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From Aher to Marcion:

Martin Buber's Understanding of Gnosis



Mohr Siebeck

# From Aher to Marcion: Martin Buber's Understanding of Gnosis<sup>1</sup>

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## *Introduction*

In 1902 a young Martin Buber published his poem cycle “Elisha Ben Abuya, Called Aher.” One poem, “Redemption,” describes Rabbi Meir, Aher’s disciple as follows: “Of the pious ones and who was privileged / To gaze into the mystery and to fly / To the other kingdom. He came and said ‘Enough!’”<sup>2</sup> It goes on to depict R. Meir saying that if God will not free Aher, then he will. This is of course a reference to the famous talmudic story on the four rabbis that entered Pardes, the garden of mystical knowledge. Elisha Ben Abuya, known as Aher, was the third of them and “mutilated the shoots,” i. e., went apostate (bHagigah 14b). He has since been considered in Judaism a signifier of Gnostic heresy; it is said that he saw Metatron and presumed to know a different divine authority besides God (bHagigah 15a).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has greatly benefited from Dan Avnon’s unrelenting support and encouragement, as well as from the helpful comments of Guy Stroumsa, Klaus Herrmann, Ron Makleff and an anonymous reviewer. I also wish to thank the Shoshana and Milton Shier Jewish Political Thought Scholarship and the Center for German Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for their support.

<sup>2</sup> Originally appeared as “Erlösung” in *Ost und West* 2.8 (1902) 541–542. This translation is from Martin Buber, *The First Buber: Youthful Zionist Writings of Martin Buber*, trans. and ed. Gilya G. Schmidt (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999) 133. In this article, translations are mine but often rely on existing ones, in which case I refer to the published English version as well.

<sup>3</sup> On Aher, see Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abuya and Eleazar Ben Aruch* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). On the etymology of the name Aher as related to Gnosis, see Guy Stroumsa, “Aher: A Gnostic,” *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, ed. Bentley Layton (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1980–81) 2.818. There is a divergence of opinions in current research as to the figures of Metatron and Aher. Peter Schäfer claims that Metatron should be understood as a rabbinical response to the New Testament, and the message

Buber's early affection for Aher is telling; it is an embrace of a heretic figure, probably the most well known heretic figure in Judaism. Buber was not alone in his fascination: the figure of the "heretic Jew" was appropriated around that time by many young Jews, who found in those figures a Jewish self-assurance that was lacking in their era.<sup>4</sup> While Buber did not write on Aher after this early period, his thought would constantly return to the idea of Gnostic redemption. Near the end of his life, in his detailed reply to his critics, he once again addressed the question of Gnosis, this time much more negatively:

I am against Gnosis because and insofar as it alleges that it can report events and processes within the divinity. I am against it because and insofar as it makes God into an object whose nature and history one knows one's way about. I am against it because in the place of the personal relation of the human person to God it sets a communion-rich wandering through an upper world, through a multiplicity of divine spheres.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that Buber wished to emphasize his objection to Gnosis in one of the last sections of his long and detailed reply is in itself a sign of the importance he attributed to it.

The centrality of Gnosis in understanding Buber's corpus has gone largely unnoticed.<sup>6</sup> Two scholarly contributions anticipate this direction: Guy Stroumsa's analysis of Buber as an historian of religion exposes some important archive material and analyzes Buber's relation to Gnosis in this area. Yet, important as it may be, this addresses only one aspect of Buber's varied thought. Rémi Brague maps the appearances

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conveyed in Aher's story is that "[h]eaven is a dangerous and unsafe territory, and human beings had better avoid it and stay with their fellow rabbis on earth"; see Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 234–237, 330. Daniel Boyarin, on the other hand, suggests seeing the figures of Metatron and Aher as both stemming from a tradition within Judaism, "which have been anathematized as heresy by the authors of the story"; Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms: Metatron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 41 (2010) 346.

<sup>4</sup> The turn of the century was a flourishing time for German-Jewish culture; see Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 22–31. Beside Aher, there was a renewed interest in other heretics like Spinoza and Sabbatai Zevi. On this tendency in Jewish thought, see Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 141–143.

<sup>5</sup> Buber, "Replies to my Critics," in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp and Maurice Friedman (Illinois: Open Court, 1967) 716–717 and 742–743.

<sup>6</sup> Under the term Gnosis I combine both what has been understood as the social movements in antiquity (Gnosticism) and the general claim of mystical knowledge (Gnosis). As will be shown, Buber, like many of his contemporaries, did not explicitly differentiate between the two.

of Gnosis in Buber's thought, but his work ignores its historical context and thus fails to capture the unique gist of Buber's argument.<sup>7</sup>

The current article contends that the locus of Martin Buber's thought in both his mystical and dialogical periods can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with Gnosis. While in his mystical period he was more prone to Gnostic tendencies, from the time of the First World War he recognized Gnosis as a threat to humanity – a threat his own thought had to confront.<sup>8</sup> First, Buber's understanding of Gnosis will be presented and put in its historical context. Second, Gnosis as knowledge in Buber's thought will be analyzed, with special emphasis on the mystical period. Third, the dualism in Gnosis will be discussed, and it will be shown as an important factor in Buber's critique of Pauline Christianity. Finally, the connection between Gnosis and politics will be made by examining Buber and Rosenzweig's translation of the Bible as an anti-Gnostic act and Buber's alternative to Gnosis, the Kingship of God.

### *Definitions of Gnosis in Buber's Time*

Gnosis (Greek for "knowledge") typically refers to the teachings of groups active in the first several centuries CE which had common ideological ground, even if not necessarily a shared origin.<sup>9</sup> Known as Gnos-

<sup>7</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, "Buber as a Historian of Religion: Presence, not Gnosis" in *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2002) 25–47 and Remi Bargue, "How to Be in the World: Gnosis, Religion, Philosophy," in Mendes-Flohr, *Buber: Contemporary Perspective*, 133–147. For the view that *Religionswissenschaft* is essential in assessing Buber's corpus, see also Michael Zank, "Buber and *Religionswissenschaft*: The Case of His Studies on Biblical Faith" in *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*, ed. Michael Zank (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 61–68.

<sup>8</sup> The common distinction in research sees *I and Thou*, published in German in 1923, as the turning point from the early mystical period to the dialogical one. On the influences of the mystic period on the dialogical one, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Von der Mystik zum Dialog: Martin Bubers geistige Entwicklung bis hin zu "Ich und Du,"* trans. Dafna Kries (Königstein: Jüdischer Verlag, 1979). For the way leading to *I and Thou*, see Rivka Horowitz, *Buber's Way to 'I and Thou': An Historical Analysis and First Publication of Martin Buber's Lectures: 'Religion und Gegenwart'* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1978). Avnon suggests a threefold division, with the third period, described by Avnon as "Attentive Silence," starting in 1938 after Buber arrived in Israel; see Dan Avnon, *Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) 42–45.

<sup>9</sup> This is made clear, for example, by the title of Hans Jonas' important work *The Gnostic Religions*, a name implying plurality but at the same time a common core; see Jonas, *The Gnostic Religions: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginning of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963). This is the English modified edition of his classic work *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*.

tics, these groups were quickly labeled heretical by the emerging Church in the second century CE, and Gnosis was subsequently used in theological discourse as a derogatory term, at least until the end of 19th century.<sup>10</sup> Buber uses it mostly in this negative manner.

