Article

Jonas, Scholem, and the Taubeses in Jerusalem: From Metaphysical Antisemitism to a Jewish Gnostic Conspiracy

Jonathan Cahana-Blum

Department of Comparative Religion, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 9190501, Israel; jonathan.cahana@mail.huji.ac.il

Abstract: This article addresses how Hans Jonas’s reconstruction of gnosticism as a historical movement in late antiquity gave rise to two parallel contemporary interpretations: Gershom Scholem’s “metaphysical antisemitism” and Susan and Jacob Taubes’s attempt at a revival of a Jewish—gnostic cultic revolt. While both reached very similar conclusions regarding the gnostic potential for modern Judaism, they could not be more different in the implications they drew from it. This, in turn, also explains the animosity that developed between all the people involved.

Keywords: gnosticism; Judaism; antinomianism; libertinism; Hans Jonas; Gershom Scholem; Jacob Taubes; Susan Taubes; Hannah Arendt

1. Introduction

With Taubes, the only thing to be said is that I will not have anything to do with him. It is easy to be a genius at other people’s (spiritual) expense, and I can’t congratulate him on this sort of career after I’ve already told him what I think about him. I think he’s better suited for America than he is here with us. He’ll introduce himself to Jonas as my friend—please, WARN Jonas on my behalf. But he’ll probably end up winning Jonas over anyway.¹

In this letter sent to Hannah Arendt in August 1954, Scholem summarizes his contention with Jacob Taubes in a rather enigmatic formulation.² It is well known and documented that Scholem’s quarrel with Taubes was also due to a personal issue: Taubes’s indiscretion regarding Scholem’s opinion on Joseph Weiss’s mental situation and his apparent scheming to create a rift between Weiss and Scholem.³ However, in this letter to Arendt written approximately three years after the event, Scholem does not find it crucial to warn Arendt that Taubes cannot be discrete or that he is a scheming “academic politician.” On the contrary, Scholem warns Arendt—and asks her to convey his warning to Hans Jonas—that Taubes is both spiritually and morally dangerous.

2. Taubes on Trial

Scholem’s words become mesmerizingly tragic when one reads through Susan Taubes’s novel Divorcing, published shortly before she committed suicide by drowning herself in the Atlantic in 1969.⁴ This autobiographical novel describes in painstaking detail Susan’s own experience of being psychologically, sexually, and spiritually abused by her former husband, Jacob Taubes. Quite amazingly, Susan connects this abuse with Scholem’s scholarship, giving us the key to unravel the complicated relationship between the three—or four—people mentioned in Scholem’s letter above.

Halfway through the novel, Sophie Blind (Susan’s pseudonym in the novel), stands trial. A mob of orthodox rabbis blame her for all sorts of uncleanness, with a stress on sexual uncleanness. They demand a divorce from Ezra (i.e., Jacob) and/or that Sophie would be proclaimed dead.⁵ Ezra tries to defend his wife and show how his and his wife

Citation:

Academic Editor: Malachi Hacohen

Received: 26 August 2022
Accepted: 3 October 2022
Published: 10 October 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).
actions can be understood as stemming from and perhaps necessitated by the contemporary state of Judaism. In this context, he says the following:

She was a virgin. I read to her the book of prophets Hosea: the parable of the sacred marriage between God and Israel, spoke of the sanctification of life, explained to her the paradox of the law Credo quia absurdum. . . . It’s all written in sacred texts (from which all pornographic handbooks are copied). . . . I wanted her to be a sacred whore. She was magnificent in her moments of complete abasement.6

Quite surprisingly, Ezra succeeds in convincing the rabbinic mob. They “signify their agreement with Ezra. The men put on prayer shawls, phylacteries; a Messianic psalm is sung.” And then they leave the court dancing and singing in joy. However, his wife would have none of it:

SOPHIE. (Aside to Ezra) You miserable ideologue! You know I never swallowed that rot about redemption through sin.7

“Redemption through Sin” was, of course, the English title of one of Scholem’s most influential works, and it translates the Hebrew expression (and theological formulation) of mitzvah ha-ba’ah ba-averah (literally, “a commandment which is fulfilled by means of a transgression”). This text, published already in 1937, would serve us as the key for understanding Jonas’s influence on Scholem and Taubes, and its important later repercussions on both scholars.

