History...represents life as continually disrupted.\(^1\)

At last, it is history’s turn to have a say. Political myths do not float in the ether and political multivalence is not intrinsic to a religion like Christianity – topics I explored in the previous two chapters. This chapter, then, offers a historical-materialist answer as to why Christianity is politically all over the place and why it should produce myths such as Christian communism. The bulk of my argument focuses on the meagre collection of letters by the most important ideologue in Christianity – the Apostle Paul (I dispense with the quaint ‘saint’, since either everyone is a saint or no-one is). It helps one’s status immensely if you happen to have your correspondence enshrined in sacred scripture. Why Paul? It is partly because I have written elsewhere on Paul, partly because his few letters are the subject of some extended discussion among philosophers,\(^2\) some from the Left, partly because Paul’s position was to become so dominant, shaping not merely Christianity itself, but the ideology of an empire, but above all because he offers an imaginary resolution, or a literary and ideological mediation of competing social formations. Through a series of oppositions – law and grace, sin and faith and so on, all of which are clustered around the death and resurrection of Christ – Paul attempts a transition from

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1. Adorno 2006b, p. 91; Adorno 2006c, p. 134.
one to the other, a transition that is also an effort to offer an ideological and cultural passage from an older economic system to the one that the Romans were brutally imposing in the ancient Near East. The problem is that Paul's transitions are neither neat nor complete, so he actually allows both sides of his many oppositions to continue. This ambivalence on his part enabled Christianity to take contrasting positions in relation to power, especially economic power, and it explains why Christianity so easily slipped into a seat at the table of empire. By contrast, a position such as Christian communism took one side, offering an idealised representation of a fading social formation. No transition or mediation, here; it was a desperate resistance to the new order of Roman power and for that reason failed to get any substantial grip.

That is my argument in brief; the rest of the chapter spins it out in some detail. In doing so, I engage in some historical reconstruction, stitching together the threads of various proposals I have made in earlier work concerning ancient economic history, but also pushing this reconstruction much further than I have done until now. Two epithets clarify what I mean by historical reconstruction: economic and ancient. My focus is on the ancient world, especially ancient Israel and early Christianity. Apart from the fact that these are old stamping grounds that have a continuing fascination for me, they are also the eras in which the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity (and indeed Islam in part) took shape. That is to say, they constitute the basis upon which the notorious political ambivalence of Christianity first was built, as well as the political myth of Christian communism. Now for the second epithet: I pursue an economic reconstruction, largely because such reconstructions are thin on the ground for the period in question. Apart from the persistent work of Richard Horsley, which is thoroughly materialist but does not go far enough, one or two exist for the moment of the New Testament and early Christianity, although their influence is tangential, parts of much wider studies of the ancient Greek world (Ste. Croix and Wood) or as precursors to feudalism and the absolutist state (Anderson). It goes without saying that I am interested in explicitly Marxist reconstructions,

3. One usually comes across ‘early’ Christianity, which carries its own ideological load, full of assumptions about pristine and authoritative origins.
5. Ste. Croix 1981; Wood 1997; Wood 2008, pp. 36–42; Anderson 1974. In another place, I will engage with Wood more directly, since she challenges both Ste. Croix and Anderson regarding the dominance of slavery in the production of surplus. However, her argument is based on Athens as an exception to the Greek rule, one where free working peasants formed the basis of Athenian democracy in a long struggle with the ‘aristocracy’ (a term under-assessed in her work). The paradox is that precisely such a democracy required an increasing number of slaves to operate, which brings one to the obvious conclusion that the necessary economic motor of Athens at least included both slaves and peasants, a point to which Ste. Croix is open.