Research on Gnosis has often been concerned with the exact origin of this religious phenomenon. During the Weimar Republic, the focus of research was the Persian and Babylonian origins of Gnosis, based on the works of Wilhelm Bousset and Richard Reitzenstein.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Buber held something of a mainstream view: he claimed that Gnosis originated from Iranian dualism, perhaps under Babylonian influences, and then spread to other religions. However, he never bothers to explain or ground this assumption. This is not just an academic discussion. What is at stake here is the purity of the religions: if the origin of Gnosis can be traced to a certain religion, then this religion inherently contains something deemed heretical. Hence it is clear why Buber, although recognizing Gnostic elements in Kabbalah, rejects the idea of Judaism as a possible source of Gnosis.<sup>12</sup> Even while he shows interest in Gnostic ideas, he nonetheless deflects what he deems a pejorative accusation against Judaism.

The core of Gnostic teaching as it was understood during the Weimar period contained several basic elements.<sup>13</sup> 1) Dualism: a strict separation between a good, transcendent God and the world that is considered to

<sup>10</sup> Especially since the finding of Nag Hammadi scrolls, this view has been strongly contended and Gnosticism has been reassessed. See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) xxxv–xxxvi.

<sup>11</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, “Gnosis and Judaism in Nineteenth Century Christian Thought,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 (1992) 46. For the commonality of the Iranian assumption during the Weimar period, see Manfred Bauschulte, *Religionsbahnhöfe der Weimarer Republik: Studien zur Religionsforschung 1918–1933* (Munich: Diagonal, 2007) 249–250.

<sup>12</sup> According to Michael Brenner, “Whoever looked for a historical battlefield to fight contemporary wars was well served by scholarly discussion concerning the relationship between Judaism and Gnosticism”; Brenner, “Gnosis and History: Polemics of German-Jewish Identity from Graetz to Scholem,” *New German Critique* 77 (1999) 46. For Buber on Gnostic elements in Kabbalah, see “Die Anfänge,” *Werke III: Schriften zum Chassidismus* (Munich: Kösel, 1963) [hereafter *Werke III*] 763. The claims of a possible Jewish origin are widespread in research. See Guy G. Stroumsa, “Gnosticism” in *Contemporary Religious Jewish Thought*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York: Free Press, 1988) 28. Also Jacob Taubes, “Der dogmatische Mythos der Gnosis,” in *Vom Kult zur Kultur*, ed. Aleida Assman et al. (Munich: Fink, 2007) 112. The view of Daniel Boyarin, discussed in n. 2, seems to suggest a similar understanding.

<sup>13</sup> The ideas in this paragraph are based on Jonas, *Gnostic Religions*, 42–47; on the importance of the *Urmensch* in the Weimar Republic, see Bauschulte, *Religionsbahnhöfe*, 243–245.

be evil by its nature and governed by a tyrant force different from the true God (*Demiurge*). 2) The person and his redemption stand at the center of the teaching: against the existence of this world, there is said to be a possibility of redemption through Gnosis, mystic knowledge that transcends the limits of this world and its dualism. In most cases this knowledge is considered limited only to a predestined selected group, i. e., members of the Gnostic sect. 3) Central to research during the Weimar period was the mythos of the “primal man” (*Urmensch*), someone who is said to be perfect and able to redeem others from the existence of the evil world. Although Buber never states this explicitly, his reference to Gnosis is always related to one or more of those points; he was in line with the research on Gnosis but used it in a rather broad form.<sup>14</sup>

The renewed interest in Gnosis during the Weimar Republic was part of the theological and philosophical crisis of a traumatized post-World War I society. Gnosis offered a negative view of human existence with a glimmer of redemption and was therefore fitting for the general mood both in academia and outside of it. In theology, this was marked by the birth of “crisis theology,” epitomized in Karl Barth’s commentary on *Epistle to the Romans* that emphasized the complete otherness of God.<sup>15</sup> In the aftermath of World War I, Buber came to see Gnosis not as the ancient remnants of a historical religion but as an alienated mindset recurring throughout history that “posited against the good power of God another primal power, which stands against it and works that which is evil.”<sup>16</sup> It is in light of the actuality of Gnosis and its manifestations that Buber’s relation to it should be understood, as a confluence of his time on his understanding of Gnosis, and vice versa.

<sup>14</sup> Brague is right in stating that Buber uses the concept in a broad way. He is wrong, however, to claim that Buber levels it “bluntly” (Brague, “How to Be,” 136).

<sup>15</sup> On the impact of the “crisis theology” on several Jewish thinkers during the Weimar Republic, see Lazier, *God Interrupted*, 40–42. On the cultural effects of this alienation, see Peter Gay’s classic study *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), esp. ch. 3–4.

<sup>16</sup> “Spinoza, Sabbatai Zwi und der Baalschem,” *Werke* III, 749; “Spinoza, Sabbatai Zvi, and Baal-Shem,” *Origin and Meaning of Hasidim*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988) 105. Silberstein rightly emphasizes alienation as a central theme in Buber’s work, but does not elaborate on the connection between alienation and Gnosis; in fact, he does not mention the importance of Gnosis at all. See Laurence Silberstein, *Martin Buber’s Social and Religious Thought: Alienation and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: New York University Press, 1989).

*Aher: Gnosis as Knowledge*

Gnostic knowledge is the claim to knowledge of the divine, often gained through mysticism and divine inspiration.<sup>17</sup> In his 1928 lecture “The Faith of Judaism,” Buber states that the threats to religion are Gnosis and magic, the latter waning as a religious experience through history, while Gnosis as the “perception of knowable mystery” remained.<sup>18</sup> The unique perception that Gnosis claims to have upon the nature of divinity is identified by Buber as a danger to the relationship with God. For him, the idea that knowledge allows a person to transcend this world and reach God without any dialogue with the divinity is highly problematic: the Gnosis replaces unmediated contact with God in this world in favor of self-redemption through leaving this world.

However, in the mystical period of his thought Buber was enthralled by the idea that a human being can reach divine space through his or her own *Erlebnis*, intense inner experience. Therefore, before moving on to examine Buber’s critique of Gnosis as knowledge, an excursus concerning the role mysticism played in the Buber’s thought is called for. Buber’s interest in the mystical goes back to his very early writings, but it reached its height with the first publications of the Hasidic tales (1906–1908) and the collection *Ecstatic Confessions* (1909). Traces of mystical tendencies are evident in the emphasis of the early Buber on the role of the human in the realization of reality, a view which appears in his book *Daniel*, as well as in the early *Addresses on Judaism*.<sup>19</sup> These notions of realization seem similar to the Gnostic notion of redemption. One should discern, however, between this type of mysticism and Gnosis. Even during his mystical period Buber does not conceive of the world as dualistic: his mysticism tries to reach unity with the world and in it through *Erlebnis* – and not through transcending the world. Thus, Buber does not negate the world in a Gnostic fashion but rather tries to fill it with meaning.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, xix

<sup>18</sup> “Der Glaube des Judentums,” *Der Jude und sein Judentum* (Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1993) [hereafter *JJ*] 191; “The Faith of Israel,” *Israel and the World Today: Essays in Times of Crisis* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987) 22. For the emphasis on the importance of Gnosis in comparison to magic, see Stroumsa, “Buber as Historian,” 33.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, *Daniel: Gespräche von der Verwirklichung* (Leipzig: Insel, 1913); Buber, “Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum,” *JJ*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> See Paul Mendes-Flohr’s editorial introduction to *Ecstatic Confessions*, trans. Esther Cameron (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996) xviii. In this sense Buber is much closer to a pantheistic view than to Gnosis.

