Chapter Seven

The Conundrums of Giorgio Agamben

…the Messiah is the figure in which the great monotheistic religions sought to master the problem of law…¹

I must confess to a certain disquiet over Giorgio Agamben’s engagement with theology. To be sure, his political appeal for many lies in his uncanny ability to show how elements sidelined in conventional political wisdom – such as the concentration camp, biopolitics (the inclusion of natural life within the machinery of power), the category of the non-citizen, martial law or the state of exception and totalitarianism – are, in fact, constitutive of capitalist parliamentary democracy. Yet, when we come to his study of Paul, there are some profound problems. This chapter, then, is an effort to bring those problems to the fore: his confusions concerning Paul’s letters, his reliance on Christology in order to develop his idea of messianism, his clear decision to make Paul a thinker of the law, thereby sidelining the question of grace, and the shaky category of pre-law as a solution to Paul’s arguments.

Yet, in the midst of these problems a usable insight emerges: Agamben tries to relativise the absolute claims made on behalf of theology, specifically by

¹ Agamben 1998, p. 56.
reaching back over theology to find the pre-theological usage of political terms that are still with us. In this way, he attempts to negate the argument that most of our central categories – hope, sovereignty, love, promise and so on – are ultimately theological. What he sets out to do – relativising theology – is sorely needed, but the way he does so leaves much to be desired. This is particularly the case when we come to his study of Paul, which is the focus of my discussion. Although I will draw on his other works where necessary, this chapter is primarily a commentary on his commentary on the letter of Paul to the Romans in the New Testament, namely *The Time That Remains*.

In what follows, I focus on the problems before exploring the insight that emerges from their midst. There are four main problems. In the effort to shake up the field of Pauline scholarship, Agamben embarrassingly slips up too often, using non-Pauline letters and making dubious arguments. Second, although he pursues a secularised reading of Paul’s letters, especially to develop a theory of messianic time and act, he cannot escape the problems surrounding that Christology so easily, for the idea of the messianic with which he works is inescapably Christological. Third, his decision to take the opposition between faith and law as the central one in Paul’s thought may be seen as a direct counter to Badiou’s emphasis on grace. While it may be seen as a necessary correction, Agamben ends up going too far, for he can make little sense of Paul’s concern with grace, which becomes a mere placeholder of the void between faith and law. Finally, we come to the argument that the key to Paul’s thought is the whole realm of Hellenistic (and a little Hebrew) law, or rather pre-law. To my mind, this resort to pre-law in order to understand Paul is the major argument of the book. The problem is that Agamben constructs this category of pre-law on the flimsiest of evidence (linguistic arguments derived in part from Benveniste), he assumes that Paul must make sense and, for that reason, seeks a point of coherence outside Paul, and he gets caught in the quicksand of a narrative of differentiation. However, this trek in search of pre-law also contains a promising insight. In straining and stretching to reach as far back as he possibly can, Agamben attempts to relativise theology’s claim to the absolute. At this moment, he marks a transition in the structure of the book, for, in this chapter, we pass from those who engage

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2 My unease over Agamben’s reading of Paul’s stands in sharp contrast to Kroeker’s enthusiastic embracing of Agamben. See Kroeker 2005.