3. Redemption through Sin

In his memoirs, Jonas notes how Scholem followed closely the preparation of the first volume of his Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, eventually published in 1934.8 According to Jonas, Scholem read each and every chapter as it became available, and Jonas recalls him saying that “with each chapter my admiration for the work and its originality increased.”9

It is thus not surprising that in mitzvah ha-ba’ah ba-averah we find Scholem’s extensive quotation from Jonas’s book, translated into Hebrew, and this remains to this day the only part of this book to have been translated into Hebrew. Jonas’s understanding of gnostic “libertinism” provided Scholem with a key to understanding the praxis of Sabbatianism and Frankism not as a pathological trait, but as a system with defendable and creative inner logic. Scholem writes:

The desire for total liberation which played so tragic a role in the development of Sabbatian nihilism was by no means a purely self-destructive force; on the contrary, beneath the surface of lawlessness, antinomianism, and catastrophic negation, powerful constructive impulses were at work, and these, I maintain, it is the duty of the historian to uncover.10

Eventually, in his lectures on gnosticism given at the Hebrew University during the 1938–1939 academic year, Jonas would, in turn, use Scholem’s translation from his own Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, and would detail further the creative impulse within gnostic “antinomianism”:

The practical side of Gnosticism can be evinced in cult and moral behavior. Gnostic cult was a kind of mysterium . . . Sometimes it was of the sort of libertinism and fornication, at times even wild behavior expressing [the gnostic belief in] anarchy. . . . Its importance, however, lies in its purpose, which is not only meant to prepare the soul for its ascension after death, but also to expropriate the gnostic from the influence of the stars in their earthly life.11

That Scholem found Jonas’s understanding of gnostic antinomianism both convincing and alluring is evinced not only in its extensive use in one of his most influential and seminal works. It is no less important to note what kind of use we are dealing with: Scholem used it apologetically as it salvages both Sabbatianism and Frankism from pathological denigrations and underlines their creative possibilities. The potential relevance of this
for Scholem’s own time seems to be stressed already in this early work, which ends by
underlining how Sabbatianism and Frankism destroyed the old rabbinic world from within
its own core and thus enabled a Jewish renewal:

The leaders of the ‘School of Mendelssohn,’ who were neither Sabbatians them-

selves, of course, nor under the influence of mysticism at all . . . found ready
recruits for their cause in Sabbatian circles, where the world of rabbinic Judaism
had already been completely destroyed from within, quite independently of the
efforts of secularist criticism. Those who had survived the ruin were now open to
any alternative or wind of change . . .

It is thus no wonder that according to Jospeh Weiss, Scholem was pleased when a
typing mistake changed the subtitle of mitzvah ha-ba’ah ba-averah from “lehavant hashabtau”
(=toward an understanding of Sabbatianism) to “lehaganat hashabtau” (=In defense of
Sabbatianism).

4. The Taubeses and a Jewish Gnostic Conspiracy

Jacob Taubes studied with Scholem in Jerusalem intermittently between 1950 and 1952,
during which time he was influenced by both Jonas and the use Scholem has put Jonas to
in his early works, especially mitzvah ha-ba’ah ba-averah.

As we have seen, this work is explicitly referred to in Divorcing. Divorcing, however,
for all its autobiographical importance, is still a fictional novel and one that was published
almost 20 years after the event at that. How can we corroborate this evidence? Luckily,
the correspondence between Jacob and his then wife Susan during this crucial period was
preserved. As such, this is first-rate documentary evidence for understanding how Jonas
affected the Taubeses’ religious and cultic convictions.

Christina Pareigis, who published the correspondence, argued that it evinces a friction
between Jacob, who had a more traditional mindset loyal to the Jewish tradition, and Susan,
who was estranged from that tradition, a friction that eventually ended in their separation
and divorce more than a decade later. However, that understanding relies mostly on one
undated and unsent letter that was apparently written just after the couple’s marriage.

From the very first dated letter, approximately a year after their marriage and just after their
first joint stay in Israel, it is clear that the couple had reached an understanding regarding
religious matters. That understanding was a neo-gnostic attempt to affect a gnostic revolt
within the very core of Judaism. In September 1950, Susan writes to Jacob that:

It seems that wherever one raises the lid of a question the same old Gnostic
serpent twists up its seductive head and gives me the key . . . I listen to the
serpent, for he seduced us away from the source only to seduce us back to the
source. And I trust the serpent who knows the secret of the passage and who
embraces the mysterious necessity wherein “the way up and the way down are
the same” and the way of going hence is the way of returning . . .

In many strands of gnosticism, the serpent is considered a revealer of gnostic truth
to humankind. Quite fittingly, then, the serpent is here considered the one who turned
the couple away from the source (traditional Judaism) in order to guide them back to
the real source, a revolted renaissance of the true/original cult. Moreover, “the way up and
the way down are the same” is a classic example of an (antinomistic) gnostic syllogism,
which, of course, could be easily paralleled in Frankism. Thus, already at this early stage,
the couple is far from representing a clash between the traditional Jewish mindset and
estrangement from Judaism. On the contrary, it seems that here a gnostic revolution from
within Judaism is a joint purpose that lies in deep spiritual agreement between them, and
as we shall see shortly, not only between them.

