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INTRODUCTION

Why Taubes?

Scenes from the Life and Afterlife of Jacob Taubes

Vienna, March 1936. The bar mitzvah of Jacob Taubes in the synagogue on the Pazmanitengasse, one of the largest in Vienna, where his father is the rabbi. Jacob reads from the Torah and the Haftorah (the Pentateuch and the Prophets). His father addresses him, first in German and then in a Hebrew richly inflected with Biblical and Talmudic allusions. He reminds Jacob that he is the scion of a family of great distinction, going back centuries, with ancestors who include great masters of rabbinic law and Hasidic rebbes.

Sankt Gallen, Switzerland, December 1944. The radically anti-Zionist, ultra-Orthodox Rebbe of Satmar arrives from Nazi-occupied Hungary on a train carrying a handful of Jews, the beneficiary of negotiations between a Zionist official and the Nazis. As the Rebbe speaks none of Switzerland's official languages, young Jacob Taubes acts as his assistant.

New York, January 1949. Having recently received his rabbinic ordination and doctorate of philosophy in Zurich, Jacob is now being groomed at the Jewish Theological Seminary to become a major Jewish theologian. The seminary pays the philosopher Leo Strauss to tutor Jacob on the great medieval Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides. Jacob, in turn, runs a seminar on Maimonides attended by a small group of up-and-coming young Jewish intellectuals—including Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Irving Kristol—who will go on to become major figures in American academic and public life. He conveys to them, among other insights, Strauss's interpretation of the political functions of religion. That summer, they attend Jacob's wedding to Susan Feldmann.

Berlin, June 1967. The speakers' platform of the Auditorium Maximum of the Free University in Berlin where, having taught at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia universities, Jacob is now on the faculty. Three thousand students crowd into the auditorium to hear Jacob's friend, Herbert Marcuse, lecture on "The End of Utopia." There on the platform with Marcuse is the star of the student left, Rudi Dutschke, and its leading faculty mentor, Jacob Taubes.

Plettenberg, September 1978. The small Rhineland town, home to Carl Schmitt, to which Taubes has traveled to meet face to face with the aged political theorist. Once one of the most prominent academics in Germany, Schmitt has come to be vilified among democrats and liberals for his active support of the Hitler regime. But Taubes has long been fascinated with him. Among the topics Schmitt and Taubes discuss is the proper interpretation of the passages related to the Jews in Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

Jerusalem, August 1981. The podium of the World Congress of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University. Jacob Taubes draws a large crowd of scholars of Judaica who come to hear his critique of Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism and messianism, Taubes's erstwhile mentor, long turned enemy.

Heidelberg, February 1987. A Protestant educational institute, where Taubes, dying of cancer, offers a series of improvised lectures on the historical significance of the Apostle Paul. When he dies on March 21, he has not published a book since his doctoral dissertation in 1947, a work long out of print and barely read.

2022. A bookstore in Germany, France, or the United States. Four books by Taubes are now on the shelves: his republished doctoral dissertation, a collection of his essays, a booklet on Carl Schmitt, and an edited version of his lectures on the political theology of the Apostle Paul. Taubes's books have been translated into a dozen languages. His *Political Theology of Paul* has legitimated Paul as a radical figure, and a slew of European intellectuals, searching for new sources of inspiration after the discrediting of communism, take up the theme.

How did the ordained scion of a rabbinic family become an influential interpreter of Saint Paul? What was there about Taubes that led him to figures as diverse as Irving Kristol and Rudi Dutschke, Leo Strauss and Herbert Marcuse, Gershom Scholem and Carl Schmitt? And why were such a range of intellectual luminaries attracted to Jacob Taubes at one time or another?

Those are among the questions that this book tries to answer.

The life of Jacob Taubes covers a wide swath of the intellectual history of the twentieth century. Fate, cultural affinities, and an inner restlessness took him from interwar Vienna, to wartime Switzerland, to postwar New York, then to Israel in the years after the founding of the Jewish state, to several great American universities, and finally to the Free University in West Berlin, where he spent the largest portion of his adult life, with frequent visits to Paris, London, and Jerusalem. His was a restless existence, full of tension and contradictions. But those personal tensions and contradictions mirrored many larger issues: of religious belief versus scholarship; of allegiance to one's origins and the urge to escape them; of institutional membership and radical criticism; and above all, of the relationship between religion and politics.

It was Taubes's powerful mind and dramatic persona that seem to have attracted so remarkable a range of twentieth-century intellectuals in German-speaking Europe, the United States, France, and Israel. He was a repository of knowledge about the high culture of the West, both religious and secular—but also a storehouse of gossip about academics and intellectuals on three continents. He had a wide-ranging mind and was constantly on the lookout for large historical patterns. He was multilingual, fluent in German, English, French, Hebrew, and Yiddish, with a reading knowledge of Latin and Greek. He was, in some moods at least, a remarkable conversationalist, his talk full of energy, learning, and biting wit.

