps even earlier: the two world wars, the Holocaust, the spring of 1968 and radical militant groups that sprang thereafter (such as Italy's Red Brigades and Germany's Baader Meinhoff Group), are not even hinted at.

Hence, we may already point out a dual tension that the essay's first section creates: a theoretical tension between preoccupation with modern nihilist ideologies and the social religious subject matter of the historical study that follows; and an anachronistic tension between its discussion of late nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century nihilist thought, and the epic historical events from the First World War onwards, that go unmentioned.

This tension, it will emerge, is significant both in the context of Scholem's preoccupation with political theology, and in relation to his views on Zionism at this late stage in his life. Scholem appears to think that the challenge religious nihilism poses to its followers is essentially epistemological: he queries whether the claim of religious nihilism to the falsity of reality provides a genuine structure for a rationale [*Anlass*], in light of which phenomena may crystallize in their true form, or whether this claim provides populist and coarse solutions to the problems arising from sensate reality? His conclusion is that neither historians nor phenomenologists have said their last regarding these questions (p. 147). This may be indicative of Scholem's recognition of the epistemological frailty that a nihilist outlook entails.

As a study in religious history, the essay stands out as an oddity in Scholem's oeuvre: he provides references to secondary literature but not to any of the primary sources cited. This may be explained by the fact that the text was written as a lecture, but then it remains unclear why he bothered providing references to his secondary sources but not to primary ones. A possible (though unsubstantiated) explanation might be that Scholem's concerns were theoretical, perhaps even ideological, and they distracted his scholarly attention. Equally telling is Scholem's engagement in comparative religious studies. As the title clearly indicates, the study is an inquiry into nihilism as a (general) religious phenomenon, rather than a strictly Jewish phenomenon. His predilection for making comparative remarks with non-monotheistic religions is well known,³⁰ but he seldom engaged in such an extensive interreligious comparison in any other of his studies, as seen in "Der Nihilismus."³¹

Thus, the essay's historical sections are divided between non-Jewish sects (part II) and Jewish ones (part III). Moreover, the staging of the historical evolution of religious nihilism dates the entry of Jewish sects to the early modern era, with the appearance of Shabbatai Sevi in the seventeenth century. Although it is difficult to ascertain Scholem's motivations for this historical construct, its deliberate silence on approximately two millennia of Jewish heresy prior to the Sabbatian movement could hardly be dismissed as coincidental.³² The essay's conclusion, climactic in some respects, anti-climactic in others, provides, I believe, clues to Scholem's motivations.

The question that frames the inquiry in part II is the following: "... whether and to what extent tradition and world order [*Weltordnung*] may stake a claim to unredeemed validity [*unerlöste Gültigkeit*] in a redeemed world." (p. 162). This question, Scholem asserts, may only be examined under the conditions that transpired during "an acute eruption of Messianism." This is where our current politico-theological concerns emerge: if Bergman argues that moral autonomy supersedes religious law, and even divine decree, Scholem seeks to understand the operation and repercussions of heresy as an ideal. The socio-political context of Scholem's inquiry in the essay doesn't require further explanation, as I have clearly pointed out above. The Zionist context becomes clear, however, toward the essay's conclusion. Scholem bases part III on the crisis of faith and theological justifications which followed it, the conversion of the foremost leaders of Jewish heretical sects in early modernity—Shabbatai Sevi and Jacob Frank—to Islam and Christianity respectively. The discussion focuses on Frank, "a nihilist, whose nihilism possessed a seldom-seen degree of authenticity. His primitive savagery was alarming" (p. 171), which Sevi serves only to contextualize Frank's leadership of the sect. Said leadership is presented in the essay as having culminated in aspirations for territorial sovereignty in eastern Europe, to be obtained with "an army of millions of elite troops, whose success on the battlefield would establish the longed-for end goal of a utopia of lawlessness." (p. 180). And while Frank, says Scholem, shunned political action, his dream of actualizing a messianic vision by military force derived from his being a self-perceived revolutionary, which Scholem interprets as the epitome of Frank's nihilist core. It is at this precise point in the discussion that Scholem invokes Zionism for the sake of contextualizing the issue for his audience. Preceding the French Revolution by a generation, the confluence between militaristic ideology and "Jewish anticipation" formed Frank's vision of violating the old borders of

religious tradition. “He [Frank] was, what one calls in the language of modern Zionists, a territorialist [*einen Territorialisten*].” (p. 181).