As Jonas noted regarding the ancient gnostics, the Taubeses were also synchronous
morally and cultishly. The description of their “private cult,” in which at least one more
person, whose name was abbreviated as J.C., participated, is spread throughout the 1950–1951 correspondence. 

I would like to bring here two vivid examples of this cult: 

The night before . . . J.C. [and I] stayed in his room and I unclothed him and veiled both of us and I did service for him and afterward he for me (more one may not dare before there is an actual cultic community) and I told him that we were acting in deep and terrible danger, walking on a holy, a forbidden ground, before the “rules” have been established before the man-aiding gods have given us defenses and protections against the holy that is non- and in-human. That we must pray that our act be accepted as service – and even pray for forgiveness, for no action of man in forbidden regions is perfectly pure and without sin.

Then, the devil took hold of [J.C.] and he seduced me, really like a serpent (I saw awful “mythological” spaces open up) and performed a wild almost cruel service–I think before very, very archaic gods. It was a little frightening because for once I was not “priestess” holding “the light” but sheer sacrificial beast. I think it is all right with the gods. I think they (the Chthonic Ones) watch me winding my “geist” through the white silences of “geist” and it is they who bedeviled J.C. toward me.

While the exact form of the cult is enigmatic, its antinomistic sexual nature is clearly demonstrated in these and other descriptions.

No less interesting is Susan’s explanation of the meaning of the cult, which one’s brave and daring decision to be involved in differentiates this person from an “arm-chair” gnostic:

Put even more boldly there is an “ontological” lie in just I and thou – Susan and Jacob are only a fragment of the truth in the world broken through and through – and if our gnosis that the individual in his walled-in separateness is a lie, and that all life is one blood, is not to be a mockery, we must be able in a cultic act to smash the walls[,] make ourselves naked to each other, and mix our blood.—Or else confess ourselves as, humanists, individualists and “nice guys” and not talk so “big” and not be “arm-chair” gnostics.

And as to cult this is the greatest problem: since the cult seeks to break-down the “exclusiveness” of love however “deep + absolute” and assert the community of blood–is not a service of one man and one woman . . . self-contradictory? That is, beyond the holy marriage the service must be “public.” However, they that prepare the ground may have to wade through the marshes of sin. I embrace you dearest and kiss all your holy places. (Each Friday I kiss the candle deeply.)

Both the “cult” contrived by the Taubeses and its meaning as detailed by Susan above have very strong roots in gnosticism, and specifically in Jonas’s explication of the gnostic phenomenon. We already saw above how his detailing of the deconstructing and reconstructing meaning of the gnostic antinomistic ritual has demonstrated the creative impulse of this religion, and how its explanation was wholeheartedly adopted by Scholem. It is now demonstrated that its praxis was adopted by the Taubeses, but the parallel goes much further. Susan above explicated how the ritual should symbolize that the “individual in his walled-in separateness is a lie, and that all life is one blood [and] we must be able in a cultic act to smash the walls[,] make ourselves naked to each other, and mix our blood.” She goes further to stress that if this accepted, “service of one man and one woman . . . self-contradictory . . . [and thus] the service must be “public”.” In his Jerusalem lectures, Jonas stressed an important aspect of gnostic antinomianism, which just happens to parallel what the Taubeses were thinking and doing. Citing the 4th century heresiologist Epiphanius of Salamis’s description of a gnostic ritual popular in Egypt during his time, Jonas writes:

In one gnostic ritual, the ascending soul says the following about its earthly life: “I knew myself and collected myself from all places, I did not bear children to the archon, but rooted him and collected the spread members.”

21

22

23

24

25

26

27
While Jonas is too polite to describe what actually happened in the ritual, and, as we saw above, only obliquely refers to it as “wild behavior expressing [the gnostic belief in] anarchy,” he does give the exact reference, so that anyone interested could find out. Perhaps an example would suffice here, and help us throw some light on what was going on in the Taubeses’ cult:

And the husband will move away from his wife and tell her—speaking to his own wife!—“Get up, perform the Agape with the brother.” . . . [and] after having made love with the passion of fornication in addition, [they] lift their blasphemy up to heaven, the woman and man receive the man’s emission on their own hands. And they stand with their eyes raised heavenward but the filth on their hands and pray . . . and offer that stuff on their hands to the true Father of all, and say, “We offer thee this gift, the body of Christ.” (7) And then they eat it partaking of their own dirt, and say, “This is the body of Christ; and this is the Pascha, because of which our bodies suffer and are compelled to acknowledge the passion of Christ.”

