

Engaging Agamben on the Time that Remains

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On the road to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus encountered the Glory of the Lord. Some think that, just as he heard what Ezekiel heard – “I send you” – so he saw what Ezekiel saw – “the likeness of a throne” and, seated above it, “the likeness, as it were, of a human form ... with the appearance of fire” and a “brightness round about.” Here, however, there was no “as it were” in what he saw. For the voice that came from the throne, commissioning him to go both to his own rebellious people and to the great sea of nations, was the voice of Jesus of Nazareth, who is the visible form of God and the very Word of God.¹ Saul was thus “untimely born” as Paul, Apostle of Jesus. His world, the world of men conducting business as usual, had been ruptured. He came soon to understand that the whole cosmos had been ruptured and rearranged by the appearance within it of the Glory of the Lord.²

In his earliest letters, Paul looks forward to the great rupture or disruption yet to come, in which that Glory will appear to all. The dead will then be raised and both the living and the dead will gather round the throne, the faithful “being caught up with the clouds” (the

1. See Ezek. 1:1–2:7.

2. See Acts 9:1–18 and further accounts of Paul’s conversion in Acts 22 and 26, the substance of which is reflected in numerous passages found in Thessalonians, Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, Ephesians and elsewhere; compare, for example, 2 Cor. 3:7–4:18 and Rom. 8:7ff.

allusion is to Daniel 7) at his appearance, “so as to welcome the Lord in the air.” They shall then behold the One seen from behind on Sinai, but face to face on Tabor; and they shall not part from him, but “shall ever be with the Lord.” On that day, writes Paul, “when he comes to be magnified by his holy ones and to be marveled at among all who have believed,” they shall enter his royal presence with rejoicing, while the rebellious and unbelieving “suffer the penalty due them: eternal destruction, far from the face of the Lord and from the splendor of his might.”³

Such is the vision articulated in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, framed by Paul’s own experience, by the Sinaitic and New Sinaitic paradigms of Exodus and Ezekiel, and (still more fundamentally) by the gospel narrative and its liturgical expression. It is this vision that in turn frames the dark and differently disruptive interval discussed at 2 Thess. 2:3–12, in which are revealed the mystery of lawlessness and the man of lawlessness. We are introduced to that through a rich complex of Sinaitic allusions at 2:1–2: “We beg you, brethren, with respect to the parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to him, that you not quickly be shaken from your senses or disturbed....” We only see it for what it is, however, when we see it in the light of the Glory that has broken through in the incarnation, that continues to break through in the eucharistic mystery, that will again break through in a final dispelling of the darkness at the Lord’s return.

All this I tried in my commentary to communicate, but in treating chapter two of 2 Thessalonians I failed (through sheer forgetfulness) to engage Giorgio Agamben’s reading of that chapter, a deficiency I want to make up here. The new situation generated by the global crisis of the past few years makes this deferred

3. See 2 Thess. 1:5–12. Quotations from Thessalonians are in the author’s translation, which can be found in *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), 23f.

engagement timely after all, as we shall see. First, however, we must follow Agamben's own quite different line of approach in *The Time That Remains*, his fascinating riff on Romans performed for the benefit of Walter Benjamin aficionados.⁴ While we will concern ourselves, not with Benjamin or with the work as a whole, but rather with its treatment of 2 Thessalonians 2, there are some preliminary matters to be dealt with and some other Pauline texts to be considered, lest we take that treatment out of context. We begin with Agamben's theology of time, or certain features of it.

Remnant Time in 1 Corinthians 7

Paul says that “at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ λείμμα κατ' ἐκλογὴν χάριτος γέγονεν, Rom. 11:5). He is referring, with the prophets of old, to a remnant of the Jewish people. Agamben, however, focusing on τῷ νῦν καιρῷ, finds here a remnant by grace of time itself. The time in view, the “now” time which he also calls messianic time and kairotic time, still belongs to chronological time, to ordinary history, but is that part of it “which undergoes an entirely transformative contraction” such that it participates also in eternity. It lies at the overlap between time and eternity, where the one begins to end and

4. On the cover of *The Time That Remains: A Commentary of the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005; trans. Patricia Dailey from *Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani*, 2000), we are told that the book advances the claim “that Benjamin's philosophy of history constitutes a repetition and appropriation of Paul's concept of ‘remaining’ time,” which is at once the remainder of time and a time for learning to abide or remain. My purpose here, however, is not to engage Agamben's engagement with Benjamin (cf. Brian Britt, “The Schmittian Messiah in Agamben's *The Time That Remains*,” *Critical Inquiry* 36, Winter 2010, 262–87) but rather to engage his engagement with Paul, coming in due course to his reading of 2 Thessalonians 2 – a reading at once as insightful and as problematic as his concept of remnant time.

the other begins to take its place. It is time insofar as it readies itself for eternity.⁵

The idea of contraction he draws from Paul's practical theology in 1 Corinthians 7. There Paul is trying to help Christians work out how to live under the conditions of the messianic rupture. Should they withdraw from the lives they have been leading, even perhaps from their marriages if their spouses aren't interested in preparing to meet Christ at his return? If they are unmarried, should they remain so, since it is a new and transformed world they are expecting, a world in which, as Jesus said, marriage will no longer be a feature of human life? They have written Paul to enquire. Here is his reply, as rendered in the *Revised Standard Version*:

Now concerning the unmarried, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the impending distress [διὰ τὴν ἐνεστώσαν ἀνάγκην] it is well for a person to remain as he is.... I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short [ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν]; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away [παράγει γὰρ τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου].

Agamben, however, does not read the passage thus. At 7:29 he translates ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν as “time is

5. *Time That Remains*, 64. That is, “messianic time is presented as a part of the secular eon that constitutively exceeds *chronos* and as a part of eternity that exceeds the future eon, while being situated in the position of a remainder with regard to the division between the two eons.” It is “a caesura which, in its dividing the division between the two times, introduces a remainder [*resto*] into it that exceeds the division.”

contracted.”⁶ With the Corinthians, he wants to know what it means to live properly in the time that somehow remains “between time and its end.” What shall we do with this time, particularly when we don’t know how much of it there is? Shall we simply carry on as we are or attempt some radical change, boldly leaving behind what is familiar and dear to us in favor (as Jesus suggests in Luke 14:25ff.) of some costly new construct?

With Paul, Agamben wants to think also about the nature of this time that is contracting itself and beginning to end, this time that is left over, that has no longer any “teleological linearity” since in Christ the goal of time has already been reached.⁷ These two concerns, the theoretical and the practical, are both evident as Agamben tries to show us “that this clear choice, this delineation between two paths, is a fiction.” There is, writes Julie Gafney, “an alternative, one that makes use of the strange potentiality of the messianic moment and of the time that remains.”

First of all, in the condition of messianism, change is inevitable; there is no standing in place. Instead, “every juridical status and worldly condition” is transformed, irrevocably altered, “because of, and only because of, its relation to the messianic event.” So much for indifference.... The transformation is not, however, the same kind of radical change the apostolic call represented in Luke. The idea is not to give up everything that mattered to you before this moment and embrace a whole new set of laws and ideas. Instead, the action is something more like reorienting your

6. *Time That Remains*, 166; cf. 142ff.