As late as 1917 Gnostic elements in Buber's thought are still evident. In a letter to Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, he makes a clear reference to Gnostic thinking by using the term *Adam Kadmon* (primal man).<sup>21</sup> Yet in the same letter, he also emphasizes that redemption is to be conducted in this world, not by transcending it. This ambivalent relation to Gnosis shows that near the end of World War I Buber abandoned the mystical experience as the human being's mode of self-realization. At the outset of hostilities, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the war, and in a regrettable remark wrote to Hans Kohn that he felt sorry he could not be drafted.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, his enthusiasm for the war should be understood in light of his mystical thought: the Great War, as an all-encompassing event, seemed to Buber to offer the possibility of realizing the human spirit and enabling an *Erlebnis* of unprecedented magnitude.<sup>23</sup> The war had a profound impact on his thought and on his rejection of Gnosis, as he came to recognize its destructive elements, physical and spiritual. Some prominent thinkers, however, remained skeptical of Buber's transformation: for Gershom Scholem, for example, Buber was and remained throughout his life a mystical thinker with Gnostic tendencies.<sup>24</sup>

After moving away from mysticism, Buber was highly troubled by those traces of what can be understood as world-negation in his thought, and it should come as no wonder that in later writings he thought to elaborate and re-interpret his early sayings. For example, concerning *Erlebnis* he explains in his preface to the 1923 edition of his *Addresses on Judaism* that "*Erlebnis* is of concern to me only insofar as it is an event or, in other words, insofar as it pertains to the real God."<sup>25</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr observes that, in compiling the 1923 edition, Buber omitted entire passages of his own work that did not fit his new views. One such statement, present in the earlier edition of

<sup>21</sup> Entry dated 4. 12. 1917 in *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, ed. Grete Schaeder (3 vols.; Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1975) 1.516, esp. n 3.

<sup>22</sup> Buber to Hans Kohn on 30. 9. 1914; quoted in Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Buber bein leumanut lemystica," in *Kidma Venafto'leha* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2010) 296.

<sup>23</sup> *Ekstatische Konfessionen* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1984) xxv.

<sup>24</sup> On Buber's leaving mysticism, see his autobiographical fragment "Bekehrung" (conversion, or Hebrew *tshuva*) in "Zwiesprache," *Werke I: Schriften zur Philosophie* (Munich: Kösel, 1962) [hereafter *Werke I*] 186–187; on the decisive impact of his friend Gustav Landauer in this change, see Mendes-Flohr, "Buber bein leumanut," 305–312. For Scholem's view, see his "Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidim," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, trans. Michael Meyer (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971) 240–241. More recently, Yossef Schwarz has said, "While I would not like to argue with the fact that Buber did go through a dramatic political crisis ... I am less convinced of a transition concerning the basic religious motivations underlying his political thought"; Schwarz, "The Politicization of the Mystical in Martin Buber and His Contemporaries," in Zank, *New Perspectives*, 216.



*Addresses* but not the 1923 edition, is Buber's claim that there is a duality of existence from which Jews can free themselves through devotion to the "ground of being."<sup>26</sup>

In light of his dialogical philosophy, but based on his already existing ambivalent relation to modernity, Buber's critique of Gnosis as knowledge should also be understood as a critique of rationalism and the sciences, which saw reason as the dominating factor of human existence. For Buber, over-rationalization brings the human being to terrible loneliness, as rational philosophy sanctifies human cognitive abilities and detaches itself from concrete reality.<sup>27</sup> It makes God an abstract metaphysical entity or a thought-product and turns the moment of meeting into an It:

The encounter with God does not come to the human in order that he may henceforth occupy himself with God but in order that he may prove its meaning in action in the world. All revelation is a calling and a mission. But again and again human shuns actualization ... he would rather occupy himself with God than with the world.<sup>28</sup>

Revelation, as meeting with God, should be realized in this world. Against Gnosis, based on his interpretation of Hasidim Buber suggests *devotio* – worshiping of God as present, as standing in a relationship with the human being.<sup>29</sup> While *devotio* might be connected to knowledge, the latter is only part of revelation. Knowledge (i. e., Gnosis) cannot force revelation; according to Buber nothing can.<sup>30</sup> Buber rejects through the *devotio* the complete knowledge of the divine promised by Gnosis.<sup>31</sup> Thus, what frightens Buber in Gnosis is not the pursuit of knowledge as such, but the fact that the Gnostic emphasis on knowledge

<sup>25</sup> Buber, "Preface to the 1923 Edition," *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum Glatzer, trans. Eva Jospe (New York: Schocken, 1967) 9; Buber, "Vorrede – die frühen Reden," *JJ*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Buber's Conception of God," *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1991) 242.

<sup>27</sup> Buber, "Chreuth," *JJ*, 129–130; on Buber's critique of the sciences as giving the modern person a lot of information but detaching her from the relation to the objects of knowledge, see Buber, "Der Chassidismus und der abendländische Mensch," *Werke* III, 945; Ehud Luz, "Buber's Hermeneutics: The Road to the Revival of the Collective Memory and Religious Faith," *Modern Judaism* 15 (February 1995) 79–80.

<sup>28</sup> Buber, "Ich und Du," *Werke* I, 157; Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996) 164.

<sup>29</sup> Buber, "Christus, Chassidismus, Gnosis," *Werke* III, 952.

<sup>30</sup> Buber, "Zwiesprache," 183. For Buber's concept of revelation, see Yehoshua Amir, "Emanah Vehitgalut etzel Mordechai Martin Buber," *Bar-Ilan* 22–23 (1988) 287–302.

<sup>31</sup> Buber, "Fragmente über Offenbarung," *Nachlese* (Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1993) 99. For the claim that *devotio* can be seen as preliminary to Gnosis, see S. H.

detaches the person from dialogue with God. Knowledge belongs to the realm of the It, which Buber recognizes as a precondition for existence, but not as the meaning of it: “without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not a human being.”<sup>32</sup>

Buber’s critique of modernity in general and of rationalist philosophy in particular shows similarity to the thought of Martin Heidegger. Both criticized modernity for alienating the modern person from the true essence of being human; both were inspired by the classical texts of their culture (biblical and the pre-Socratic), as well as Nietzsche; more importantly, both called for a radical change in the way one should perceive the ontological presupposition concerning human beings. Buber emphasized the Between (*Zwischenmenschliche*) as the basic category of human existence, while Heidegger called for a fundamental ontology that would explore the nature of *Dasein* and being-in-the-world.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps due to these similarities, Buber explicitly rejected any attempt to connect his own philosophy with Heidegger. In a letter to Maurice Friedman, he stated, “It may not happen so, that you bring my thought close to the Heideggerian one, to which I stand in opposition more than ever.”<sup>34</sup>

In 1938, after five years under mounting pressure from the National Socialist regime, Buber emigrated to Palestine and was appointed as a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.<sup>35</sup> His first lecture series was dedicated to “The Problem of the Human.” In it, Buber reprimands Heidegger for his analysis of human existence, which, according to Buber, appears to offer knowledge of the true being but in fact makes one more lonesome and alienated by closing the possibility of dialogue:

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Bergman, “Martin Buber and Mysticism,” in Schlipp and Friedman, *Philosophy*, 306–307.

<sup>32</sup> Buber, “Ich und Du,” 101; Buber, *I and Thou*, 85.

<sup>33</sup> A full survey of the complicated relation between their philosophies is beyond the scope of this article. Some recent scholarly works on the subject include Leora Batnitzky, “Revelation and Neues Denken – Rethinking Buber and Rosenzweig on the Law,” in Zank, *New Perspectives*, 153–159; Haim Gordon, *The Heidegger-Buber Controversy: The Status of the I–Thou* (Westport: Greenwood, 2001). See also the study by Michael Theunissen, *Der Andere: Studien zur Sozialontologie der Gegenwart* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965) 266–273. All of the above do not seem to take Buber’s critique of Heidegger qua Gnostic as significant to his understanding of Heidegger.

<sup>34</sup> Buber to Maurice Friedman on 11. 8. 1951; see *Briefwechsel*, 3.289. In the same letter Buber says that everything that he does is “ontology” but that he has no “ontological system,” another allusion to Heidegger.