5. The Rift between Scholem and Taubes

Up to this point, it seems to have been well demonstrated how both scholars—Scholem and Taubes—were thoroughly influenced by Jonas’s understanding of the gnostic antinomistic cult and saw its potential within Judaism. Yet why did that cause such a bitter rift between them, so much so that Scholem would feel people should be “warned” of Taubes, and even 25 years later would refuse to renew the contact with him, writing that “what has irreparably separated us twenty-five years ago . . . belongs to the existential decision in my life (and of moral . . . life), along with experiences I have had . . . to understand the Jewish people and the Jewish phenomena”?

While Scholem was thoroughly impressed with Jonas’s understanding of gnostic antinomianism, and with the key it provided him to understand and appreciate the creative impulse within Sabbatianism and Frankism, he apparently did not dare to think that its application as such was permissible or even conceivable today. In a poem he wrote, and inscribed as a dedication of his book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* to Jonas in 1942, he clearly notes this alluring temptation, but decides against it. After describing his descent to the depth of Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah, he ends by saying:

> Time transformed cast us a fearsome glance,
> For it is unwilling to turn back again,
> The vision of redemption dissolves in pain,
> What remains is depraved joy.

Taubes, apparently, did not flinch from such “depraved joy,” and seems to have been certain that this would still, *mutatis mutandis*, incite a redemptive process that would hurl Judaism into a universal religion for the 20th century. This would clarify why Scholem believed Taubes was utterly irresponsible, and why, in addition to his anger at and derision of Taubes, he seems to have been also truly frightened of him. Thus, when Susan Sontag and David Rieff met Scholem in October 1973, Scholem “paled when [Susan] mentioned Jacob’s name [and said] it was Jacob Taubes who revealed to him the existence of moral evil.”

6. A Jewish Metaphysical Antisemitism?

On the other hand, Scholem did not flinch from trying to locate a gnostic creative impulse within more “orthodox” trends of Judaism. While in the 1930s, it was he who coined the phrase “metaphysical antisemitism” to describe the most pertinent aspects of gnosticism. He later insisted on speaking of “Jewish gnosticism,” a phrase that seems to dismay many a scholar of gnosticism to this very day. Yet, at that stage of Scholem’s scholarship, it seems that all the troubling elements of gnosticism had been removed
from his definition, so that what remained of gnosticism (except its prestige) was nothing of what gnosticism was for both him and Jonas during the time that mitzvah ha-ba’ah ba-averah was written.  

This apparently dismayed Jonas, who felt this use was both scholarly and politically irresponsible. Taking the opportunity to critique the work of Gilles Quispel, who argued that gnosticism both originated and existed at times within Judaism, Jonas produced a thinly veiled critique of Scholem himself, and especially of his Jewish Gnosticism book, in which Scholem’s own 1930s persona was brought into conflict with his contemporaneous one:

> In short, and with the oversimplification excused by extreme shortness the nature of the relation of Gnosticism to Judaism – in itself an undeniable fact – is defined by the anti-Jewish animus with which it is saturated. “The greatest case of metaphysical anti-Semitism!” exclaimed Scholem once when we talked about these matters soon after the appearance of my first volume on Gnosis: that was in the thirties (and in Jerusalem) when one was very much alive to this aspect of things.

For Jonas, to speak of “metaphysical antisemitism” within and from Judaism would not only be a scholarly fallacy and historical mistake. It would also have political repercussions that Jonas probably believed Scholem was not fully aware of, and this, no less than the scholarly blunder, may have been what horrified Jonas. Mutatis mutandis, Jonas may have felt that what Quispel did (with the unwitting help of Scholem) was similar to what Hannah Arendt did in comparing National Socialism to Zionism, and arguing that the first was influenced by the latter. While Arendt purportedly located the source of “racial antisemitism” within modern Judaism (specifically Zionism), Scholem rejoined by finding the source of “metaphysical antisemitism” within classical Judaism. In both cases, we end with the Jews themselves that are to be blamed for antisemitism, whether racial or metaphysical.

It is unclear if Scholem understood the gravity of Jonas’s accusations. The correspondence between them evinces that he may have, and in order to exculpate himself he touted an almost impossible definition of gnosticism, in which its very core is missing. Jonas may have felt he had crossed a line and tried to reconcile with Scholem on personal grounds. His rapport with Arendt may have been enough for him. However, the acrimony remained strong until Scholem’s death.