7. Messianic time, he says, “is *the time that time takes to come to an end*, or, more precisely, the time we take to bring to an end, to achieve our representation of time” (*Time That Remains*, 67f.; italics his). But did I say “with Paul”? This way of speaking would certainly puzzle Paul, nor is it clear how it characterizes messianic time rather than all time under the conditions of the fall. For “it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27; cf. 10:26f.).

vocations or pursuits *toward* the messianic event, understanding how it fits into this new framework, rather than choosing a vocation or pursuit that is entirely new. Agamben beautifully names it an “almost internal shifting ... by virtue of being called.”⁸

This internal shifting is a “nullification or canceling out,” a having yet not having, pursuing yet not pursuing, being yet not being, even as regards being married. “The binary distinctions here fold into one another, just as time has folded in upon itself.” So Paul is not asking us to forsake everything in the most literal sense, but to engage everything in a transformative way that reorients it to the new messianic reality. That is how we should live in remnant time.⁹

Now, I also render 1 Corinthians 7 differently from the common translations. For in the mysterious expression at verse 26, διὰ τὴν ἐνεστώσαν ἀνάγκην, we must stretch semantically both of the key words to arrive (with the RSV) at “in view of the imminent distress.” It seems sounder to say, “because of the present constraint.” Or more expansively: “because our age is bracketed before and behind, because it is already consigned to its proper end.” Such a reading does not invite dismissal of Paul’s practical theology as the consequence of a misguided imminentism, as if “the time that remains” must necessarily be very brief. It allows us to

8. Julie Gafney, *The Point*, 12 April 2020 (<https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/the-time-that-remains>). “Unbelievably, almost ludicrously,” she observes, even in remnant time life seems to go on as before. “People get up, and eat breakfast, and gossip over the Tiberius treason trials, or over what Simon told Rachel at the beach last weekend, and go about their day. People are married, people get buried. People fall in love, and exchange stolen glances, furtive smiles, across the well.” To understand how in remnant time the ordinary ends of temporal existence and the true end achieved by Christ are related is the task.

9. Thus Gafney, following Agamben; our task, however, is to discover how far Agamben is following Paul.

keep thinking with Paul.¹⁰

But what does Paul mean? What constraint is operative? Verse 29 tells us: τοῦτο δέ φημι, ἀδελφοί, ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν[.] τὸ λοιπὸν, ἵνα καὶ οἱ ἔχοντες γυναῖκας ὡς μὴ ἔχοντες ᾧσιν.... I think we must translate this differently as well. Not “the appointed time has grown very short,” but rather: “The *kairos* [we await] has been prepared; so in what [time] remains let those who have wives live as those who do not.” The verb Paul employs in the first line is συστέλλω, which means to prepare or ready something for dispatch. Luke uses the same verb at Acts 5:6 even for wrapping up a corpse to be carried out for burial.¹¹ The time left to us is no corpse, but it is a remnant, a remnant of that which has already been delivered in Christ himself. It is this time that is now under constraint. Why? Because it too has been summed up in Christ and, just so, readied for its own delivery to God. All history has been recapitulated in the personal history of the Messiah, who in the midst of it, in the heart of the darkness and void, entered the womb of Mary; who walked among us and was handed over to death; who was freed from death’s grip and raised up from the grave, before ascending to the throne of God. In him God has effected, as Agamben says, a “summary judgment” on the whole of time and matter and human existence.¹²

That judgment rendered, it is left to us, whether as individuals or as a race, to respond as we may. For our response, we

10. See *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 198–202, on the distinction between imminence, properly conceived, and immediacy.

11. The verb is employed here as a perfect passive participle. In the infinitive, we may say “to draw together, limit, shorten” (*BAGD*); or “to cover or wrap up for removal,” as at Acts 5:6 (ἀναστάντες δὲ οἱ νεώτεροι συνέστειλαν αὐτὸν καὶ ἐξενέγκαντες ἔθαψαν: “having arisen, the younger men covered him up and, having carried him out, buried him”). In the present context these senses may be combined.

12. *Time That Remains*, 76.

have an opportunity of indeterminate duration – indeterminate to us, not to God, who not only constrains but restrains it – until the full judgment is handed down.¹³ Here is Paul a little later in 1 Corinthians:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers [παραδιδῶ] the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death... When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one.¹⁴

This full and final judgment, unfortunately, does not come into focus in *The Time That Remains*. Other things also seem to be missing, then, in Agamben’s account of remnant time. Mistakes are made that eventually distort his reading of 2 Thessalonians 2. I want now to identify some of those, making important adjustments to the picture he presents.

Reframing Remnant Time

First, we must keep in mind that Paul’s focus on the time that remains is missional before it is pastoral.¹⁵ This time is

13. Restraint may be said in two senses: the individual’s life span is limited, and the age itself is limited. “If those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (Matt. 24:22, RSVCE; the verb here is κολοῦόω, to “lop” or “cut short”).

14. 1 Cor. 15:22–28 (RSVCE); the last phrase is more appropriately rendered “all in all.”

15. See *Time That Remains*, 59–61. The chapter in question is subtitled

preeminently time for the announcement – the same announcement that came to Paul so dramatically on the Damascus road and must now be made to everyone – that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and that the Messiah is the very “image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation,” in whom all things cohere and whom all ought to obey and adore.¹⁶

Second, it is misleading to say: “What interests the apostle is not the last day, it is not the instant in which time ends, but the time that contracts itself and begins to end.”¹⁷ This misleads both because Paul most certainly *is* interested in the last day, and because he does not equate the last day with the instant in which time ends. He has no such instant in mind at all. The last day is the day of the public parousia of Jesus Christ, hence the end of what we might better identify as “preparation time” time than “remnant time.” It is also Day One of what Jesus called “the regeneration of all things.” That universal reconstruction is a process that begins when “the Son of Man shall sit on the throne of his glory” and all shall attend him, whether willingly or unwillingly, as he passes judgment on all.¹⁸ It is a process completed by the dissolution of the old creation and the advent of the “new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells.”¹⁹ Here, and here only, can we speak of an instant in which time ends – ends and begins again as time that no longer dissolves itself and runs away into the void, but rather runs on toward God,

“Apostolos,” and the distinguishing mark of the apostle, as opposed to the prophet, is that “the apostle speaks forth from the arrival of the Messiah,” not in prediction of the Messiah. From this distinction Agamben proceeds to his claim that “Paul’s technical term for the messianic event is *ho nyn kairos*, ‘the time of the now.’”

16. See Col. 1:15–20.

17. *Time That Remains*, 62.

18. See Matt. 19:28: ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ, ὅταν καθίσῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐπὶ θρόνου δόξης αὐτοῦ.

19. 2 Pet. 3:11–13, which is followed by a reference to Paul’s own teaching.

who sustains it with his eternity.²⁰

Third, the present time is directly linked to the time of the new heavens and earth only through Christ; which, for us, means epiclestically and eucharistically. Only thus can we speak of an overlap between the two, and we must speak of it as Paul does in 2 Corinthians, on which more in a moment. Agamben, unfortunately, does not consider the pneumatological and liturgical dimensions that are so important to Paul.

Fourth, Agamben supposes that “Paul decomposes the messianic into two times: resurrection and parousia, the second coming of Jesus at the end of time.”²¹ But this overlooks the ascension of Jesus. It is the ascension, rather than the resurrection, to which the anticipated parousia is counterpart. To live ἐν τῷ νῦν καρῶ is to live in the rupture or caesura in time opened up by the ascension, made manifest at Pentecost, and closed again at the parousia. It is to live poised in the Spirit between the glorification of Jesus in heaven and the revelation of this glory on earth. It is to live eucharistically between the temporal form that is passing and the eternal form that is coming.