Yet, in interviewing scores of people who knew Jacob Taubes, I found the word most frequently used to describe him was “demonic”—a description used not only by his enemies, but by his friends. That designation is not entirely censorious, for in Plato it also connotes a semidivine source of creativity. Another adjective applied to Taubes was “Mephistophelian,” with a similarly dual connotation of danger and inspiration. And then, there were those who opted for the more unequivocal “Satanic.” Jacob Taubes exuded the fascination of the liminal and the paradoxical. For his was an existence on the border between Judaism and Christianity, between skepticism and belief, between scholarly distance and religious fervor. He was a man given to abstraction on the one hand, and carnality on the other. His was an erotic life in the many senses of the word.

During his lifetime and after, those who knew Jacob Taubes debated the depth, accuracy, and originality of his ideas. To some he seemed a genius, to others a charlatan, to yet others, “a con, but not a fraud.”¹ As we will see, there are plausible grounds for all of these judgments.

To those who knew him, Jacob Taubes could be a source of joy and mirth, but he was both tormented and capable of tormenting others. He thrived on disorder and created disorder around him. He could elevate lives and wreck them. That is why Jacob Taubes was the object of love, fascination, fear, and antipathy—often by the same individual in successive phases of encounter.

But this book is not only about Jacob Taubes the man. It uses his biography to reconstruct a series of intellectual milieus in which Taubes operated. Those include the interactions between Christian and Jewish theologians in the shadow of the Holocaust; the New York Jewish intellectuals in the postwar decade; the Hebrew University in the late 1940s and early 1950s; the establishment of the academic study of religion in the United States in the 1950s; the creation of Jewish studies in West Germany; and the radicalization and deradicalization of German academic life from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Taubes is of particular interest as an intellectual conduit and a merchant of ideas between the American and German intellectual contexts from the 1940s through the 1980s, roles rarely explored in the writing of modern intellectual history. Ideas do not move across national and linguistic boundaries by their own force. Their transfer depends on the ability of individuals to stimulate others to take particular ideas seriously. That includes those who act as advisors and editors at journals and publishing houses, or who bring together intellectuals from a variety of disciplines or nations in academic conferences. Taubes played all of those roles. He was a self-appointed spotter and promoter of talent.

Taubes's published output was modest. But that is by no means an accurate measure of his influence, which often took the form of suggestions to others about unexpected lines of inquiry—or of experience—that they might pursue. He was influential behind the scenes, a secret agent in the academic world. The thinkers who get the most attention from historians tend to be those who exert influence through systematic and coherent research and inquiry. But then there are figures like Taubes—less easily documented, but not necessarily less significant in intellectual life—whose impact takes more diffuse forms.

Though Jacob Taubes may not have been among the most profound intellectuals of the twentieth century, his life is among the most interesting. He traversed different religious camps, political orientations, and national contexts. The intellectual and spiritual dilemmas he confronted were among the most pressing and widely shared of the age.

For many of those who encountered him as a teacher, Taubes embodied intellectualism as a way of life: a person who not only thought about ideas, but could impart them with verve. His breadth of knowledge, brilliance of insight, and sharpness of wit could dazzle. Though he spent most of his life in academic settings and taught at some of the most distinguished universities in the world, he was anything but a typical professor—nor did he seek to be. He aspired to be less a scholar than a seer. His self-appointed role was that of a gnostic, apocalypticist, or revolutionist—a man who fed on crisis, constantly on the lookout for signs of the impending destruction and transformation of a world perceived as evil or corrupted. To some that made him inspiring, to others frightening, to some a treasure, to others a purveyor of fool's gold.

This book combines several genres. It is a biography of a colorful, dramatic, and enigmatic personality, portraying his struggles, inner and outer conflicts, his achievements and disappointments. Because it is the biography of an intellectual, it is perforce a study of the ideas with which he wrestled and what he did with them. And because its protagonist was in conversation with so many of the leading intellectuals in Europe, Israel, and the United States, it is also a mosaic of twentieth-century intellectual life and an intellectual Baedeker, that is, a guide to key figures, schools, ideas, and controversies. As such, it tries to provide readers unacquainted with one or another thinker or milieu with enough information to make sense of the matters at hand. Since there are few readers who will be equally familiar with Christian “crisis theology,” the Frankfurt School of critical theorists, the radical Hasidic sect of Toldot Aharon, and debates over “political theology,” my hope is that readers already conversant with one or another of these will keep in mind that other readers will find these subjects terra incognita. My intention is that readers will find themselves learning about new intellectual worlds and the surprising ways in which Jacob Taubes managed to travel among them, as a facilitator, promoter, and connecting node.