This brief, seemingly haphazard comment, encapsulates in my opinion the distraught view of Zionism that Scholem came to hold. And while it may seem random, the only reference to Zionism in the essay actually has a history and a context of its own in Scholem’s thought. His most acclaimed study of early modern heresy in Judaism, “Redemption through Sin,” opens with an historical justification of the scholarly interest in Sabbateanism and its later offshoot—Frankism: “In these times of Jewish national rebirth it is only natural that the deep though ultimately tragic yearning for a national redemption to which the initial stages of Sabbateanism gave expression should meet with greater comprehension than in the past.” (Scholem 1971, p. 78). Scholem restates this point more emphatically at the conclusion of his literature survey: “In our own times we owe much to the experience of Zionism for enabling us to detect in Sabbateanism’s throes this groping toward a healthier national existence which must have seemed like an undiluted nightmare to the peaceable Jewish bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century.” (Scholem 1971, pp. 84–85; trans. altered).

This constitutive essay was published in 1936, a time of political unrest in Palestine,³³ yet it exudes an air of unmistakable optimism. Scholem’s linking of the contemporary political reality with the historical understanding of the Sabbatian movement is employed to justify the renewed scholarly attention to early modern heresy in Judaism, over and against the resentment of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* historians. Scholem explains, if only in passing, that the bourgeois outlook of that cadre of scholars curtailed their ability to appreciate the historical significance of movements like Sabbateanism and Frankism. Under this interpretation, the growing prospects of political Zionism generate a concrete, palpable collective experience of redemptive hopes that provide amenable conditions for a comprehensive re-evaluation of Sabbatian history.

Closer to forty years later, with a staggering catalogue of studies and critical editions of heretical teachings and history to his credit,³⁴ no such justification was necessary anymore for Scholem. The ideological exposition in the nihilism essay anchored in late nineteenth-early twentieth century nihilist thought was an odd choice for the introductory section of such a study. But given this anachronistic choice—in relation to both the historical subject matter and the contemporary context of the essay’s completion—a reference to “territorial Zionism” is anything but meaningless. In general, territorial Zionism was a notion associated with Theodore Herzl (1860–1904), the prominent advocate of the early Zionist cause, which contrasted with Ahad Ha’am’s (1856–1927) so-called spiritual Zionism, which refrained from making concrete territorial claims. Yet, in 1974 Israel the term “territorial Zionism” was taken over by another connotation. In the aftermath of the Six-Days War in 1967, Israel retained control over four new regions: the West Bank, Gaza strip, the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. In contradistinction from previous wars, Israel did not hand over the regions conquered as part of its ceasefire agreements with Egypt, Syria and Jordan. This change of policy enjoyed a broad consensus in Israel, thanks to which the initiatives of small cohorts of religious Zionists to settle in these territories, especially in the West Bank, struck root. Scholem belonged to a select group of intellectuals who opposed this de facto annexation of new territories and signed an open letter warning against the incontrovertible repercussions of Israel’s refusal to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza (Haaretz 1967). Scholem’s reference to “territorial Zionism” in a piece written in the aftermath of the Six-Day War appears more likely to refer to its contemporary incarnation. This assumption receives further corroboration from an interview Scholem gave David Biale in August 1980, two years before his death. Entitled “The Threat of Messianism,” Biale’s questions confront the elderly scholar with the political reality of the present. In a display of uncharacteristic candor, Scholem accepts the analogy Biale draws between the religious Zionist faction that led Jewish efforts to settle in the West Bank, called Gush Emunim, and Sabbateanism: “Yes, they are like the Sabbatians”, he confirms Biale’s thesis, “their messianic thesis can only lead to disaster.” (Biale 1980, p. 22). Yet the analogy is only partial as Scholem considered the risk that Gush Emunim messianism