This warrants further elaboration. Agamben is quite right that the present age, considered chronologically, is not as such a transitional age. It does not itself yield the kingdom. Nor is it for pursuing, as Kant or Hegel would have it, a kingdom that is always deferred. Rather it is an age in which “two heterogeneous times ... are coextensive but cannot be added together.” But here we need what Agamben largely ignores, the ascension; otherwise we will misconstrue the parousia, the very thing he says we must correctly

20. See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.25 (with 2.28 and 2.34), 4:20 (with 4.38f.), and 5.36. It is the ungodly who “shall walk in a circle” instead of always going straight on toward God, as Augustine argues in *Civ.* 11–13 (cf. 12.14 and 12.22) and 20–22.

21. *Time That Remains*, 69.

understand.²² We will also misconstrue the way in which these heterogeneous times are held together as both press towards the parousia.

The ascension is the presentation of Jesus before the Father to receive the glory due him. The parousia is his royal presence with us, openly and in person, “to be magnified among his holy ones and to be marveled at among all who believe.”²³ The former is the goal of the Messiah’s own time as he effects our salvation.²⁴ The latter is the focal point of that salvation, just as the cross and resurrection are the fulcrum thereof. The operational time we are given between ascension and parousia is most fundamentally eucharistic time, with its own fulcrum in the epiclesis – the time of being “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.”²⁵ As such, it is also apocalyptic time, in which is revealed the reality of the tension between the times and the prospective completeness of the one as opposed to the increasing vacuity of the other.²⁶ Through the consecration and *conversio* the stuff of this age is seized and brought forth to fulfillment, to borrow Agamben’s expression. It is voluntarily delivered up to God with and in Christ.²⁷

22. Agamben (*ibid.*, 70) tries to understand it etymologically instead of historically, biblically, and theologically, which cannot be done; cf. *1&2 Thessalonians*, 86–88.

23. 2 Thess. 1:10 (trans. mine).

24. See Aquinas, *ST* 3.57.6.

25. Rev. 1:10. See the chart provided at p. 158 in *Ascension Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), which in its lower register outlines the Church’s participation in the anaphoric work of Christ, to which the liturgy gives witness in the perfect tense (Christ has died), the present tense (Christ is risen), and the future tense (Christ will come again).

26. See *1&2 Thessalonians*, 121–25, 165–68, and. *Ascension Theology*, chapters five to seven.

27. *Time That Remains*, 71. Just so, eucharistically, is that “small door” opened to the Messiah, an image Agamben borrows from Benjamin. But Agamben here misses the eucharistic allusion altogether, turning aside to an analogy between Paul and Kafka when he ought to have been thinking with the fathers

Approached thus, through the law of prayer, the law of faith also becomes clear. Approached as Agamben approaches it in *The Time That Remains*, one never arrives at the parousia in any sense but Bultmann's: a revelatory moment, a mystical disclosure time, a time between the times that is no time at all.²⁸ The pivotal function of the eucharistic thank-offering does not appear, through which the baptized are continually prepared anew for delivery to God, so that they have always as their end the One who has no end.²⁹ When Paul says to the Corinthians that they are those "unto whom the ends of the ages have come" (εἰς οὓς τὰ τέλη τῶν αἰώνων κατήντηκεν) he is still using martial imagery, something Agamben fails to notice. The statement belongs to a eucharistic warning passage.³⁰ The long ages of contest are come to a climax. Love of God and love of idols stand opposite one another in pitched battle. The moment, the common moment, is one of great opportunity and great peril.

about the relation between the week of creation and its *eighth* day. On the eucharistic *conversio*, see chapter six of my *Theological Negotiations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

28. Genealogically it is Heidegger who stands in the background and gets noticed here. See Jessica Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption* (New York: SUNY Press, 2013), 149: "For Paul, Heidegger writes, 'the parousia depends on how I live.'" But Heidegger is wrong, and so are Bultmann and Agamben, all of whom suppose that that one lives differently by seeing differently, and that this *is* the parousia rather than something that makes a difference *at* the parousia.

29. Cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.17f., 5:1f., and Augustine, *Civ.* 10:20ff. It won't do to say that "the kingdom does not coincide with any chronological instant but is between them, stretching them into *parousia*" (*Time That Remains*, 73) or to account for the kingdom's "nearness" or availability in that way. The first claim may be true but the latter is false unless ascension, Pentecost, the Eucharist, and the second coming are properly deployed as the requisite frame of reference for interpreting the so-called *Zwischenreich* and for answering questions about the millennium.

30. 1 Cor. 10:11; see 8:1–11:1. As for "settling our debts with the past" (*Time That Remains*, 78), that is the business of baptism, is it not?

“Therefore let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”³¹

Agamben is working with a different set of interests. He sees chronological time and ordinary history as the realm of law, whether Torah or the *ius gentium*. This is a realm that can never be properly salvific, except insofar as Torah is fulfilled by the Messiah, who in fulfilling it also nullifies it. Eternity, Agamben seems to think, knows neither law nor time. In remnant time, the contraction of time and of law is already experienced by the faithful, as eternity begins to appear. They become the beneficiaries of a “tendential lawlessness” as the obscuring veil of law, of the legal mindset, is nullified messianically.³²

There is an important moment of truth here, derived from Paul, though it must be handled with caution, lest a false dichotomy between law and gospel arise.³³ Paul, for his part, as his second letter to Corinth so marvelously displays, remains focused (even in

31. That being so, the messianic is not, as Agamben claims, the relation between type and antitype. He has got off on the wrong track here, with his talk of *Olam HaZeh* and *Olam HaBa* “contracting into each other without coinciding” (*Time That Remains*, 74) – unless we are to take that, too, in military terms, with the understanding that the resolution of the struggle will appear precisely at, and only by way of, the parousia. This is not to make the common mistake of viewing messianic time “as oriented solely to the future” (*Time That Remains*, 77), but neither is it to allow that the messianic recapitulation, which takes place for the sake of “the economy of the fullness of times” (εἰς οἰκονομίαν τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν, Eph. 1:10), renders each and every “now” open to fulfillment in some hidden depth dimension. Paul was not a Continental philosophical theologian; he did not think in such abstract terms.

32. 2 Cor. 3:16. As elsewhere, Agamben translates καταργεῖται “rendered inoperative” (172).

33. To say that one is justified apart from the law, or that the writ of the law was nailed to the tree on which Jesus hung, such that it can no longer condemn us (Col. 2:14), is not at all the same thing as to say that one exists lawlessly in Christ, for Christ is the giver of a new or renewed law, the law of liberty that preserves the old law by deepening and broadening and perfecting it. Cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.13.3 and 4.16.5.

mundane monetary matters) on eucharistic gratitude – “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!”³⁴ – and on transformation in the Spirit. He remains focused on conformity to “the image of the invisible God” whom he beheld on the road to Damascus; on “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” as he puts it elsewhere. For he immediately goes on to say: “Now ‘the Lord’ is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”³⁵ In the time that remains – in that “now” that is pure opportunity, the time of invitation and acceptance, the day in which salvation lies open to us³⁶ – Paul reminds us that “power is made perfect in weakness,” that our “slight, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen,” knowing that “though our outer man is wasting away, our inner man is being renewed every day.”³⁷

At the parousia, what is mortal will be swallowed up by immortality.³⁸ This, however, does not entail the cessation of time or of law, for the realm of the creaturely *is* the realm of time and law. It entails rather a change of time and law through a change in

34. 2 Cor. 9:15.

35. 2 Cor. 3:17f.; cf. Col. 1:15, 1:27.

36. 2 Cor. 6:2, quoting Isaiah: ἰδοὺ νῦν καιρὸς εὐπρόσδεκτος, ἰδοὺ νῦν ἡμέρα σωτηρίας.

37. 2 Cor. 4:16–17; cf. 11:30ff. and 12:9.