7. Conclusions

One of Jonas’s most brilliant and influential discoveries in his 1930s work on gnosticism—as evinced both in his first volume of Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist and in his Jerusalem lectures—was his understanding of the creative impulse of gnostic antinomianism. This thoroughly influenced Scholem, and later, his student Jacob Taubes. In contrast to Scholem, his student not only talked the talk, but apparently tried to walk the walk. The Taubeses seem to have learned from Scholem that gnosticism—with its baggage of metaphysical antisemitism—had definite potential to revolt and rejuvenate Judaism from within, and just as it did in the past, it would be able to prepare it for the new era that beckoned after two world wars, the Holocaust, and the Cold War. Scholem apparently found this gnostic potential alluring as well, but flinched from the idea of applying it now as it is to modern Judaism. Instead, he laboriously searched the more “orthodox” Jewish writing for some diluted (or purer, depending on the perspective) gnostic impulse that could accomplish the same purpose. This inevitably led to a rift with Taubes—whom Scholem believed to have been thoroughly irresponsible and downright morally evil—and with Jonas, who tried to warn him that in doing so, he may be collaborating in an Arendtian scheme to find the source of antisemitism within Judaism.

But what about Taubes and Jonas? Although Jonas’s memoirs include two embarrassing anecdotes regarding Taubes, it seems that Jonas was quite appreciative of him, both as
a scholar and as a person. In fact, it seems that it was due to him that Jonas’s work on gnosticism so thoroughly influenced the English-speaking world:

I must add that to a large extent I have Jacob Taubes to thank for the fact that . . . I was encouraged to write an English version of my Gnosticism book. He got the Beacon Press in Boston, owned by the Unitarian Church, to commission me to write a book on Gnosticism.

Considering what has been demonstrated in this article, I venture to suggest that Taubes’s interest in having Jonas’s book in English was not only academic, although this was probably completely unknown to Jonas himself. Thus, Scholem’s prescient letter to Arendt came to pass. Taubes did “win” Jonas in the end. And his spiritual irresponsibility is still spread throughout the lines of his former wife’s novel, Divorcing, in which the heroine is as dead as the author.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

### Notes

2. Jacob Taubes (Vienna 1923–Berlin 1987) was a scholar of religion who was born to a rabbinical family. He received his doctorate from the University of Zurich in 1947, and his rabbinical ordination a year earlier. He subsequently studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Eventually he became a professor of Jewish Studies at the Free University of Berlin. He married Susan Taubes in 1949, who was originally from a Hungarian rabbinical family, but grew up in the U.S. with her (apparently) atheist Freudian psychoanalyst father. Susan studied in Bryn Mawr College and Columbia, and received her doctorate from Harvard in 1956. The couple divorced in 1967, and Susan committed suicide in 1969. For details on their lives and thought, see Muller (2022) and Pareigis (2022) respectively.
3. See Scholem’s letter to Jacob Taubes from 7 October 1951 in Skinner (2002, pp. 363–64) and the discussion in Zadoff (2012, p. 21). There was also a scholarly contention, but that developed significantly later: see the discussion in Macho (2014) and Styhals (2018).
4. Divorcing (Taubes 2020) was originally published in 1969 and met with a scathing misogynist review in the New York Times. For further details, see the introduction to the new edition by David Rieff (Taubes 2020, pp. 6–11).
5. (Taubes 2020, p. 139). Sophie is brought into court in a coffin, but then she rises and speaks to the court. Throughout the novel, there is constant confusion as to whether Sophie is dead or alive.
6. (Taubes 2020, pp. 140–41). Gomer was a prostitute whom God ordered Hosea the prophet to marry. Their complex relationship was meant to symbolize God’s relationship with his people. At the beginning of their marriage, and at least a few years afterwards, Susan and Jacob understood their relationship on these terms. Susan wrote a long poem detailing these intricacies from Gomer’s perspective. It exists in her nachlass in the Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung Berlin in at least two versions, a longer and a shorter one. An edition of this poem was promised, but never materialized: see Taubes (2011, pp. 71–72, n. 2; p. 99) and the short discussion and even shorter quotation in Pareigis (2022, p. 182).
7. (Taubes 2020, p. 141).
8. (Jonas 1934). Many scholars nowadays believe that Jonas’s understanding of Gnosticism is historically inaccurate and/or politically inopportune. See, for instance, Williams (1996), and King (2003). While my own opinion differs here (cf. Cahana-Blum 2018), this discussion is not strictly relevant to my article. Here, it is only important that the protagonists relied on Jonas’s study as historically sound, as will be documented throughout the article.
10. (Scholem 1971, p. 84). For convenience, I am quoting from the English version that was published considerably later, but does not differ from the Hebrew version in the relevant aspects.
11. These Hebrew lectures are available at the Philosophical Archives of the University of Konstanz, Hans Jonas Papers, HJ-38-1. The translation is mine.
12. (Scholem 1971, p. 141). For further discussion of this aspect of mitzzvah ha-ba’ah ba-averah, see Zadoff (2007).
14. As late as 1977, Taubes would still signal this text as Scholem’s *non plus ultra* and suggest a collective German translation as a part of a proposed critical *festschrift* to Scholem: see Taubes (2006, p. 121). Scholem, whose hatred, anger, and fear of Taubes have just grown during the years, would not hear of that. See his response in Skinner (2002, p. 468) and the discussion below.
Taubes (2011, p. 78). Letter written on 3 November 1950. The syntax seems more

It should also be noted that at this early stage, Susan feels it quite convenient to sanguinely describe her deep attachment to

See Scholem (1971, pp. 130–32): “In order to ascend one must first descend. ‘No man can climb a mountain until he has first

19

18

17

16

15

(See, for instance, Irenaeus of Lyon, Adv. Haer. 1.30.7. Moreover, at least one gnostic sect, the Naassenes, was named after

The serpent was also crucial in the couple’s Sabbath ritual. They seemed to have believed that the candle signified its presence.