entails much graver consequences than those faced by their early modern counterparts: “Like the Sabbatians, their messianic program can only lead to disaster. In the seventeenth century, of course, the failure of Sabbateanism had only spiritual consequences; it led to a breakdown of Jewish belief. Today, the consequences of such messianism are also political and that is the great danger.” (Biale 1980) As tempting as it might be, it would be ill-advised to use this isolated statement, made late in Scholem’s life, as proof of a fundamental link in his thought between Sabbatianism and Zionism. The formidable corpus of his research on early modern Jewish heresy is modeled on the scientific ideals of philology, historical research and theoretical reflection (Scholem would prefer metaphysical or historiosophical). As mentioned above, the book on Sabbatinism Scholem published concurrently with the Eranos gathering of 1974 attests to the dominance of this methodological approach. Moreover, Scholem viewed his scholarship as based on strict separation from current affairs. This was the crux of a vehement critique against Scholem by Baruch Kurzweil in the late 1960s, accusing Scholem of ideological bias, which comprised, according to the literary critic, an admixture of radical secularity and Zionism, supported by an historicist methodological approach. Scholem’s *Shabatai Sevi*, Kurzweil says, provides an opportunity “to examine the objective historical research method, which discloses the degree to which the ‘I’ preoccupied with the evaluation of historical facts, becomes part and parcel of the interpretation, determines its orientation and the textual evaluation, and becomes the advocate of a certain theology and metaphysics.” (Kurzweil 1969, p. 105).³⁵ While references to his research bedeck his statements as a public intellectual, Scholem’s academic work never declared an attempt to apply scholarly insights to the political reality of the present. In this sense, Shaul Magid correctly observes that for Scholem, “the study of Kabbalah as the handmaiden to Zionism” was implausible (Magid 2011, p. 524). And despite its paradoxical potential, Magid further asserts that Scholem’s study of Kabbalah is his Zionism” (p. 524, fn.42).

The use of Zionism to contextualize Sabbatianism and Frankism in essays forty years apart demonstrates that this paradox exists in Scholem’s work: very far from hijacking his scholarship in the service of a political agenda, Zionism hovered in the background of Scholem’s scholarship: At times as inspiration, other times as an object of critique. His analysis of Frankist nihilism in the essay, however, leads to a clear-cut conclusion: in Scholem’s view, the movement’s destructive potential was absolute. He repeatedly refers to the practices and actions of the sect as “the way in the abyss” [*Der Weg in den Abgrund*] in which “the struggle surrounding destruction, genuine nihilism, grips all strata of our existence.” (Scholem 1984, p. 179). Equally beyond the reach of paradox is Scholem’s use of the term “territorial Zionism” to explain Frank’s vision of territorial conquest by military force to fulfill his revolutionary aspirations.

As I have argued throughout this article, the scholarship of both Bergman and Scholem simultaneously formed and was informed by their views on the political reality in which they lived. Therefore, “Der Nihilismus” is approached here as a single example, without judging whether it is singular or indicative of defining characteristics of Scholem’s life’s work. As such, I would like to suggest that the unique features of the nihilism study offer a candid moment in Scholem’s scholarship; a moment in which the understanding he shared with Bergman of Zionism as a religious phenomenon crystalizes into a penetrating and painful insight. Bergman saw hope, if ever so slight, in the prerogative to exercise moral autonomy to resolve ethical dilemmas, even at the cost of transgressing divine decree. The aged Scholem was compelled to share a glimpse of the terrifying semblance between Jacob Frank’s radical antinomianism and Israel’s religion-fueled expansionism. His unequivocal conclusion that Frankist nihilism led to destruction seems to be echoed in another interview of Scholem’s from the same period. In reply to his Israeli interviewer, Muki Tzur, about the future of Judaism in Israel, Scholem said: “I do not know what form [of Judaism] will take shape here; if a synthesis will be found between the forces of reactionaries or piety and the transformative and replacing forces. [. . .] I do see today what I did not see fifty years ago: the danger of death, of doom, in the processes underway here.” (Scholem 1976, p. 30).

6. Conclusions

The current article opened with an illustration of a paradox deeply ingrained into the Zionist project. Despite its secular façade, the systematic striving toward founding a Jewish polity in Palestine was fraught with theological imagery and vocabulary. This observation underscored the historiographic oddity of the Israeli scholars' recent "discovery" of political theology as a vital analytical category in the conceptual study of Zionism. Hugo Bergman's and Gershom Scholem's late work was then presented as a neglected yet telling political theologies of Zionism that place the religious dimension as anteceding the political. Significantly, both perceptions understand the religious ground of Jews' national-political revival as a moral imperative to approach the use of force ever so cautiously, and to understand Israel's redemptive task as pertaining to the whole of humanity. Exclusionary, chauvinistic, territorial expansionism was often held synonymous with messianically inspired Zionism (secular or religious) and was seen by them as a gross misinterpretation of Judaism, a danger to be avoided at all costs.

This is where the dialectic of feeling came into play: Bergman sought to remedy the ethical violations of Zionism by advocating radical moral autonomy, implicitly modeled on Immanuel Kant, but explicitly grounded in commentary on a broad range of traditional Jewish texts. Scholem, for his part, warned against the destructive potential of the fledgling Gush Emunim movement, by inscribing a comparison between their expansionism and the heretical movement he viewed as the most monstrous in Jewish history: Frankism. Curiously, the open letter cautioning against the annexation of conquered territories after the Six-Day War echoed this dialectic. After conceding the war's importance for Israel's security, the short statement warned against unilateral annexation of the land overtaken during the war, as well as against degradation of the local population (Haaretz 1967).