38. With 2 Cor. 5:1–10 cf. 1 Thess. 4:13ff. and Rom. 8:18ff. It should not be overlooked that 2 Corinthians 3–6 is recapitulated in Romans 8, on which Agamben oddly has very little to say, though he translates a portion of it for us at p. 157.

the mediation of both.³⁹ Meanwhile, since the ascension of Jesus and because of it, the old and the new are both operative, just as Agamben says. There is already, to deploy an Irenaean phrase, a greater *operatio libertatis* in play.⁴⁰ The relation between the two is presently governed by the nullification and substitution at work in the sacraments: paradigmatically in baptism, which Paul treats in Romans 6 before extending this dialectic into the climactic chapters of Romans.

Nullifications and Substitutions

The time that remains comes with a hidden expiry date – albeit not without warning thereof – as time always has since man was expelled from the Garden. Whether for individuals, or peoples, or the race as a whole, boundaries have been set by God.⁴¹ But messianic time is time to make an end of time in the sense of determining to what end we mean to go. For we who live in the last times live in time that runs toward the coming of the Son of Man in judgment, without which there can be no universal manifestation of the Glory of the Lord. Those who believe in him, who meanwhile also suffer with him, will then be glorified with him. In remnant time we await this glory, which will not appear as a peculiar event by the river Che'bar or on the highway to Damascus, but will appear rather as lightning that flashes from east to west.⁴² Our own experience of time, our experience of all reality, will suddenly undergo rupture. It will be subject to an apocalypse. The truth will

39. Heb. 7:12 is situated near the heart of that work as one of its interpretive keys; see further the final chapter of *Theological Negotiations*.

40. *Haer.* 4.13.3. I have tried to elucidate this for the sphere of law in “The Greater Operation of Liberty,” chapter 22 in *Christianity and Constitutionalism*, ed. Nicholas Aroney and Ian Leigh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

41. See Acts 17:24–31.

42. Matt. 24:27.

be laid bare. The history that we took to be our history will turn out to have belonged to him and to his history all along. It will be shown to be our history only in relation to his.⁴³ All this, both baptism and the Eucharist already declare and, in mysterious fashion, effect. Though we do not see it, they rupture the time of the saeculum by gathering it and us into the time of the self-offering of Christ. In them is hidden the secret of the saeculum.⁴⁴

Viewed thus, there is no need at all to say that Paul is interested in time as it ends rather than in the end of time. He is interested in both, for the former cannot be grasped apart from the latter. There is also no need to think of ending-time primarily in terms of nullification. We may take still more seriously than Agamben the fact that “messianic *katargesis* does not merely abolish; it preserves and brings to fulfillment.”⁴⁵ One who lives by faith will live by being unattached even to people or things to which one is properly attached: by being a Jew, say, without putting stock in Jewishness; by being a spouse and a parent, without putting family before God and his Christ; by having much or little and being equally content, because not bound up with having or not having – in short, by a certain holy indifference. But this is not the indifference of one who is merely seeking to be emptied of this world and what belongs to it, of one who has no interest in the

43. Thus Karl Barth, who lays the groundwork – again, lamentably, without reference to the sacraments – for a christological view of time in §47 of *Church Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: T&T Clark, 1960, vol. III.2). For criticism, see my *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Grand Rapids: T&T Clark, 1999), 429ff.

44. See Farrow, “The Secret of the Saeculum,” *First Things* (May 2020), 27–35.

45. *Time That Remains*, 99. His critique of Hegel’s concept of *Aufhebung* is sound, for the latter does tend to confound “the problem of messianic time with the problem of posthistory” (101), producing an “infinite deferment” rather than a fulfillment (103); but compare my own rather different account of the problem in *Ascension and Ecclesia* (186ff.).

present age or of any particular place in it. To think with Paul, we must think in terms not only of nullification but also and especially of substitution.

The key substitution is “Christ in us, the hope of glory.”⁴⁶ This is what makes us “light in the Lord,” conveyors of the brilliance that through the incarnation rends the heavens and pierces the darkness with the glory of God.⁴⁷ This is what reveals the lawlessness that is work against the law and more subtly (as Agamben stresses) within the law. We will come back to that in connection with 2 Thessalonians 2, after first noticing the series of nullifications and substitutions presented in Romans 9–11.

First, there is Paul’s self-nullification and his Moses-like offer to God. In Exodus 32, referencing the golden virility god by which Israel had betrayed the Glory of the Lord, Moses says to the people: “You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” He then intercedes with God to “forgive their sin – and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.” Likewise, Paul writes, “I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race.”⁴⁸

Second, and most decisively, there is the self-nullification of God’s incarnate Son, Jesus, who does what neither Moses nor Paul could do, so that God may be found absolutely faithful in his love for both Jew and Gentile. “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has

46. Col. 1:27.

47. Cf. Isaiah 6–12, 49–55, 60–66; Eph. 5:8–20. See also Luke 2:25–35, where Simeon prophesies that the same one who is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel,” will rupture the present order, as the “thoughts out of many hearts” are revealed.

48. Rom. 9:3; cf. Exod. 32:30ff.

done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?” A remnant of both can and will be saved, because the self-nullification of Jesus on the *via crucis* is answered by the gift of new life – the substitution of life for death – in the resurrection and ascension. “If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?”⁴⁹

Third, there is the nullification of justification through the law and the substitution of justification through faith in Christ. “For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified.”⁵⁰ Here it may be remarked that Agamben is right to suggest that Christ is the end of the law in both senses; that is, as *telos* and *finis*. But *finis*, we must add, only in the sense that Torah is no longer the primary reed through which the note of faith sounds, though it is still, in its modulation as “the perfect law of liberty,” the register in which it is played.⁵¹

Fourth, there is the nullification of the Jew for the sake of the Gentile, or rather the nullification of the Jew/Gentile distinction and of circumcision as an effective sign. In their place is put the one ecclesial body of Christ that is accessed by the sacrament of baptism. “The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek;

49. Rom. 8:31f. and 9:22ff.

50. Rom. 10:4, which takes us back, of course, to chapters three through seven.

51. See James 2:8ff.; cf. again *Haer.* 4.13.3: “For He did not set us free for this purpose, that we should depart from Him (no one, indeed, while placed out of reach of the Lord’s benefits, has power to procure for himself the means of salvation), but that the more we receive His grace, the more we should love Him. Now the more we have loved Him, the more glory shall we receive from Him, when we are continually in the presence of the Father” (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1, 478).

the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For ‘every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.’⁵²

Fifth, there is the nullification of the nullification of the Jew. This is the thrust of the final chapter of Paul’s great account of the faithfulness of God, an account he has already told us in chapter one is for the Jew first and then also for the Gentile.⁵³ Of the Jews he enquires, at Rom. 11:11, “Have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!”

Sixth, having looked ahead to the ingathering of Jews into the Church, as body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit, Paul points to the nullification of the wisdom of the world in favour of what the world regards as foolishness – the foolishness of God that he has already told the Corinthians “is wiser than the wisdom of men.”⁵⁴ Thus also the famous final lines of chapter eleven, which begin with the exclamation, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”

Finally, there is the nullification of the world itself, as shaped by sin and sinners, and the substitution of life in the world to come for the life of groanings in this present world. For Paul does indeed regard our time as a time of contractions – in the dominical sense of “birth pangs” or “labour pains.”⁵⁵ Remnant time is really

52. Rom. 10:11–13.

53. Hence those who have tried to turn the fourth nullification into nullification of the Jew qua Jew are as far from Paul as it is possible to be; see chapter 8 of *Theological Negotiations*.