<sup>35</sup> On Buber’s years in Nazi Germany and his work as in the field of education, see Akiva Ernst Simon, *Aufbau im Untergang: Jüdische Erwachsenenbildung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland als geistiger Widerstand* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1959). For an almost unbelievable tragi-comic account of Buber’s encounter with the Gestapo, see Schalom Ben-Chorin, *Zwiesprache mit Martin Buber* (Munich: List, 1966) 29–30.

We enter a strange room of the spirit, but we feel as if the ground we tread is a board game and the rules are to be experienced as we move forward, deep rules which we ponder, and must ponder, but yet they arose and persist only through a decision, which was once reached, to play this intellectual game and to play it in this very way.<sup>36</sup>

After World War II, in the article "Religion and Modern Thinking," Buber will imply that Heidegger's thought is Gnostic, because it enables the *Dasein* to summon God to him, to give God re-birth through the illumination of human thoughts. In other words, in Heidegger's system, God is subsumed to human will and knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

Buber's objection to Gnosis as knowledge helps explain how he rejects at once both rationality and the modern modes of thought proposed by Heidegger and Jung.<sup>38</sup> For Buber, during his dialogical period, such claims are hubris, endangering the dialogue with God by detaching God from the world by means of objectification and the claim to know God's essence. This detachment of God from the world is indeed a symptom of Gnostic dualism, to which we turn next.

### *Paulus: Gnosis as Dualism*

The dichotomy between God and the world that plays such a central role in Gnostic thinking is abhorrent to Buber. True, he says, we perceive the world as duality, but this is only human perception. Commenting on the opening lines of *I and Thou*, he says: "I do not say that the world is twofold, rather the world is twofold *to man*. I do not thereby say anything concerning anything existing independently of man."<sup>39</sup> This view

<sup>36</sup> "Das Problem des Menschen," *Werke* I, 362; *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Smith (London: Kegan Paul, 1947) 165. Heidegger is the only living philosopher analyzed in this lecture series, and it is therefore all the more noteworthy that while Heidegger had already become a member of the Nazi party in 1933, Buber does not mention his affiliation with the regime. Only after the end of World War II will Buber make an explicit comment on this issue. See David Novak, "Buber's Critique of Heidegger," *Modern Judaism* 5 (May 1985) 126.

<sup>37</sup> "Religion und modernes Denken," *Werke* I, 558–559; "Religion and Modern Thinking," *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952) 72.

<sup>38</sup> Buber's objections to Jung are beyond the scope of this article. It is worthwhile to note, however, that in this context Buber stands in contrast to the general embrace of the Eranos project, which was inspired by Jung, by the most renowned scholars of history of religion at the time. See Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> Sydney Rome and Beatrice Rome, eds., *Philosophical Interrogations* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) 85. Emphasis in original. The opening lines of *I and Thou* read:

of perceived duality seems to have emerged from Buber's own life-experience, since his thought has a dualistic character: You-It, distance-relationship, moment-eternity, *emunah-pistis*, and others.<sup>40</sup>

The tendency to see the world as polar, as Buber formulated it before World War I, is especially notable among the Jews.<sup>41</sup> However, for Buber the Jew does not deteriorate into Gnostic dualism. Feeling the duality in his life, the Jew strives for unity and unification. Through the concept of unification (*yihud*), a Hasidic concept that originally concerned the unification between God and the Hasid, Buber presents a holistic perspective; for him, perceiving the world as unity is an important character of the Jew as a person and of Judaism: "[the Jew] sees the forest more truly than the trees, the sea more truly than the wave, and the community more truly than the individual."<sup>42</sup> This quote shows that the striving for unification is not seen as a mere mental construct but as the way in which a Jew experiences the physical world. Against Buber, Scholem claimed that *yihud* in Hasidic literature holds not the existentialist positive meaning that Buber attributes to it, but rather the opposite: it is an annihilation of the world. Scholem's criticism only reinforces the fact that Buber's understanding and use of *yihud* is a pertinent polemic against Gnosis.<sup>43</sup>

Duality is experienced by the Jew as suffering because he strives for unification without necessarily achieving it. According to Buber, this is epitomized in the words of the Jew Saul of Tarsus: "For that which I work, I understand not. For I do not that good which I will; but the evil which I hate, that I do" (Romans 7:15). Saul could not live with this tension, as many Jews before and after him did, but rather concluded that the world could not be redeemed because the works of the Torah could never be fulfilled. For Buber, this inability to live with the duality turned Saul to Paul, from a Jew to adopting a Gnostic view which lies at the very heart of Christianity. Motivated by the accumulated "great dis-

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"The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude" (Buber, *I and Thou*, 13).

<sup>40</sup> See Avraham Shapira, *Haruch Bametzit* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1993); Silberstein, *Martin Buber's Social and Religious Thought*, 129 and n. 56, 301–302.

<sup>41</sup> "Das Judentum und die Menschheit," *JJ*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> "Erneuerung des Judentums," *JJ*, 34; "Renewal of Judaism," *On Judaism*, 42. Compare also "Der Geist des Orients," *JJ*, 47; "Jüdische Religiosität," *JJ*, 66.

<sup>43</sup> Scholem, "Martin Buber's Interpretation," 240–241. The Scholem-Buber dispute on Hasidim has been well documented and will not be analyzed here. I wish only to point that even if the above critique of Scholem on Buber is justified, it strengthens the point that Buber was opposed to Gnosis, because it is his interpretation of *yihud* that suggests opposition to dualism.

appointments [of] Judaism's reaching for realization," Paul concluded that "we ourselves cannot achieve anything."<sup>44</sup>

Written in 1918, Buber's address "The Holy Way" is a direct charge against Christianity and one of its canonical figures. Therefore, a preliminary remark should be made concerning the delicate context of the interfaith dialogues and debates in Germany after the emancipation of the Jews. On social and cultural grounds, most Jews had much more interest in dialogue than their Christian colleagues, who comprised the majority. On theological grounds, however, it seems to be the other way around, because Christianity sees itself as "new Israel," whereas historically, as Jacob Taubes formulated it rather bluntly, "the Christian religion generally, and the body of the Christian church in particular, have no *religious* meaning to the Jewish faith. There is a Jewish 'mystery' for the church; the Synagogue, however, knows no Christian 'mystery'."<sup>45</sup>

With this in mind, it is possible to fully appreciate Buber's stance. In this address he reiterates the typical Jewish position that Jesus was an important representative of the Jewish spirit of the prophets and that all of his teachings are within Judaism. In this, he responds to the old debate around Adolf von Harnack's *The Essence of Christianity*. Harnack, one of the leading theologians of his time and a liberal Protestant who could not be suspected of explicit anti-Semitism, claimed that Jesus purified and exemplified the message of the prophets, while the Pharisees and Judaism had departed from this message and remained an ossified set of laws without a true positive essence.<sup>46</sup> The shifting of the debate to Paul, on the other hand, while not unique to Buber, can be seen in this context as anticipating the theological mood after World War I and making a statement in what was to become a major theme for Protestantism in the Weimar Republic – namely, the theological movement toward Paul and the prevalent feeling that humanity's only hope was divine salvation.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> "Der heilige Weg," *JJ*, 102; "The Holy Way," *On Judaism*, 127.

<sup>45</sup> Jacob Taubes, "Die Streitfrage zwischen Judentum und Christentum: Ein Blick auf ihre unauflöbliche Differenz," *Vom Kult zur Kultur*, 88. Emphasis in original.