Among the dozens of signatories appeared the following names: Hugo Shmuel Bergman and Gershom Scholem.

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Notes

¹ For a discussion see (Scharf 2019).

² Note (Avinery 1994, p. 10) who points out the religious dimension of nationalism in Ireland, Poland, Greece, and Czech Republic, among other European nations.

³ On the engrossment of Weimar Jewish intellectuals with the discourse on political theology (Brody 2018, pp. 61–80; Lazier 2008b). On the complex relations between Scholem, Walter Benjamin and Schmitt see (Ng 2017).

⁴ For early references to the use of religious terminology by the secular Zionist labor movement see (Shapira 1994; Avinery 1994). Note that both studies stop short of explicitly employing the term political theology.

⁵ (Schmidt 1995), Reprinted in (Schmidt 2009b).

⁶ See for example (Hotam 2013; Brown 2014; Setter 2019; Ohana 2019; Yadgar 2022). Hanan Hever has blazed the trail for scholars wishing to apply political theology as central analytical tool for the study of pre-state and post-independence Israeli prose. See (Hever 2009, 2013; Tzamiir 2014).

⁷ On Scholem's early Zionism see (Scholem 1976, 1982, 1989; Schmidt 1995; Zadoff 2018). On Bergman's early Zionism see (Bergman 1976; Maor 2010; Shumsky 2010). For a comparative view of both thinkers see (Shapira 2004).

⁸ Brith Shalom has been researched extensively in recent years. For a detailed history and analysis of its ideology see (Ratzabi 2002; Gordon 2008).

⁹ (Zadoff 2018, esp. pp. 251–58). I discuss Zadoff's analysis in detail in the next section below.

¹⁰ See (Scholem 1981) and Zadoff's discussion in (Zadoff 2018). See also example (Hertzberg 1987; Schmidt 1995; Shapira 2004; Magid 2011; Idel 2012).

¹¹ For a summary of Bergman's appointments in Zionist organizations see (Shapira 2004, pp. 526–30). Both he and Scholem participated in the efforts immediately after the Holocaust to salvage Judaica libraries seized by the Nazis. For Scholem's involvement see (Zadoff 2018, pp. 95–141); for Bergman's involvement see (Lucca 2020).