54. 1 Cor. 1:25ff.; cf. Eph. 2:11–3:21.

55. Rom. 8:22.

prelude time, the commencement of judgment time.⁵⁶ That is a note of warning he has already sounded for Gentiles in chapter one and for Jews in chapter two. “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel,” writes Paul, that “though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved; for the Lord will execute his sentence upon the earth with rigor and dispatch.”⁵⁷

Just here we may turn at last to Thessalonians, where Paul first develops this motif. In doing so, we will not make the mistake Agamben makes of trying to subsume what Paul is doing under the rubric of law and lawlessness or of Christ as the end of the law. We will read them as they must be read, within the salvation-historical and eucharistic tension already described. Yet we will find in our disagreement with Agamben about law and lawlessness something on which we can and should agree.

Agamben’s Twofold *Anomia*

In Thessalonians, the time that remains is time to prepare for what is to come. It is time for turning from idols, “serving the God who is living and true” and waiting “for his Son to appear from the heavens, whom he raised from the dead: Jesus, the one rescuing us from the wrath that is coming.”⁵⁸ This time is not idle time. It is time for the conduct of the apostolic mission. It is time for building up the brethren, for perseverance in the good, for enduring growing lawlessness and persecution, until the Judge of all men appears. These things require mention, for Paul’s concern in these letters is not with the messianic *katargesis* of law but rather with effective

56. Cf. 1 Cor. 5; 1 Cor. 11:27ff.

57. Rom. 9:27, quoting Isa. 10:22f., which continues: “Judgment is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. For the Lord the LORD of hosts, will make a full end, as decreed, in the midst of all the earth.”

58. 1 Thess. 1:9f.

situating of the community in the time that remains, the time we are calling eucharistic or prelude time and may here call waiting time.

When Agamben himself turns to Thessalonians, there is no mention of such things. He appeals directly to the second letter, or rather to one notoriously difficult bit of it – the riddle of the restrainer – in aid of his reflection on *katargesis*, the nullification or “rendering inoperative” of law. His interpretation of this passage stands the traditional reading on its head.⁵⁹ Once again it will help to have the text before us, in its standard form, before providing Agamben’s alternative:

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day [of the Lord] will not come, unless the rebellion comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.... And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time [καὶ νῦν τὸ κατέχον οἴδατε εἰς τὸ ἀποκαλυφθῆναι αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ ἑαυτοῦ καιρῷ]. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way [μόνον ὁ κατέχων ἄρτι ἕως ἐκ μέσου γένηται]. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus] will slay him with the breath of his mouth, and will destroy him by his appearance and his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders [οὗ ἔστιν ἡ παρουσία κατ’ ἐνέργειαν τοῦ Σατανᾶ ἐν πάσῃ δυνάμει καὶ σημείοις καὶ

59. Agamben’s ambition is to “restore Paul’s Letters to the status of the fundamental messianic text for the Western tradition” (*Time That Remains*, 1). He is asking what it means “to live in the Messiah, and what is the messianic life” (18). Yet he does not begin where Paul begins, nor trace Paul’s own argument even in Romans, never mind Thessalonians. At p. 72, he does mention 1 Thess. 4:13ff. very cryptically in connection with 1 Cor. 15:23–28, but he fails to resume that discussion. So all we are left with is his idiosyncratic treatment of 2 Thessalonians 2.

τέρασον ψεύδους], and all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.⁶⁰

With this rendering and others like it, Agamben is not satisfied. He translates 2:6–9 thus:

You know what it is that is now holding him back [*ho katechōn*], so that he will be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of anomy [*anomia*] is already at work [*energeitai*], but only until the person now holding it back [*ho katechōn*] is removed. Then the lawless one [*anomos*] will be revealed, whom the Lord will abolish with the breath of his mouth, rendering him inoperative by the manifestation of his presence [*parousia*]. The presence [*parousia*] of the former is according to the working of Satan in every power [*dynamis*].⁶¹

As translated into Italian and thence into English, Agamben's various renderings of this text are somewhat confusing, lacking internal agreement. Two features stand out, however. First,

60. 2 Thess. 2:3–4, 6–12 (RSVCE).

61. I have conflated the translation that appears on p. 109 with the one that appears on p. 110, which reads: “until the person now holding *it* back *gets out of the way*” (italics added). At p. 184 we find a third, more literal, version in parallel with the Greek text. This, with minor adjustments I have introduced for clarity, reads as follows: “And now all of you know the one withholding, for [the purpose of] being revealed himself in his moment. For the mystery of lawlessness already works; only the one restraining now [restrains it] until from the middle he becomes [removed]. And then shall be revealed the lawless [one] – whom the Lord Jesus will abolish with the breath of his mouth and will render inoperative with the appearance of his coming – of which is [the] presence according to [the] working of Satan in every power and [in] signs and prodigies of falsehood and with every trick of injustice to those being destroyed...”

anomia appears as a diabolical counterpart to the work of Christ in bringing the law to an end. Second, the restraint that is operative in this counterpart is a purely tactical restraint that works through law and the power of law, which is the present instrument of lawlessness in the diabolical sense. It is the working of Satan *in every power* rather than “with all power” that Agamben thinks Paul is warning us about.

Most interpreters see the restraint of lawlessness as a function of the good order maintained by the state, which (per Rom. 13:1–7) is ordained of God for that purpose. They understand this order to come first from Roman law and empire, then from Christian law and empire. Agamben begs to differ. He thinks that this view plays into the hands of the very man of lawlessness (*anomos*) whose arrival it fears. For his part, he finds in all worldly claims to authority a kind of antichrist. The *anomos* is the man who after the *katargesis* of law in Christ begins to usurp law for his own purposes, secularizing and idolizing respect for law and authority. In Paul’s reference to restraint, Agamben finds anomy’s self-restraint, that the *anomos* might appear to the world as the force of law that deters evil, until it finally becomes evident that law and lawlessness are one and the same and that the force working through law today is not God, but Satan.

On Agamben’s approach, then, it is still right to say that the state, or some power within the state, is the restrainer, but now in multiple senses: the old sense, appropriated by Hobbes, in which the state purports to be able to block or delay the final catastrophe;⁶² a

62. Agamben (109) quotes Tertullian as follows: “We pray for the permanence [stability?] of the world (*pro statu saeculi*), for peace in things [human affairs?], for delay of the end (*pro mora finis*).” Agamben remarks that “every theory of the State” that views it “as a power destined to block or delay catastrophe, can be taken as a secularization of this interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2.”

new sense, in which the state restrains itself lest it tip its hand prematurely, revealing its totalitarian aspirations; and a further sense that is more difficult to articulate because it is more theological. The *katechōn*, says Agamben, is “the force—the Roman Empire as well as every constituted authority [is the force]—that clashes with and hides *katargesis*, the state of tendential lawlessness that characterizes the messianic, and in this sense delays unveiling the mystery of lawlessness.”⁶³

In none of these senses is the restrainer viewed positively, as in traditional readings. According to Agamben, 2 Thessalonians 2 cannot be made the basis of a Christian doctrine of law or power. For the *katechōn* is every force that restrains or opposes the gospel by refusing to acknowledge the *katargesis* or abolition of law in Christ. It is every force that makes of itself and its own law a saviour.⁶⁴ As for the mystery of lawlessness, it seems to be twofold. Positively – and here it can be viewed positively – it is a godly lawlessness in Christ, through whom the law of love cancels out the law that exposes sin and leads to death. Negatively, it is the wicked lawlessness of those who defy God and his Christ by insisting on law while transforming law itself into lawlessness.⁶⁵

For a time, the mystery of ungodly lawlessness operates under the guise of law, deferring disaster. But eventually the pretence is dropped, exposing the ruse for what it is. In Carl Schmitt’s terms, the state of exception is shown to be the true ground of law, and the difference between law and lawlessness disappears altogether. The situation of being beyond the law,

63. *The Time That Remains*, 111.