My interest in Taubes was motivated in the first instance by two concerns. One was intellectual: to explore a chapter in the relationship between religion and politics, between religious belief and the historical and philosophical critique of religion, and religious critiques of modern liberal society—a twentieth-century chapter in a story that begins in the seventeenth century with Hobbes and Spinoza.

The second was the challenge of trying to explain the life of an enigmatic thinker and to discover why so many twentieth-century intellectuals

found him of interest. In December 2003, I met up with Irving Kristol and his wife, Gertrude Himmelfarb, after a public lecture on Leo Strauss, during which the speaker had discussed Strauss's analysis of Maimonides in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. I asked the couple whether they remembered a seminar I had heard about on Maimonides with Jacob Taubes, in which they had participated more than half a century earlier. Irving's eyes lit up: Remember? Of course he did, for Jacob Taubes was unforgettable, "the only really charismatic intellectual" he had met. "Someone should write something about him," Irving averred. I took up the challenge of trying to reconstruct and recapture the life of a charismatic intellectual.

A Note on Sources and on Psychology

The most important vector of influence for most intellectuals is through their publications. But not for Taubes, who, as we will see, had trouble writing for publication. Taubes actually wrote a great deal, but in the form of letters to colleagues, friends, and occasionally, enemies. Thus in reconstructing his life, I have made extensive use of his letters—scattered in archives and repositories in Europe, Israel, and the United States. Once I embarked on this project, over a decade ago, it became clear to me that one of the most important sources for understanding his life and influence was through those who had known him, and that, given the limits of human longevity, some of his peers would not be around much longer. I therefore made a point of interviewing as many people as possible who knew Taubes at various stages of his life, from his bar mitzvah in Vienna through his death in Berlin. That has involved over one hundred interviews, some by telephone, many in person. Most of those I approached were eager to talk about Taubes; but not a few refused, sometimes with comments like "Jacob Taubes was an evil man whose memory should be blotted out."

Memories, of course, must be treated with caution, for they are always partial and often reflect retrospective judgments. I have used them primarily in conjunction with archival or published sources, and wherever possible have tried to rely on multiple interviews to establish the facts. But Jacob Taubes was a person about whom many tales were told, both by others and by Taubes himself. These tales are themselves part of his story.

I have found indispensable the novel *Divorcing*, published in 1969 by Jacob's former wife, Susan Taubes. Though a work of fiction and hence of

the creative imagination, it draws very heavily on the actual lives of Jacob and Susan Taubes, which are portrayed through a variety of lenses, some comic, some surrealistic. Nevertheless, there are times when the novel points to events that help illuminate archival sources. Used with caution, it provides yet another source from which to reconstruct the extraordinary life and times of Jacob Taubes.

When he was in his early fifties, Taubes suffered from a major episode of clinical depression, which was diagnosed as bipolar disorder, a condition characterized by periods of euphoria and high energy, alternating with periods of despair and lassitude. After treatment, he continued to cycle through manic and depressive phases of varying intensity. But like many who experience his form of the illness (what diagnosticians term “Bipolar II”), its symptoms appeared much earlier, in the milder form of hypomania. That is a moderately manic condition, characterized by a profusion of ideas and fluency in associating ideas with one another.²

Hypomanics frequently exhibit enhanced liveliness, interpersonal charm, and a high degree of perceptiveness, together with a sometimes uncanny ability to find vulnerable spots in others and to make use of them.³ When in the hypomanic state, they are prone to “excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high potential for painful consequences.”⁴ While manic depression is debilitating, the condition, especially in its milder form of hypomania, can also be a source of intellectual energy, creativity, and personal effervescence. It is part of what made Jacob Taubes both charismatic and puzzling. It would be reductive to explain Jacob Taubes’s character as a symptom of an underlying biological condition, but to ignore the role of biology in accounting for personality would be equally fallacious.

A Note on Names

Jacob and his family functioned in a variety of languages—German, Hebrew, Yiddish, and English—and the spelling of their names varied accordingly. To spare the reader from unnecessary complications, I have tried to employ a single spelling for each name. For the first twenty-three years of his life, Jacob’s name was spelled “Jakob,” in the German fashion. When he first moved to the United States, he changed it to “Jacob,” the spelling he retained thereafter. Jacob’s father spelled his name “Zwi,” pronounced “Tzvi.” Jacob’s sister’s name was Mirjam, pronounced “Miriam.”



FIGURE 0.1. Jacob Taubes, Bar Mitzvah, Vienna, 1936. (Ethan and Tania Taubes Collection.)

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