<sup>46</sup> Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity?* trans. Bailey Saunders (London: Williams and Norgate, 1901) 34. For a reconstruction of the major Jewish and Christian positions following the debate around Harnack's *Das Wesen des Christentums*, see Uriel Tal, *Christian and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870–1914*, trans. Noah Jacobs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975) 204–219 and his "Theologische Debatte um das 'Wesen' des Judentums" in *Juden im Wilhelminischen Deutschland 1890–1914*, ed. Werner Mosse and Arnold Pucker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1976) 599–632. One of the most famous Jewish responses to Harnack is Leo Baeck's *The Essence of Judaism*, published in 1905.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Buber and the Metaphysicians of Contempt," *Divided*

The roots of Buber's critique of Pauline Christianity can already be found at the end of this mystical period, as the fostering of dualism in the world and the separation of works from faith are deemed to have Gnostic tendencies with dangerous implications. Buber comes to a full realization of this critique in *Two Types of Faith*, published in 1950. In this work he contends that there are only two basic types of faith: faith as a relationship of trust, which he sees as being represented by the Jewish faith (*emunah*), and faith as claiming something to be factually true, as represented in Pauline Christianity (*pistis*).<sup>48</sup> This view has its parallel in the dialogical philosophy, the *emunah* corresponding to the I–Thou relationship and the *pistis* to I–It.<sup>49</sup> This work was harshly criticized, especially with regard to the distinction between the two types of faith, which detractors said was invalid not only philologically but also analytically, as every faith contains both elements. The Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar went so far as to claim that with this work Buber had brought interfaith dialogue to its very limits and was thus leading a “lonesome dialogue.”<sup>50</sup>

Buber had been fully aware of the critique of the two types, as is clear from his description of the two types as “ideal types.” A closer inspection of the development of this distinction in his thought shows that in 1930, in a course he taught in Frankfurt am Main, he did not present such a clear dichotomy. In this course, titled “Faith and Practice,” Buber

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*Passions*, 219–220. This move to Paul, as mentioned earlier, was triggered by Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*. Curiously enough, most comparative works on Buber and Barth focused on Buber's influence on Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* and not on a possible influence of Barth on Buber's move to dialogical philosophy. See, for example, Hans-Christoph Askani, “Karl Barth und Martin Buber,” in *Karl Barths Theologie als europäisches Ereignis*, eds. Martin Leiner and Michael Trowitzsch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2008) 239 and n. 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Zwei Glaubensweisen* (Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1993) [hereafter ZG] 11–12. On the Christian sources of this distinction, which Buber never formally recognized, see Zwi Werblowsky, “Reflections on Martin Buber's *Two Types of Faith*,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 39 (1988) 98–101.

<sup>49</sup> For this parallelization, see Akiva Ernst Simon, “Buber Ve'emunat Israel,” in *Aims-Junctures-Paths: The Thought of Mordechai Martin Buber*, ed. idem (Tel Aviv: Poalim, 1985) 97–98.

<sup>50</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Einsame Zwiesprache: Martin Buber und das Christentum* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1993). For a general overview of Buber's dialogue with Christians and Christianity, see Karl-Josef Kutschel's extensive introduction to Martin Buber, *Schriften zum Christentum*, ed. idem (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011) 12–73. For the philological critique, see David Flusser, “Bubers ‘Zwei Glaubensweisen’” in ZG, 190. For an analytical view on the mixture of the two kinds in every religion, see Moshe Halbertal, “Al Ma'aminim Veemuna,” in *Al Haemunah*, ed. Moshe Halbertal et al. (Jerusalem: Keter, 2005) 12–13.

claimed that every religion combines both types of faith.<sup>51</sup> The rejection of this earlier insight seems to indicate that *Two Types of Faith* was indeed intended as a polemic. Buber mentions in the introduction that the book was written during “the days of its [Jerusalem’s] so-called siege, or rather in the chaos of destruction which broke within it .... The work involved helped me to endure in faith this war, for me the most grievous of the three.”<sup>52</sup> In this dark hour, Buber writes about the crisis of modern spirit: the Gnosis in Pauline Christianity, which has manifested itself in a political form. He therefore emphasizes the problematical aspects of it.

Buber’s criticism of Pauline Christianity is intimately connected to his understanding of myth and the role it has in religion.<sup>53</sup> For him, myth is a subjective attempt to describe an authentic I–Thou relationship in human language. It is not mere fictional invention, but entails organic memory of a meeting with the divine, and should be considered not as something obsolete to be disregarded, but rather as a motivating force in the rejuvenation of religious life.<sup>54</sup> The myth, however, is only an expression of I–Thou, not the meeting itself. According to Buber, Pauline Christianity strayed because it turned the myth into the essence by making faith in the one “who knew no sin” as the basis of its credo and claimed this as a factual truth. Myth thus turned into something that distances humans from the unmediated meeting with God; it turned to Gnosis: “What is evil is not the mythicization of reality that bring the unspeakable to speech, but the gnosticization of myth, that tears it from the historical-biographical ground in which it was rooted.”<sup>55</sup>

David Flusser notes that if there is a distinct core teaching to Paulinism it is antinomianism and the emphasis on the belief in Jesus instead of the fulfillment of the laws of Torah.<sup>56</sup> The Pauline worldview has a

<sup>51</sup> Ms 350/y in the Martin Buber archive in the National Library, Jerusalem. Stroumsa discusses the manuscript at length in his “Buber as an Historian,” 31–43.

<sup>52</sup> *Two Types of Faith*, trans. Norman Goldhawk (London: Routledge, 1951) 15; ZG, 18.

<sup>53</sup> As Steven Wasserstrom shows, the myth also stands in more than one way at the core of modern field of history of religion; see Wasserstrom, *Religion*, 245.

<sup>54</sup> “Der Mythos der Juden,” *JJ*, 85; “Myth in Judaism,” *On Judaism*, 105. See also “Bilder von Gut und Böse,” *Werke* I, 635–638. This view, in line with the neo-romantic trends of *fin de siècle*, is clearly aimed against the school of Rudolf Bultmann and what Buber saw as the draining of religion’s vitality through excessive rationalization. See Ze’ev Levi, *Hermanutika Bamach’shava Hayehudit Baet Hahada’sha* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006) 87–112.

<sup>55</sup> “Christus, Chassidismus, Gnosis,” *Werke* III 956; “Christ, Hasidim, Gnosis,” *Origin and Meaning of Hasidim*, 249.

<sup>56</sup> David Flusser, *Yahadut Vemekorot Hanazrut* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame’uchad, 1979) 361.

resemblance to the Gnostic dualism that cannot be overlooked from a Jewish perspective: it sees the world as being ruled by an unjust law that should be conquered. Buber seems to show an interesting similarity to Paul in this aspect, as he also rejects the obligatory status of the commandments of the Torah, most notably in his address “Heruth”: “We who consider life as more divine than laws and rules do not want to regulate the life of youth by laws and rules attributed to God.”<sup>57</sup> He was harshly criticized for this view by many of his Jewish friends, most famously in his exchange with Franz Rosenzweig on the subject. Although the debate between the two ended with no clear agreement, it seems Buber was not left untouched by it.<sup>58</sup>

Rosenzweig’s influence on Buber’s understanding of the Jewish law can be recognized in Buber’s critique of Paul. Buber contends that the reason Paul rejects the Torah is that, based on the Septuagint, he understands it as a rigid law (*nomos*). However, Torah’s meaning in Hebrew is “to point the way”; it is dynamic and not static.<sup>59</sup> In a lecture delivered in the Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus in 1934, Buber emphasizes this nature of the Jewish teaching as a means of encouraging his hearers and claims, implicitly internalizing Rosenzweig’s critique, that the Torah is not a dogmatic codex but rather a process pursued through the generations: “The teachings themselves are the way. Their full content is not comprehended in any book, in any code, in any formulation.”<sup>60</sup> In the same speech, however, he also interprets the verse, “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today” (Deut 5:1), and states that that the Torah is valid only when it is realized with full intention and deed, a reiteration of his earlier position. Buber’s comment that in this verse “dualism is fought with utmost vigor,” is an allusion to Paul, but probably also to the National Socialism rule.<sup>61</sup> Another allusion to the Nazi regime is to be found in another lecture

<sup>57</sup> “Cheruth,” *JJ*, 122; “Heruth,” *On Judaism*, 152.