64. Cf. Farrow, “The Audacity of the State,” *Touchstone* 23.1 (January/February 2010), 28–35.

65. It would have been helpful if Agamben himself had identified the mystery of lawlessness in these twofold terms, for it is his attribution of positive messianic value to “the mystery of lawlessness,” while yet retaining a negative or anti-messianic sense, that sets apart his reading of this text.

brought about by the crucified and resurrected Christ, is parodied by the state of exception, in which (to employ language from 1 Corinthians) “all things are lawful” for those who rule. Laws and constitutions are suspended in the face of a crisis no longer deferred, and the will of the rulers takes their place. Human life is organized by pure arbitrary fiat.⁶⁶

When this happens, worldly anomy is exposed as such. The *anomos* appears as the antichrist it is and as the “absolute outlaw.” For the messianic mystery of “the absence of law” must come to fullness both positively and negatively.⁶⁷ But Christ will complete his own salvific work by rendering inoperative this sinful parody. He will win the war of presences by bringing our false representations of time and of law, embodied in the totalitarian state, to an end. He will deliver up the kingdom to his God and Father. This too will be by fiat, by “the breath of his mouth,” though Agamben does not attempt to describe it or to say whether it is anything other than the providential collapse of the sinful *anomos*.⁶⁸ That is, he does not address the confrontation between the two in the terms of 2 Thessalonians 1, which he passes over in treating 2 Thessalonians 2. But, one way or another, this man that wills to

66. See *Time That Remains*, 104ff. A link between Paul and Schmitt is found in Paul’s concept of a remnant – that is, of a people neither *ennomos* nor *anomos*, since law has suffered *katargesis*. Schmitt’s concept of the state of exception, which identifies where true authority lies by virtue of the power to suspend law, raises an irresolvable question about the relation between authority and legitimacy in human affairs. It should be noted that *Il tempo che resta* appeared three years before Agamben’s highly prophetic *Stato di eccezione* (2003), which pursued the project begun in *Homo Sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (1995).

67. On Agamben’s view, if I understand him correctly, the restrainer is simply anomic man, in satanic rather than christic form, operating under the guise of a law that eventually will be exposed as satanic.

68. Such is the meaning, according to Agamben, of 1 Cor. 15:24; but might a more Joachimite representation recommend itself to some, as it did to Lessing?

have neither the old law of Moses nor the new messianic freedom from law but rather to substitute for both his own arbitrary autonomy, his lawless law, will come to nothing. He will be nullified.⁶⁹

In this connection, and in fulfillment of a promise made at the outset, we may mention Agamben's Tyconian instincts; that is, his recognition of the divided nature of the Church, which harbors a secret loyalty to the antichristic rather than the christic mystery of lawlessness. For the Church itself, whether in its members or in its institutional life, is in no small part inclined to cling to law and to idolize respect for authority. It is therefore always in danger of serving to obscure, rather than to declare and live, the gospel of Christ; in danger of substituting an antichristic gospel of restraint. Is this not what we have witnessed in pandemic responses that subordinate the life and mission of the Church to the demands of secular authorities who declare a state of exception – an apparently permanent state of exception in which the Church's authority to conduct its mission of word and sacrament can be suspended in the name of health and safety? And is it not the case that a major part of the Church, in precincts high and low, has quite happily agreed to this?

This is what I had in mind when I spoke of the timeliness of engagement with Agamben, for a new light has been cast by our present circumstances on the manner in which the antichristic mystery emerges into the open and on the ease with which so many,

69. It is not made clear (this is one of the many lacunae in Agamben's argument) whether the parousia of Christ is historically distinct from the parousia of antichrist. Is the latter somehow destroyed by his own parousia in a failed attempt at absolute power, or is he destroyed rather by the appearance of Christ from heaven with his host of holy ones (1 Thess. 4:13ff.; 2 Thess. 1:5ff.)? Or are these events and causes, *pace* Paul, ultimately indistinguishable?

whether inside or outside the Church, “credit the lie.”⁷⁰ New light has been cast on divisions within the Church, which has certainly become internally polarized, as if in proof of the Tyconian ecclesiology according to which there is an overlap between the body of Satan and the body of Christ, in the form of a false church within the Church.⁷¹

In this new context serious thought must be given to Agamben’s idea of the kairotic “now” as a time for transformation through a voluntary nullification or letting-go of one thing in particular: the precious idea of church and state as partners in the restraint of evil and so in the delay of the end.⁷² Insofar as the state still presents itself “as a power destined to block or delay catastrophe,” and insofar as it does this in such a way as to block or delay the mission of the Church and to herd its members into the digital dictatorship desired by the authors of this putative catastrophe – insofar as the state, having declared a perpetual state of exception, supposes itself in a position to grant rights and

70. 2 Thess. 2:11. By way of illustration, see “Unclean! Unclean!” (first published then unpublished at *The Catholic World Report*, but available on my Academia pages). Infinite deferment seems also to be the ambition of many bishops and church leaders.

71. Augustine expounds Tyconius’s view as found in the second of his seven hermeneutical rules. This is the rule “about the twofold division of the body of the Lord.” Or rather, it is a rule about “the true and the counterfeit,” which requires the interpreter of scripture to beware lest he mistake what is said of the true for what is said of the counterfeit and vice versa. For “the good fish and the bad” are “mixed up in the one net” owing to their common participation in the sacraments (*Doc. Chr.* 3.32; cf. the seventh rule at 3.37). While Augustine did not read the Apocalypse with Tyconius as a book about the struggles of a divided Church, he did allow that the Church was a *corpus permixtum* that in the last days would have to be cleansed of its impure element (cf. Zechariah 13 and Rev. 16:19).

72. In *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days* (2013; ET 2017), Agamben attempts a Tyconian reading of the papal resignation, extending this analysis into the Church, but we cannot engage that here.

freedoms at its own discretion, in exchange for submission, rather than to recognize pre-political rights and freedoms as granted by God – it is plainly revealed as lawless in the satanic sense and must be resisted as such, lest it seat itself in the temple of God, declaring itself to be God.⁷³

It is no accident that Agamben was one of the first to see through the false claims being made about the coronavirus crisis and to identify the political problem it presented;⁷⁴ or, indeed, that he had long since decried the biometric aims which are being pursued today under cover of that crisis.⁷⁵ How thin is the line between democracy and dictatorship, how readily “biopower” and “biopolitics” dehumanize man, he had perceived and studied for some time. It was not difficult to apply the analysis of his 2003 work, *Stato di eccezione*, to the situation that emerged in 2020. Paul, I am convinced, would approve, joining Agamben in his rebuke of

73. There is indeed a catastrophe, but one that shows every sign of being purpose-built and based on a great many deliberate lies. These lies are largely designed to manipulate through fear, for at its deepest level the contest is between what Aquinas called the gift of godly fear and the curse of ungodly fear. With Agamben’s work on the topic (see the following note) compare my essays “The Health-First Heresy,” “The Emerging Nowa Huta,” “Enrolled in the Religion of Fear,” “America’s War,” and others collected at douglasfarrow.academia.edu or published at douglasfarrow.substack.com, including the series on what I call the Public Health revolution.