See, for instance, Susan’s letter from 6 October 1950 (Taubes 2011, p. 39). “My dear, the night of the Sabbath has entered and I

have lit the candle of the serpent . . . The serpent that is the \textit{AO}—the seducer and enchanter that leads away from the source only
to lead back to the source.”

See Scholem (1971, pp. 130–32): “In order to ascend one must first descend. ‘No man can climb a mountain until he has first
descended to its foot. Therefore we must descend and be cast down to the bottom rung, for only then can we climb to the infinite.’

These are some of the main features of Frank’s teaching. It is a veritable myth of religious nihilism . . . Indeed, to anyone
familiar with the history of religion it might seem far more likely that he was dealing here with an antimyth from the
second century composed by such nihilistic Gnostics as Carpocrates and his followers.” The quote comes from the Frankist work

Sayings of the Lord. For the similar argument of the 2nd century gnostic teacher Carpocrates, see Irenaeus of Lyon, Adv. Haer.
1.31.1–2.

It should also be noted that at this early stage, Susan feels it quite convenient to sanguinely describe her deep attachment to

Judaism, or at least to fellow Jews. In context of the cult, she writes: “I experienced very deeply the mystery of race the mystery
of my jewish blood at the very point of my sex where the blood is engendered; all is said in A\textit{O} it is the secret of man + woman
and of the race; and at this point I understand that a jew is clean to me as no man of another race” (Taubes 2011, p. 43; letter was
written on 8 October 1950).

His name appears in full in the original letters. It is abbreviated to J.C. in the edition to preserve his anonymity, due to the request
of his relatives. See Taubes (2011, p. 351). There are tantalizing hints that there were more participants, but nothing of certainty

can be deduced from the currently published evidence from Susan Taubes’s nachlass.

Taubes (2011, pp. 17–18). Letter was written on 15/16 September 1950.

As the one who convinced Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge, the serpent was classic clickbait in the gnostic retelling of

Genesis. See, for instance, Irenaeus of Lyon, \textit{Adv. Haer} 1.30.7. Moreover, at least one gnostic sect, the Naassenes, was named after

the Hebrew word for the serpent, \textit{Nahash}. Jonas discusses the Naassenes and the role of the serpent in gnosticism both in his

Jerusalem lectures and in his first volume of \textit{Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist} (see, for instance, Jonas 1934, pp. 221–23).

The serpent was also crucial in the couple’s Sabbath ritual. They seemed to have believed that the candle signified its presence.

See, for instance, Susan’s letter from 6 October 1950 (Taubes 2011, p. 39). “My dear, the night of the Sabbath has entered and I

have lit the candle of the serpent . . . The serpent that is the \textit{AO}—the seducer and enchanter that leads away from the source only
to lead back to the source.”

See Scholem (1971, pp. 130–32): “In order to ascend one must first descend. ‘No man can climb a mountain until he has first
descended to its foot. Therefore we must descend and be cast down to the bottom rung, for only then can we climb to the infinite.’

These are some of the main features of Frank’s teaching. It is a veritable myth of religious nihilism . . . Indeed, to anyone
familiar with the history of religion it might seem far more likely that he was dealing here with an antimyth from the
second century composed by such nihilistic Gnostics as Carpocrates and his followers.” The quote comes from the Frankist work

Sayings of the Lord. For the similar argument of the 2nd century gnostic teacher Carpocrates, see Irenaeus of Lyon, \textit{Adv. Haer}.
1.31.1–2.

It should also be noted that at this early stage, Susan feels it quite convenient to sanguinely describe her deep attachment to

Judaism, or at least to fellow Jews. In context of the cult, she writes: “I experienced very deeply the mystery of race the mystery
of my jewish blood at the very point of my sex where the blood is engendered; all is said in A\textit{O} it is the secret of man + woman
and of the race; and at this point I understand that a jew is clean to me as no man of another race” (Taubes 2011, p. 43; letter was
written on 8 October 1950).

His name appears in full in the original letters. It is abbreviated to J.C. in the edition to preserve his anonymity, due to the request
of his relatives. See Taubes (2011, p. 351). There are tantalizing hints that there were more participants, but nothing of certainty

can be deduced from the currently published evidence from Susan Taubes’s nachlass.