<sup>58</sup> For Rosenzweig’s critique on Buber, see his “Die Bauleute,” *Franz Rosenzweig, Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Reinhold and Annemarie Mayer, vol.3 (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983) 704–705, and the correspondence that appeared in Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1965). The influence of Rosenzweig on Buber is stated for example in Akiva Ernst Simon’s “Martin Buber and German Jewry,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 3 (1958) 33–36. For an analysis of this debate, see Batnitzky, “Revelation and Neues Denken,” 149–165.

<sup>59</sup> *ZG*, 59; “Über die Wortwahl in einer Verdeutschung der Schrift,” *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936) 158.

<sup>60</sup> “Die Lehre und die Tat,” *JJ*, 656; “Teaching and Deed,” *Israel and the World Today*, 145.

<sup>61</sup> “Lehre,” 652–653; “Teaching,” 142.



at the Lehrhaus from the same year, "The Power of the Spirit," in which Buber discusses Paul's relation to the law and belief in a redeemer from the outside:

In this Pauline dual-law, they dwell one near the other. The Spirit is holy; the world unholy ... a fundamental dualism of the Being resulted: Spirit and world are different rules, the human can accomplish nothing by himself, he can only surrender to the Other, to redemption, which comes from the beyond and has assumed bodily shape ...<sup>62</sup>

Rejection of the Torah in favor of belief was based theologically by Paul on his interpretation of Gen 15:6, that Abraham believed and it was counted as his righteousness (*tzedakah*), and on Hab 2:4, "the righteous (*tzadik*) lives in his faith." Buber and Rosenzweig's translation of the Bible shows a rejection of the Pauline interpretation, as they translate *tzedakah* as *Bewährung* and all forms with variations of *bewähren*, which Michael Fishbane understands as "putting to the proof in action."<sup>63</sup> This means acting, thus inverting Paul's interpretation: in order to be a *tzadik*, one has to act in the world in order to foster unmediated dialogue with God. Faith, as *pistis*, is not enough.

For Buber, Paul's rejection of the Torah as a living word, as meeting with God, is a rejection of participation in this world. Paul mixed Gnostic ideas with Jewish concepts and so handed to the nations "the sweet poison of faith, a faith that was to disdain works, exempt the faithful from realization and establish dualism in the world."<sup>64</sup> In the later Hebrew translation of "The Holy Way," Buber says that Saul *kizez bane-ti'ot* ("mutilated the shoots") – a clear reference to Aher, this time in an unequivocally negative way.<sup>65</sup> According to Buber, Paul's Gnostic tendencies led to a negation of this world and therefore impede human participation in the realization of the Kingship of God. The same Gnostic view also led to anti-Semitism, which, according to Buber, stems

<sup>62</sup> "Die Mächtigkeit des Geistes," *JJ*, 562; "Power of the Spirit," *Israel and the World*, 178–179.

<sup>63</sup> By Bible and Scripture I mean, unless otherwise explicitly stated, the Hebrew Bible. On the decision about the translation of *tzedek*, see Buber, "Über die Wortwahl," 156–157. Fishbane shows how *bewähren* can be seen as a *Leitwort* in Buber's thought and is used to reject both Pauline views and Jewish orthodox ones; see Michael Fishbane, "Justification through Living: Martin Buber's Third Alternative," in *Buber: Contemporary Perspective*, 120–132; Shemaryahu Talmon makes a similar claim concerning the Buber-Rosenzweig translation; see Talmon, "Zur Bibelinterpretationsmethode von Franz Rosenzweig und Martin Buber," in *Der Philosoph Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. Wolf-dietrich Schmeid-Kowarzik (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1986) 273–285.

<sup>64</sup> "Der heilige Weg," *JJ*, 102.

<sup>65</sup> For the Hebrew edition, see Buber, "Derech Hakodesh," *Te'udah Veyeud*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Zionist Library, 1961) 102. Buber carefully edited all his translations.

from the tension between keeping the so-called “Old Testament” and the Jewish God, yet refusing to accept the message of the book and adhering to a redeeming figure other than God:

In so doing they rely upon the teachings of Saul, a Jew from Tarsus, who asserted that it was impossible to fulfill the demand and that it was necessary to cast off its yoke by submission to another Jew, Jesus of Nazareth ... who indeed fulfilled the demand and abolished it at the same time, and who demanded nothing of his true believers save faith.<sup>66</sup>

*Marcion: Gnosis, Translation and Politics*

In 1921 Adolf von Harnack published yet another book that was to steer Jewish intellectuals. *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God* explored the roots and theology of one of the most important heretics in Christian history. Active in the second century CE, Marcion claimed that the God of the Old Testament, the God of Israel who is full of wrath, cannot be identified with Jesus, the redeeming God of love. From this theological perspective of unbridgeable dualism, Marcion created a canon of which most of the Old Testament was not a part. He was considered heretic and was excommunicated. Harnack saw in Marcion a figure that for almost two millennia had been mistreated by the Church, and his monograph can be seen as an erudite attempt at rehabilitating Marcion. Commenting on Marcion’s proposed canon, Harnack writes:

In the second century, the rejection of the Old Testament would have been a mistake, and the Great Church rightly refused to make this mistake ... but its conservation as a canonical book in modern Protestantism is the result of a paralysis of religion and the Church.<sup>67</sup>

For Buber, on the other hand, Marcion was the embodiment of Christian Gnosis, which not only led to a radical dualism between God and the world but also to the claim that Judaism is the representative of the God of wrath and the unredeemed world.

Buber and Rosenzweig’s translation of the Bible into German can be seen in this context, as a refutation of the modern Marcionite attempt to detach Christianity from its Jewish roots. Shortly after work on the translation started, Rosenzweig wrote Buber:

<sup>66</sup> “Der Geist Israels und die Welt von heute,” *JJ*, 147; Buber, “The Spirit of Israel and the World of Today,” *On Judaism*, 186.

<sup>67</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960) 217; quoted in Mendes-Flohr, “Buber and the Metaphysicians,” 220.

Is it clear to you that the situation striven for by the neo-Marcionites is practically already here? The Christian understands Bible today as the New Testament, perhaps together with the Psalms, which he mostly believes do not belong to the Old Testament. So we will become missionaries.<sup>68</sup>

The mission Rosenzweig had in mind was to revive the word of the Bible for Jews as well as for Christians.

Mission to the Jews meant bringing forth a sense of identity based upon a return to the Bible and adapting the message of the text to modern life. In this, Buber and Rosenzweig were part of a larger movement in German culture around the *fin de siècle*, and more evidently after the First World War, which emphasized the importance of a return to primal origin as an answer to modernity and its discontents. This feeling can be summed up in Karl Kraus's statement, "the origin is the destination."<sup>69</sup> Buber and Rosenzweig's understanding of the Bible as the writing down of an oral tradition about authentic dialogical encounters with God led them to emphasize the oral character of the text, which should be read aloud: "Are we talking about a book? We are talking about a voice. Are we saying: Go and read and learn? We are saying: Go and learn to hear."<sup>70</sup> This attempt to bring back the oral character of the text lies at the heart of Buber and Rosenzweig's rendering of the Bible into German.

By retrieving what they claimed to be the original Hebrew character of the Bible, Buber and Rosenzweig sought to enable the reader to

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<sup>68</sup> Rosenzweig to Buber in 29.7.1925, in *Briefwechsel*, 2.232. For Buber's full approval of this statement, see Mendes-Flohr, "Buber and the Metaphysicians," 223–224.