74. “*Lo stato d’eccezione provocato da un’emergenza immotivata*,” *Il Manifesto*, 26. February 2020. See also *La medicina come religione*, Quodlibet, 2 May 2020, and the collection, *A che punto siamo? L’epidemia come politica* (Nuova edizione accresciuta, 2021) / *Where are we now? The Epidemic as Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). “We live,” he observes, “in a society that has sacrificed freedom for so-called ‘security reasons’ and has hence condemned itself to ... a perpetual state of fear and insecurity” (*Where are we now?*, 28). And he asks pointedly, of his own nation: “How did it happen that an entire country, without even realising what was happening, collapsed both ethically and politically in the face of an illness?” (*ibid.* 34).

75. “*Non à la biométrie*,” *Le Monde*, 5 December 2005.

the Church.⁷⁶ He would not, however, entirely approve of Agamben's reading of 2 Thessalonians 2, for reasons I must now clarify.

Abolishing Law through Lawlessness Disguised as Law

There is certainly much to admire in Agamben's reading, particularly his subversion and inversion of the traditional idea of the state as restrainer. But the state is not the restrainer Paul has in view, either in the old sense in or Agamben's new sense. If we wish to think with Paul here, we cannot be content to use whatever sources we prefer in order to frame the question. We must follow him precisely as a student of the dominical teaching found in the Olivet Discourse and so also as an interpreter of Daniel. Approached just so, in the light of the Olivet Discourse and of the Thessalonian correspondence as a whole, the riddle of the restrainer (who or what is it?) requires another solution than the one Agamben offers.

76. "At this point, and since I have remarked upon everybody else's, I should mention the most serious responsibility of those who ought to have protected human dignity. First of all, the Church. Now a handmaiden of science – the latter having become the true religion of our time – the Church has radically disavowed its most essential principles. Led by a Pope named Francis, it is forgetting that St Francis embraced the lepers. It is forgetting that one of the works of mercy is visiting the sick. It is forgetting the martyrs' teaching that we must be willing to sacrifice life rather than faith, and that renouncing one's neighbour means renouncing faith" (*Where are we now?*, 36). The Church, of course, has constantly appealed to the second great commandment in defence of its actions, but this defence cannot withstand scrutiny, as I began showing in "Let the Dead Bury their Dead" (*The Catholic World Report*, 18 May 2020). Moreover, it has abandoned its own interpretive advantage, which has been taken up by its opponent, as Agamben astutely notes: "The medical religion has unreservedly adopted from Christianity the eschatological appeal dropped by the latter" (*Where are we now?*, 53); but see n. 91 below.

Without attempting to reprise the arguments of my commentary, I will point directly to the opening of Daniel 12, where the visions of that book are brought to their climax. “At that time,” Daniel is told – the reference being to the last remnant of the time that remains – “shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people.”

And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end.⁷⁷

On the basis of this text, in its own context, the correct solution to the riddle begins to appear. Colin Nicholl rightly observes that, in Daniel 10–12, St. Michael is cast in the role of restrainer.⁷⁸ It is only reasonable to suppose that Paul has Michael in mind.

At 12:1, however, the words “shall arise” hide an important translation issue. Nicholl contends that the reference to “a time of trouble such as never has been” makes little sense unless the action of Michael, with which that time of trouble is correlated, is not a rising up but rather a standing down. He argues that both the

77. Dan. 12:1–4 (RSVCE), which adds, as if to underline the distinction between knowledge and understanding: “Many shall run back and forth, and knowledge shall increase.”

78. See *1&2 Thessalonians*, 252f., and Colin R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 234ff. Nicholl supplies copious evidence for the prominence of Michael in Jewish literature of the period, including a later reference to Michael as κατέχων.

Hebrew word $\pi\eta\upsilon'$ and the word used in the LXX, $\pi\alpha\rho\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$, can refer either to a new action or to a cessation of action, and that it refers here to Michael's withdrawal from the fray, from his post as protector of the covenant and the covenant people. If that indeed is what Daniel is saying, and if Paul (like Jesus) is following Daniel closely, we may take Paul to be saying that there is one presently restraining the mystery of lawlessness, one whom he has earlier identified as Michael, who eventually will no longer do so. The time will come when, at God's command, he will permit the enemies of God free rein.⁷⁹

This clears away a number of difficulties. But Paul's appeal to Daniel being quite complex, we must also consider the vision in chapter seven concerning the ascension of the Son of Man to the seat of divine authority and all that lies between chapters seven and twelve describing the contestation of that authority on earth. That is how we arrive with Paul at a statement both about the restrainer of the mystery of lawlessness and also about the coming man of lawlessness. To make a long story short, Paul's *anomos* is the final embodiment of that serpentine mystery of lawlessness which has been at work on the covenant people and within the covenant people from the very beginning: a lawlessness that in Daniel's day found its fullest eschatological type in the pagan Antiochus and his Hellenizing sycophants.⁸⁰

79. "Do you not remember that while I was with you I was telling you these things?" (2:5).

80. The beast from the pagan sea, as John has it in Revelation 13, and the beast from the earth, respectively; that is, "the men of violence among your own people" (Dan. 11:14). The former is symbolized in Daniel 11:21ff. as the little horn with the boastful mouth, a deplorable fellow who honours a god of fortresses or refuges (מִצְרֵי) for the sake of peace and security. Agamben again, cogently if without reference to such texts: "At issue here is the entire idea of human societal destinies, an idea derived from a perspective that seems for many reasons to have adopted from our declining religions the apocalyptic

When this material is taken into account, one puzzle is resolved while another arises. Which of two sound options for rendering 2 Thess. 2:7 should we prefer, once confident that there is an allusion both to Michael as the restrainer and to the little horn with the boastful mouth who will be allowed to step forward onto centre stage? Should we read, “there is one who restrains until he (the man of lawlessness) emerges,” or rather, “there is one who restrains until he (Michael) steps aside”?

My own rendering of the passage, as readers of the commentary will know, favors the former but leaves my indecision on display:

And now you see what is delaying the day of the Lord; namely, that he [the man of lawlessness] should be revealed in his own proper time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only there is one presently restraining it until he shall emerge from the midst [*or*, until that one is ordered to stand down]. And then at last the lawless one will be unveiled, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth and bring down by the display of his own parousia—the one whose parousia is according to the working of Satan, with all demonic power and with false signs and wonders and with every wicked deceit, a parousia unto those who are perishing for want of love of the truth, which they did not receive that it might save them. For this very reason God sends upon them a deluding influence, that they might credit the lie, so they should be judged...⁸¹

idea of an end of the world. Politics has already been superseded by the economy, but now even the latter, in order for it to govern, will have to be integrated into the new paradigm of biosecurity – a paradigm in the name of which all other needs must be sacrificed. It is legitimate to ask if such a society can still define itself as human, or if the loss of sensible relationships, of the face, of friendship, of love, can truly be compensated for by an abstract and presumably absolutely fictitious health security” (*Where are we now*, 57f.).

81. *1&2 Thessalonians*, 242. In a forthcoming essay, “Apocalypsis in 1 & 2

The majority reading of verse seven, in which the second “he” is taken to refer, not to the man of lawlessness, but rather to the restrainer, is certainly viable. So, I contend, is a rendering that makes it refer to the former. The good news for the reader, if not for the translator, is that, whichever referent we supply, we may still understand Michael to be the restrainer and the man of lawlessness to be the one whose unveiling occurs when the prince of the covenant withdraws.