- Avraham Shapira duly observes that, “one of them [Scholem] has, and continues to enjoy reputation in several spheres of Western culture, whereas the other [Bergman] seems to have been relegated to oblivion even among us [Israeli scholarship].” (Shapira 2004, p. 506)
- For Birnbaum’s essay see Kohn 1913, pp. 239–49.
- And compare Felix Weltsch’s counter-response in (Weltsch 1955) in same volume.
- The article was originally published the summer of 1949. See (Bergman 1949).
- See for example the final lines of the essays “The Messianic Idea in Judaism” (Scholem 1971, p. 36) and “Kabbalah and Myth” (Scholem 1996, p. 117).
- The book’s seven chapters are entitled: (1) Can Transgression Have an Agent (Proof-text: BT Bava Kama 79a); (2) The Sacrifice of Isaac and Contemporary Man (Proof-text: Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov, *Bnei Issaschar*, vol. 1, Month of Nissan, article 5, “The Virtue of Torah” 143b); Expansion and Contraction in Jewish Ethics (Proof-text: Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5 and Leon Roth’s analysis ad loc. in Roth 1999); (4) Two Letters to a Young Female Kibbutz Member (Proof-text: a letter Bergman wrote from the Italian front in World War I, based on Kant’s Categorical Imperative and Genesis 15:6, which the Hassidic commentary he cites in ch.2 interprets); (5) The Spirit of Israel in the State of Israel (Proof-text: Aaron David Gordon, “Hebrew University” (Hebrew)); (6) The Hope of Israel (Proof-text: H.N. Bialik, *Book of Legends*, “Secrets of Catastrophes and Salvation”); (7) The Humanism of the Covenant (Proof-text: this is the only article in the book without a dominant text as the subject of reflection). Citation references are to the English edition (Bergman 1970). All translations are altered by the author of the current article.
- The universal validity of Jewish ethics and the duty to eschew particularism in the resolution of moral dilemmas (ch.3), the crucial significance of cultivating intellectual refinement and spiritual awareness in the State of Israel to fulfill the redemptive calling of the Jewish people (ch.5); Jewish optimism in the face of calamity backed by God’s eternal promise to the People of Israel, which religious faith discloses to believers (ch.6); the Hebrew Bible’s guidance toward ethical solidarity in virtue of God’s solidarity with the Jewish people (ch.7).
- Committed on the first day of Israel’s 1956 war with Egypt, the Kafr Qasim massacre caused an uproar that led to extensive court proceedings in early 1957. Based on careful study of documentary evidence accumulated in the course of four decades, Adam Raz argues that 51 Palestinian women, men and children were murdered in cold blood by a squad of Israeli Border Police ordered to shoot dead any Arab resident in violation of curfew hour, which was set 30 min earlier than usual that day without due notice (Raz 2019). For the massacre’s impact on the ethical standards of Israeli courts see (Orbach 2013).
- See also parallels in BT Kiddushin 42b; Bava Kama 51a; Bava Metzia 10b.
- Note that Bergman’s interpretation stops short of arguing that the teachings of Torah preclude moral transgression. Ch. 2 and 3 address ethical dilemmas arising from the clash between divine commandments and ethics in the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) and in God’s commanding King Saul to annihilate Agag King of the Amalekites (I Samuel 15:9).
- See for example Rashi on BT Bava Kama 79a, Bava Metzia 8a and 10b, Gittin 23a, Hagiga 10b, Ketubot 33b. In all of these discussions, the Babylonian Talmud (and Rashi) distinguish between cases where agents are culpable for transgressive actions and cases where their respondent superior is culpable. Both cases are present as a *fait accompli*, whereas Bergman’s concerns pertain to the moral dilemma preceding the act itself.
- “[Therefore] every person must consider themselves [all year-round] as facing half-favorable, half-liable judgment. And so should the world—half-favorable, half-liable judgment. If they sinned a single sin—they condemned the entire world to be liable and have defiled it. If they committed one virtuous deed [*mitzvah*—they have brought on themselves and the entire world favorable judgment and have brought on themselves and the entire world salvation and rescue.” Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance (*Hilkhot Teshuvah*) 3:4.
- For an account on the Lavon Affair see (Muallem 2016); for an account on *Min Ha-Yesod* see (Bar-Or 1994).
- “Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” (I Samuel 15:3)
- For his condemnation of enthusiastic media coverage of Arab tragedies in the war see (Bergman 1976, p. 63).
- For scholarship on Scholem’s engagement with nihilism see (Wohlfarth 1995; Zadoff 2007; Biale 2015).
- (Scholem 1957) (Hebrew; new ed. with new intro was published in 1988, recently re-published and re-edited in Scholem 2021), (Scholem 1972) (English; new ed. with introduction Scholem 2016).
- (Scholem 1974) (Hebrew; originally appeared in Scholem 1936); (Scholem 1971) (English). Lazier argues that Redemption through Sin “proved to be the single most important piece of Jewish historical scholarship written in the twentieth century. It proved also to be one of the most important in twentieth-century religious thought, period” (Lazier 2008a, p. 3). Similarly, Wasserstrom opines that “Redemption through Sin’ remains one of the most influential essays written not only in Jewish Studies but in the History of Religions more generally.” (Wasserstrom 2000, p. 215).
- At least some of his motivations for employing this scholarly gesture repeatedly may be gleaned from his relationships with Henry Corby (scholar of Islam) and Mircea Eliade (scholar of comparative religion), described and analyzed in depth in (Wasserstrom 2000).
- An exception is the prolonged discussion at the end of *Sabbatai Sevi*, see (Scholem 2016, pp. 94–102).

- ³² Scholem remarks (p. 164) that he had already addressed related phenomena in the course of Jewish history in “The Crisis of Tradition in Jewish Messianism” (Scholem 1971, pp. 49–77). However, like the Nihilism essay, “Crisis and Tradition” begins the history of messianic heresy with Sabbatianism. Moreover, this earlier study still does not explain Scholem’s engagement in a comparative study in the Nihilism piece. For a recent overview of Jewish heresy see (Sharvit and Goetschel 2020).
- ³³ The article was published in the 1936 issue of the annual *Knesset*. That year a Palestinian rebellion known as the Great Arab Revolt broke out. The rebellion, which included attacks on British institutions and Jewish settlements, gradually subsided in 1939.
- ³⁴ For a recent bibliography of Scholem’s Sabbatian studies see (Meir and Yamamoto 2018, pp. 377–88).
- ³⁵ For evaluations of this polemic see (Myers 1986; Maciejko 2004; Zadoff 2007; Goulttschin 2009; Biale 2015).

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