<sup>69</sup> Kraus's citation from Benjamin; see Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974) 701. Peter Gordon examined the translation from this perspective, as an act of what he calls "ontological retrieval"; see Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 266–267.

<sup>70</sup> "Der Mensch von heute und die jüdische Bibel," *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*, 45. The English version is abridged and lacks this part; compare Buber, "The Man of Today and the Hebrew Bible," *On the Bible*, ed. Nahum Glatzer, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000) 1–13. Avnon notes that the Hebrew *miqra* means at the same time that which is read (Scripture) and "what is being called" (Avnon, *Buber: Hidden Dialogue*, 52–53). In a letter to Buber, Rosenzweig writes that "Schrift ist Gift" (Scripture is poison) and adds "holy Scripture included. Only when it is translated back into its orality does it suit my stomach"; quoted in Buber, "Targum Hamikra, Kavanato Vedra'chav" [hereafter Targum], *Darko Shel Miqra* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1997) 350. See Buber, "The How and Why of Our Bible Translation," in Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, ed. and trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 211.

encounter the text anew.<sup>71</sup> The result was a text that was foreign to the German ear even in the names of its protagonists, as Isaac for example became Jizchak and Moses became Mosche.<sup>72</sup> It was almost, Scholem noted, as if they appealed to the reader: “Go and Learn Hebrew!”<sup>73</sup> Hebrew speaking was deemed by Buber as a necessary but in-and-of-itself insufficient step of Jewish revival; the Hebrew humanism that Buber had in mind involved more than just language, it was a way of life: “Hebrew humanism means fashioning a Hebrew person, and a Hebrew person is not at all the same as a Hebrew-speaking man.”<sup>74</sup>

For Buber the Bible stands not only at the heart of the Jewish people, but also at the center of Western culture.<sup>75</sup> “Germanization” (*Verdeutschung*), the term Buber and Rosenzweig used for their translation, was aimed bringing the Hebrew message to the German audience. Luther’s translation was the one to be confronted, because of its eminent influence on German culture and because it Christianized the original message by turning the “Old Testament” into a book of proclamation, later to be fulfilled by the New Testament. In this view Buber saw the direct influence of Paul’s Gnostic teaching of the separation between the world of faith and the world of deeds.<sup>76</sup>

In the essay “Translation of the Bible, Its Intention and Its Ways,” written shortly after Buber left Nazi Germany for Palestine, he notes that the veil of Luther’s translation also affected interpersonal relationships: “Were we as well accessible to our German friends only in Christian translation, no matter how intimate and open-hearted we were with them?”<sup>77</sup> His positive answer led him to the translation of the Bible. In

<sup>71</sup> Rosenzweig, “Die Schrift und Luther,” *Die Schrift und Ihre Verdeutschung*, 93–94. On the language of the translation as archaic and modern at the same time, see Peter Gordon’s discussion in *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, 238–248.

<sup>72</sup> For more elaborated examples of this and other mechanisms of translation, see Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 130–132, and Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, 243–244.

<sup>73</sup> Scholem, “At the Completion of Buber’s Translation of the Bible,” in *Messianic Idea*, 315. For a discussion of the Bible translation as a way for Buber to return to the Hebrew language via German, see Barbara Schäfer, “Buber’s Hebrew Self: Trapped in the German Language,” *JSQ* 14 (2007) 152–156.

<sup>74</sup> Buber, “Biblical Humanism,” *On the Bible*, 212; Buber, “Biblischer Humanismus,” *Werke II: Schriften zur Bibel*, (Munich: Kösel, 1964) [hereafter *Werke II*] 1087. It is worth noting that on this point Buber and Rosenzweig differ significantly, as for Buber revival of Judaism meant Zionism. See Batnitzky’s analysis of the differences between the two in *Idolatry and Representation*, 112–123.

<sup>75</sup> Buber, “Der Mensch von heute,” 21.

<sup>76</sup> “Targum,” 353.

<sup>77</sup> “Targum,” 347; “How and Why,” 209. Buber wrote this essay in 1938 in German, but it was not published until 1964, when it appeared in Hebrew and afterwards a

the same essay Buber claims that the oral character of the Bible, the voice of God speaking to humans, is central in the refutation of Marcion:

Here the line was drawn, on which the new translators of the Bible must do battle against Marcion and the Marcionites. Marcion's God is silent or speaks from a chartless distance, and the voice does not reach us ... whereas our God creates himself a world with his word, and the heaviest of his trials is the thirst for his word.<sup>78</sup>

The new translation was to bring forth this word, in all its foreignness, to the German ear. This entailed the risk of overly distancing the reader, as Rosenzweig noted shortly after translation work started: "I fear sometimes that the Germans will not put up with this altogether not-Christian Bible, and it will become the translation by which the Bible undergoes the expulsion from the German culture that the Marcionites have strived for."<sup>79</sup> Rosenzweig hoped that in the end, after many years, the Bible might regain its stature in German culture; as late as 1936 Buber still believed that this return to the Bible would soon occur.<sup>80</sup>

In his famous speech "The Spirit of Israel and the World of Today," given in 1939, Buber discussed Marcion, Paul and Gnosis once again. He drew a direct line linking Paul's rejection of the yoke of the Torah and the role of the human in this world with Marcion, who, "when he undertook to separate for eternity between God of the Creation and God of the Redemption, not unjustly called upon the apostle to the Gentiles."<sup>81</sup> Marcion, who based himself upon Paul's teachings, reached for Buber their logical conclusion: "there is no value to this material world and no thought ought to be given to its correction."<sup>82</sup> Buber seems to agree with Harnack that there is a line connecting Marcion to Paul, but whereas the latter identifies this as positive, Buber uses it

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German version. See Lawrence Rosenwald, "On the Reception of Buber and Rosenzweig's Bible," *Prooftexts* 14 (1994) 162–163 n. 15.

<sup>78</sup> "Targum," 350; "How and Why," 211–212.

<sup>79</sup> Rosenzweig to Eugen Mayer on 30.12.25, in Rosenzweig, *GS* 1.2, 1073–1074; quoted in "Targum," 350; Buber, "How and Why," 214.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* See Buber's footnote, added in 1936, that seems to allude to neo-Marcionism in Nazi Germany: "That the Bible becomes today in many cases again an offence, seems to me as the first turn to a new genuine appreciation [of it]" ("Der Mensch von heute," 18). Interestingly enough, Buber kept this footnote in the 1964 version of his writings on the Bible; compare "Der Mensch von heute," *Werke* II, 852.

<sup>81</sup> This citation appears in an earlier manuscript of *Zwei Galubensweisen*, MS 82 in Buber's archive at the National Library in Jerusalem. See the editor's comment to the second edition of *ZG*: Lothar Stiehm, "Zum Text dieser Neuauflage," *ZG*, 272.

<sup>82</sup> "Der Geist Israels," 148; "Spirit of Israel," 187.

to stress the problematic character of Pauline Christianity and its modern manifestations.