This makes sense of both text and context, including source texts.⁸² The mystery of lawlessness, once Michael ceases to restrain it through his support for the covenant people – think of Abraham ceasing to drive the vultures from the sacrifice or Moses arising from his rocky seat and lowering his orant hands⁸³ – comes to its climax with the appearance of that man of lawlessness before whom the people of God will appear to be defenceless. Rule by decree will again, and universally, bring the sacraments of the covenant and the proclamation of the gospel to a halt.⁸⁴ Violence will be done against

Thessalonians: Paul’s Vision of the Day of the Lord,” I set this in its context in the two letters to Thessaloniki.

82. One cannot derive Agamben’s view from Daniel, or retain it once Daniel is taken into account. It is not “every constituted authority” that is the restrainer but a very specific authority, Michael.

83. Not before the proper time, though Abraham fell asleep (Gen. 15:1; cf. Augustine, *Civ.* 16.24) and Moses needed Aaron and Hur to prop him up (Exod. 17:12). Michael, too, has a little help, even as he lends help (Dan. 10:13), until he is told to withdraw. Perhaps he has already done so. Are we not seeing, in the Church and on a global scale, what begins to look like a time of trouble such has never been, a time in which even the elect seem subject to deception and in need of help (Matt. 15:21–25; cf. Dan. 11:32–35)? Is it still difficult to conceive of “a contemptible person to whom royal majesty has not been given” coming in without warning and obtaining the kingdom “by fear and by flattery,” acting deceitfully and becoming strong “with a small people,” scattering among his followers “plunder, spoil, and goods” (Dan. 11:21ff.)?

84. See Josef Pieper, *The End of Time: A Meditation on the Philosophy of History* (trans. Michael Bullock, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 119ff.

the people of God on a global scale. Those who will not submit to the mark of the beast, which will serve as the key to its kingdom and as the last great temptation of man, will find themselves without succour or support.⁸⁵ They will not in fact be defenceless, of course, or without support; for Christ himself will defend them, as Paul is at pains to say. The God of the covenant will come to their rescue by sending Jesus himself once more into the fray, by revealing to them and to their enemies the One whom all heaven already knows and adores: the Son of Man, arrayed with his proper glory, dominion, and power.⁸⁶ That – nothing other or less than that! – will prove the bitter end of the mystery of lawlessness and of the man of lawlessness, individually and corporately. It will bring the world to its knees, just as it brought Saul to his knees on the Damascus road.⁸⁷ Divine justice and divine mercy will both be served, divine faithfulness demonstrated. The ascended Lord, to whom “all authority in heaven and on earth” has been committed for its true

85. Rev. 13:11ff. More should have been made in *1&2 Thessalonians* (see 236f.) of the construction of the Internet of Bodies by which the beast will wield its power. The world crisis that began to unfold in 2019 is directed, in no small part, toward that end: the advance of biodigital convergence. By some accident of history, the World Intellectual Property Organization patent application filed by Microsoft in June of that year, for a “Cryptocurrency System Using Body Activity Data,” bears the prophetically freighted number WO 2020/060606 A1. How appropriate! Let it serve as a reminder of John’s vision of a demonic parody of the instruction in Deut. 6:8 to bind the commandments of God tightly to head and hands. For powerful men, who despise the commandments of God, have proposed implants in heads and hands to bind humans to their own commandments. Which is not merely an accident of history.

86. “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins,” writes Paul (Rom. 11:26f.), quoting Isa. 59:20f. and looking forward as well as backward to Christ, with the salvation of “all Israel” in view. See my essay, “Blessed Is He Who Comes in the Name of the Lord: Jews and the Parousia of Jesus,” *Communio* 45.3–4 (Fall/Winter 2018), 494–514.

87. Cf. Phil. 2:9–11; see further *1&2 Thessalonians*, 203ff.

and proper exercise, will put that authority on full display. The kingdom will come, not by human effort, but with a flash of light and the sound of a trumpet.

In *The Time That Remains* – things are otherwise in Agamben’s more recent work – this biblical note remains muffled at best. The note that sounds in its place is the *katargesis* of law. Dialectic displaces eschatology, or distorts it; too much is invested in a single word.⁸⁸ The authority granted to Jesus Christ is indeed rendering inoperative all authority that opposes Christ, in whom alone the diastasis between authority and legitimacy is overcome. Putative authority over and among men is expanding, on a global scale, to god-like claims and proportions. In the hollow spaces of this authority, blasphemous words are being spoken, blasphemous images being displayed, blasphemous deeds being done.⁸⁹ Yet, as Agamben has pointed out, there is a crisis of legitimacy that cannot be overcome, a gap between word and deed that cannot be bridged. Lawlessness is voiding itself through law that is not law, though the lawless pretenders do not know it and do not see it coming. For, like those subject to them, they too are under the spell of a strong delusion, having not “believed in the truth but taken pleasure in unrighteousness.”⁹⁰ And what are we to make of this clash? What indeed, if not to send out with great urgency the call to repentance,

88. Agamben’s fixation on *katargesis* is itself a distorting feature, generating untenable analogues between Paul’s attitude to the law, on the one hand, and to the mystery of lawlessness on the other. Paul says that the *anomos* himself will suffer *katargesis*, which will certainly render him inoperative! But it will not fulfill or preserve him, except for the execution of his sentence. Words mean different things in different contexts. That ὁ κύριος ἀνελεῖ τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ καὶ καταργήσει τῇ ἐπιφανείᾳ τῆς παρουσίας αὐτοῦ means that the *anomos* will be ordered to his place of punishment (cf. Rev. 19:20).

89. Witness the words projected onto the statue of Jesus that towers over Rio, *Vacina salva!*

90. 2 Thess. 2:12.

and with great compassion the invitation to “look up and raise your heads, for your redemption is drawing near”?⁹¹ Is that not just what Paul makes of it in 1 Thessalonians 4–5 and 2 Thessalonians 1–2?

God will not forever strive with man.⁹² A time is coming, and perhaps now is or soon will be, when restraint will be removed, when the covenant itself will appear to have been rendered inoperative. Then will take place the contest of parousias, in which the lawless one will be destroyed and all the lawless banished from before the Lord’s glorious countenance. Then will crowns of righteousness be awarded “to all who have loved His appearing.” From his conversion on the Damascus road to his martyrdom in Rome, Paul himself was such a one, “straining forward to what lies ahead” and pressing on “toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus,” to that final assembling around Jesus of the Church militant and the Church triumphant. In the time that remains, that is precisely what he advises us also to do.⁹³

91. Luke 21:28 (RSVCE). Such is not Agamben’s conclusion, of course, for he is not reading Paul with the faith of Paul: “We have no nostalgia for the notions of the human and of the divine that the implacable waves of time are erasing from the shore of history. But we reject with equal conviction the mute and faceless bare life and the health religion that governments are proposing. We are not awaiting either a new god or a new human being. We rather seek, here and now, among the ruins around us, a humbler, simpler form of life. We know that such a life is not a mirage, because we have memories and experiences of it – even if, inside and outside of ourselves, opposing forces are always pushing it back into oblivion” (*Where are we now?*, 97). To which it must be said in reply, “God will not always strive with man!”

92. Gen. 6:3. This, I fear, is being overlooked by those Marian maximalists and social kingship theorists who, while seeing a great struggle on the near horizon, have adopted a postmillennialist stance that cannot be found in the scriptures or in the fathers. That, too, is a matter we cannot pursue here, except to note that it is linked also to the papal maximalism I queried in “The Church’s One Foundation” (*The Catholic World Report*, 4 March 2019) and in “Dethroning Christ?” (*ibid.*, 30 August 2020), as in chapter five of *Desiring a Better Country* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015).

93. See 1 Thess. 4:13ff. and 2 Thess. 2:1; cf. Phil. 3:12ff. and 2 Tim. 4:8.

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