Taubes (2011, pp. 17–18). Letter was written on 15/16 September 1950.

As the one who convinced Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge, the serpent was classic clickbait in the gnostic retelling of

Genesis. See, for instance, Irenaeus of Lyon, \textit{Adv. Haer} 1.30.7. Moreover, at least one gnostic sect, the Naassenes, was named after

the Hebrew word for the serpent, \textit{Nahash}. Jonas discusses the Naassenes and the role of the serpent in gnosticism both in his

Jerusalem lectures and in his first volume of \textit{Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist} (see, for instance, Jonas 1934, pp. 221–23).

The serpent was also crucial in the couple’s Sabbath ritual. They seemed to have believed that the candle signified its presence.

See, for instance, Susan’s letter from 6 October 1950 (Taubes 2011, p. 39). “My dear, the night of the Sabbath has entered and I

have lit the candle of the serpent . . . The serpent that is the \textit{AO}—the seducer and enchanter that leads away from the source only
to lead back to the source.”

See Scholem (1971, pp. 130–32): “In order to ascend one must first descend. ‘No man can climb a mountain until he has first
descended to its foot. Therefore we must descend and be cast down to the bottom rung, for only then can we climb to the infinite.’

These are some of the main features of Frank’s teaching. It is a veritable myth of religious nihilism . . . Indeed, to anyone
familiar with the history of religion it might seem far more likely that he was dealing here with an antimyth from the
second century composed by such nihilistic Gnostics as Carpocrates and his followers.” The quote comes from the Frankist work

Sayings of the Lord. For the similar argument of the 2nd century gnostic teacher Carpocrates, see Irenaeus of Lyon, \textit{Adv. Haer}.
1.31.1–2.

It should also be noted that at this early stage, Susan feels it quite convenient to sanguinely describe her deep attachment to

Judaism, or at least to fellow Jews. In context of the cult, she writes: “I experienced very deeply the mystery of race the mystery
of my jewish blood at the very point of my sex where the blood is engendered; all is said in A\textit{O} it is the secret of man + woman
and of the race; and at this point I understand that a jew is clean to me as no man of another race” (Taubes 2011, p. 43; letter was
written on 8 October 1950).

His name appears in full in the original letters. It is abbreviated to J.C. in the edition to preserve his anonymity, due to the request
of his relatives. See Taubes (2011, p. 351). There are tantalizing hints that there were more participants, but nothing of certainty

can be deduced from the currently published evidence from Susan Taubes’s nachlass.


The syntax seems more \textit{ad sensum} than grammatical, but Susan’s

pejorative use of “arm-chair gnostics” is clear.

Taubes (2011, p. 89). Letter written on 12 November 1950. The phallic connotation is thoroughly meant. As late as 1952,

when the Taubeses’ cult seems to have dwindled considerably, Susan would still remember her moment of revelation: ” . . .

when I contemplate “spiritual” matters I don’t ponder about the justice of god—I confess I have absolutely no image of god—I

contemplate the hour when I held your phallus in my hand for the first time and it was the first time that I touched a man and I