Buber blames Harnack for contributing intellectually to the destruction of Israel in modern times, just as Marcion contributed to the spiritual destruction of Israel as it was being destroyed physically by Hadrian:

Three years after the death of Harnack in 1930, his idea, the idea of Marcion, was put into action; not, however, by spiritual means, but by means of violence and terror ... The gift of Marcion had passed from Hadrian into other hands.<sup>83</sup>

Those were the hands of Hitler. For Buber, the connection between Gnosis and politics is clear: it is the spiritual crisis that led to the political one, and not the other way around.<sup>84</sup>

The crisis leading to World War II and the Shoah emerged from the Gnostic tendencies in Christianity that became stronger in modernity; with the deepening feeling of alienation from this world in light of an unbridgeable dualism grows the false hope that the “perfect one” could redeem the world. The end result is belief in the leader: “Trust in someone, does not mean that everything he will say or do is always right. Rather, that the wrong becomes ‘right’ and worth following only because he [the leader] says it or does it.”<sup>85</sup> This absolute belief in the leader, his sayings and doings becoming factual truth, is the opposite of the feeling of true trust. This is of course similar to the distinction between *pistis* and *emunah*, thus revealing a connection between Pauline Christianity and dangerous political tendencies.<sup>86</sup>

Buber offers an answer to the Gnostic dualism and inherent *pistis* in Christianity: working toward the Kingship of God in this world. In his book *Kingship of God* (1932), Buber argues that the kingship is a direct, unmediated relationship between the people of Israel and God, illu-

<sup>83</sup> “Der Geist Israels,” 149; “Spirit of Israel,” 188–189. Buber could have not known it, but a group of Nazi theologians did programmatically set forth the quest for the “study and eradication of Jewish influence on German Church life,” thus supporting theologially what was to become physical annihilation. See Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). While Heschel mentions Harnack only briefly, his influence on this theology seems clear.

<sup>84</sup> “Das echte Gespräch und die Möglichkeiten des Friedens,” *Nachlese*, 204.

<sup>85</sup> “Vertrauen,” *JJ*, 739.

<sup>86</sup> This text originally appeared in 1926 in honor of Achad Ha’am, more than twenty years before *Two Types of Faith*, yet contains in a way the same distinction. Buber edited this article and re-published it in 1946, thus making it into a clear political statement; see “Emun,” *Tikvah Leshah’ah Zo*, ed. Avraham Shapira (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992) 64–65 and 265.

strated by Gideon's rejection of rule over Israel, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; HE will rule over you" (Jud 8: 23).<sup>87</sup> In ancient times the Israelites were ruled directly by God, who was their historical leader and king; this was not hierocracy, but theocracy in a more basic sense: God as king in reality and not as a metaphor.<sup>88</sup> Although *Kingship of God* is by far Buber's most academic book, it is also a political statement: he repeated this analysis of Gideon's words on the first of May 1933 in order to encourage German Jews, calling them to renew their relation to God against the tyranny of the Nazi state.<sup>89</sup>

Buber chose to explain the relation between the Kingship of God and the modern state by referring to Jesus' teaching "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mat 22: 21 and parallels). Interpreting this verse, Buber offers a counter-reading to the apparent withdrawal from politics. In his interpretation, paying tax to the emperor means that the people "were to give the whole reality of life to God."<sup>90</sup> Buber bases his interpretation on the fact that "giving to God" is only possible when it is done with the entire human being, "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6: 5). He concludes that Jesus' saying means to give to the state only what is left after giving to God, and not the other way around: one should give to the state only insofar as the state helps in realizing the Kingship of God, i. e., by fostering true dialogical community between humans.

Thus, by way of biblical exegesis of both the Bible and the New Testament, Buber offers his version of "theopolitics" – the relation to God as having primacy over political rule. The Kingship of God counters the authority of the state; it puts a theological-ethical dimension above the political. This is a polemic against Carl Schmitt's claim for the absolute power of the state, as expressed in *Political Theology* and *The Concept of the Political*, which was highly criticized by Buber in his 1936 article "The Question to the Single One."<sup>91</sup>

<sup>87</sup> "Königtum Gottes," *Werke* II, 539.

<sup>88</sup> This is based on Buber's controversial interpretation to the Hebrew root *malach*. For the polemic and Buber's answer to it, see his introduction to the second edition of *Königtum Gottes* ("Königtum Gottes," *Werke* II, 499–503).

<sup>89</sup> "Politik aus dem Glauben," *Nachlese*, 174.

<sup>90</sup> "Geist Israels," 149; "Spirit of Israel," 188.

<sup>91</sup> This distinction between "theopolitics" and "political theology" is based on Christoph Schmidt, "Die theopolitische Stunde," *Die theopolitische Stunde* (Munich: Fink, 2009) 221–222. On Buber's understanding of Carl Schmitt, see Michael Zank, "Buber and *Religionswissenschaft*," 70–72, and Nitzan Lebovic, "The Jerusalem School: The Theopolical Hour," *New German Critique* 35 (2008) 104–105.

The attempt to realize the Kingship of God in this world should not be misunderstood as revolutionary. While he undoubtedly shared a sense of messianic hopes with many other intellectuals in the Weimar Republic, Buber thought that the founding of the Kingship of God is a long process, which involves first and foremost a return to dialogue with God and the building of a true community. In this aspect he differs from radical thinkers at the time, such as Ernst Bloch (who proudly defined his politics as Gnostic), who try to force the Kingship of God here and now.<sup>92</sup> Buber manifests his view in the Hasidic novel *Gog u'Magog*, completed in Jerusalem in the midst of World War II. The novel depicts two camps of Hasidim: on the one side, the Seer of Lublin, who sees in the appearance of Napoleon the apocalypse proclaimed in the book of Ezekiel and therefore tries through mysticism “to hasten the end”; and on the other side, the camp of the Holy Yehudi of Peshischa, who believes in the preparation of hearts, in the self-transformation of the human, as a pre-condition to redemption. Buber makes it no secret that his affinities are with the Yehudi.<sup>93</sup> In this sense his answer to Gnosis and radical politics can be summed in the words of the R. Tarfon: “It is not upon you to finish the work, but neither are you to desist from it.” (mAvot 2:16).

### Conclusion

This article has traced the central role played by Gnosis in the thought of Martin Buber, from fascination in his youth to strong opposition in his mature writings. From the early Addresses on Judaism, with their warnings against dualism, to his translation of the Bible and his later writings, Buber diagnosed the ailments of his time as being caused by Gnostic thinking. His alternative to Gnosis was the realization of the

<sup>92</sup> Michael Löwy emphasizes the socialist utopian vision in Buber's thought but gives little attention to long path that is required in the realization of this vision. See Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe*, trans. Hope Heany (London: Athlone, 1991) 48–57. On Buber's critique of messianic politics, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, “The Stronger and Better Jews’: Jewish Theological Responses to Political Messianism in the Weimar Republic,” in *Jews and Messianism in the Modern Era: Metaphor and Meaning*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 190–193, and Mendes-Flohr, “The Kingdom of God: Martin Buber's Critique of Messianic Politics,” *Behemoth* 2 (2008) 26–36.

<sup>93</sup> On Buber's affinity for the Yehudi, see “Nachwort zum ‘Gog und Magog’,” *Werke* III, 1258. For an analysis of Buber's novel, as well as the complex relation between the figure of the Yehudi and Jesus, see Simon, “Buber Ve'emunat Israel,” 112–122.



Kingship of God in this world by fostering a dialogical community, which was not a revolutionary process.

Buber himself came to see in the refutation of Gnosis and Marcion one of his greatest achievements. Shmuel Hugo Bergmann recalls a “very sad conversation” with Buber on the way to the Hebrew University. Buber complained of the lack of influence of his mature thought among the Jews and the lack of Jewish philosophy in Israel. He added that this was not the case with the Christians:

The Christians I have influenced. They know today that they cannot understand their Christianity without learning the Old Testament. A Marcionite Christianity, which would wish to detach the New Testament from the Bible, is today impossible. In this sense I have influenced the Christians.<sup>94</sup>

While Buber might have exaggerated his influence in this respect, it nonetheless shows what he deemed as his most important message to the Christian world: the rejection of Gnosis.

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<sup>94</sup> S. H. Bergman, “Sichot im Buber,” *Tikvah Lesha'ah Zo*, 142–143.