am full of wonder and thanksgiving that this hour was given to me in the deepest purity and innocence.” See Taubes (2014, p. 78;
The feeling of living in an apocalyptic era in constant fear of “The Bomb” is very much present in the correspondence. In a letter as in the case of Taubes, there was also a personal reason for the deterioration of Scholem’s relationship with Jonas, i.e. Jonas 39 Eichmann in Jerusalem 38 Cf. (Wiese 2007, pp. 62–66). 37 The following seems to hint that Jonas believed Scholem’s cooperation with Quispel had a very different origin: “In the spirit Sontag (2012, p. 354). David Rieff has confirmed it in his interview to Muller (2022, p. 323). In his very last letter to Scholem, dated Dec. 5th, 1979, Jacob Taubes jokingly referred to this incident by saying that a Kabbalist of Scholem’s stature shouldn’t have waited until his mid-fifties to meet such iniquity (Taubes 2006, pp. 121–22). Scholem, however, was not amused. On the top of Jacob’s letter, he scribbled, apparently to himself, “I did not reply to such audacity [=chutzpah]” (Gershom Scholem archive, NLI, ARC. 4* 1599: 01 2623). Another incident that exemplifies Scholem’s near-mystical fear of Taubes was recounted by Jean Bollack: when Taubes appeared unannounced in the latter’s Paris home while Scholem was visiting, Scholem locked himself with his belongings in the bathroom and refused to exit until he was assured that Taubes had left (Taubes 2006, p. 115, n. 4; Muller 2022, p. 322); Taubes himself, evidently hurt, referred to this incident in his letter to Scholem dated 8 October 1968. Apparently, Scholem was far from being alone in his moral judgment regarding Jacob Taubes. According to Taubes’s biographer Jerry Z. Muller, quite a few people refused to be interviewed by him, saying that “Jacob Taubes was an evil man whose memory should be blotted out” (Muller 2022, p. 6). 32 See, for instance, the discussion in King (2003, pp. 176–90). 33 Although there were precedents, this later stage is first and foremost exemplified in Scholem (1965). 34 Jonas (1965, p. 289). The phrase also appears in mitzvah ha-ba’ah ba-averah (Scholem 1971, p. 104), but as we shall see shortly, it was important for Jonas to evoke Nazism as the historical context. It is clear that Jonas knew his criticism would anger Scholem: in the offprint of this article that he sent to Scholem and is currently in the Scholem Reading Room of the National Library of Israel, Jonas’s dedication reads: “Mit herzlichen Gruß und Hoffnung auf nur mäßigen Zorn.” 35 This was one of the strongest points of contention between Jonas and Arendt regarding her Eichmann in Jerusalem. In his memoirs, he writes: “To her . . . Zionism and National Socialism had something in common . . . she had the temerity to assert that the theory of eternal antisemitism was a Zionist invention . . . I was shocked . . . at the way she made us Jews, and especially Zionists, partially to blame for the Shoah” (Jonas 2008, pp. 180–81). Evidently, Jonas was no less shocked to find Scholem leading Arendt’s argument into the metaphysical realm, despite the acrid controversy and eventual total rift that Eichmann in Jerusalem provoked between Arendt and Scholem (see below). The following seems to hint that Jonas believed Scholem’s cooperation with Quispel had a very different origin: “In the spirit of generosity after the holocaust, our (the Jews’) credit for creativity has been vastly extended; and Jewish vanity, which is of course not lacking, might be pleased to welcome into the record even the disreputable, which in the present climate (with all the alienation going around) enjoys its own paradoxical prestige” (Jonas 1965, p. 291). Again, I do not believe it is a coincidence that Jonas brings Nazism to bear on this question. 36 Cf. (Wiese 2007, pp. 62–66). 37 Eichmann in Jerusalem resulted in a temporary rapport between Arendt and Jonas, and a constant one between Arendt and Scholem. For details, see Jonas (2008, pp. 181–82) and Knott (2017, pp. vii–xxvi and the relevant letters). 38 As in the case of Taubes, there was also a personal reason for the deterioration of Scholem’s relationship with Jonas, i.e. Jonas turned down an offer for a position at the Hebrew University that was essentially made possible by Scholem (cf. Wiese 2007, esp. pp. 53–60). 39 Interestingly enough, Baruch Kurzweil’s criticism of Scholem as delineated by Zadoff (2007, esp. pp. 313–19) seems to fit Jacob Taubes much more than Scholem, who, for his part, never embraced nihilism as such. No less interesting in our context is that Kurzweil also located the possibility of Scholem’s implicitly and inadvertently condoning a Nazi ideology (ibid, pp. 335–36) 40 The feeling of living in an apocalyptic era in constant fear of “The Bomb” is very much present in the correspondence. In a letter written 28 October 1950, Susan vividly describes a nightmare she had “ . . . Thursday nights I have my usual Sabbath nightmares.
Last time, just before I went to sleep I saw an H-Bomb dropped into N.Y. harbor and the ocean roared up in horrible flood of radio-active water and I could not escape. Then I dreamt the whole world was suddenly thrown in total darkness for days and weeks and I was locked in a room and could not move and could not even remember my father’s address. We are poor beings living in the valley of death."

Intriguingly, Taubes was well aware that Scholem could see through him, that their goals and methods were entirely different, and thus that their relationship was ill-omened from the start. Just weeks before he died, Taubes said in an interview to Peter Sloterdijk: “I’ll say something spiritual now, there was a small chance between Scholem and me, because Scholem understood all that without its having to be expressed in words, I couldn’t fool him … Scholem knew what pneumatic meant; he knew what ecstasy and mysticism are. He never confused himself with a mystic … He wanted something else; he wanted the renaissance of Jewish experience … be it the shabbiest type of Kabbalism, if it comes out of us, it is something” (as cited in Macho 2014, p. 39).

The first of these actually demonstrates how thoroughly Taubes was influenced by Jonas: “I asked Karl Löwith … do you know [Taubes’s] book … is it any good?” At that he said, laughing, “Oh, it is a very good book. And that’s no accident—half of it is by you, and the other half’s by me” (Jonas 2008, p. 168). The reference is to Jacob Taubes’s only book, which was essentially a revision of his dissertation: Occidental Eschatology (Taubes 2009). The original German version of the book was published in 1947.


References


