The Relationship of Canon and Messiah

The Convergence of Jan Assmann and Walter Benjamin on a Theory of Monotheistic Canon

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This paper focuses upon the relationship between the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann and the German-Jewish late modern literary critic Walter Benjamin as regards the movement from canons to messianic forces. It therefore traces the evolution in Assmann's thought from issues surrounding the processes of canonization to his development of a form of "weak thought" in relation to religious violence before then turning to Benjamin's portrayal of a "weak messianic force" moving through history which is only conceivable in close proximity to a scriptural legacy and a divine (or "pure") violence, as he saw it. Additionally, this paper draws a line connecting the work of each in order to solidify the structure and function of the monotheistic canon as being not only at the heart of western civilization, but also at the heart of all cultural transmissions today. That is, the formal elements at work in the canonical-messianic relationship are universally applicable for all identity formation of modern subjectivities, whether political, cultural or religious, insofar as the entire realm of representations appears to be governed by a canonical sense of normativity. A closer inspection then of how these elements were brought together in their original religious context might therefore better enable us to discern the effects that canons have upon the construction of identities in a globalized world today.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the historical and critical analysis of two contemporary authors that follows, I intend briefly to sketch the interrelation of the concepts of the *canonical* and the *messianic* from their earliest origins (in the formulation and promulgation of the monotheistic canon, the first real cultural canon of its kind) to their relevance in late modernity, on the heels of a cultural catastrophe in terms of identity. To do this, I will be utilizing two seemingly, at first glance, distant discourses, those of the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann and the German-Jewish late modern philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin. By restricting this study to the interrelation between their work, I hope to demonstrate not only the close theoretical proximity between their thoughts, but also the importance and prominence which the procedures guiding the usage of a monotheistic canon have for today. In this sense, I will begin by tracing the evolution in Assmann's thought from issues surrounding the processes of canonization to his development of a form of "weak thought" in relation to religious violence. I will then, relatedly, turn to Benjamin's portrayal of a "weak messianic force" moving through history which is only conceivable in close proximity to a scriptural legacy and a divine (or "pure") violence, as he saw it. In essence, then, I will show how Assmann's work has moved naturally from the canonical, and in order to more fully justify his claims on the canonical, to the messianic,

shortly before demonstrating how Benjamin's chronologically prior work moves from the messianic to the canonical, a point which has not yet fully surfaced within contemporary Benjamin scholarship.

2. JAN ASSMANN ON THE MONOTHEISTIC CANON AND THE "MOSAIC DISTINCTION"

The work of contemporary Egyptologist Jan Assmann has run over a breadth of ideas throughout the course of a long and ongoing career. Throughout it, he has focused mainly on an analysis of the polytheistic beliefs of ancient Egypt as well as the processes of a monotheistic canonization that juxtaposed itself over against Egyptian polytheism (Assmann 1993, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2010; Assmann and Assmann, 1987). In the past several years, however, Assmann's work has begun to address the roots of monotheistic belief in a rather profound manner, merging the work of Freud on Moses and monotheism with the signifying function of the canon in general cultural terms, that is, the canon's ability to determine meaning and value within a given society. This has led him, in turn, to shed light on the relationship between *monotheism*, with its canon of revealed writings, and *polytheism*, with its emphasis on an oral culture. His work has also provoked a good deal of critical attention, since his depiction of the monotheistic canon as a unique source of religious violence has seemed to some to be an unfair linkage. These criticisms have subsequently moved Assmann to devote a number of studies to ascertaining more precisely the relationship between the formation of canons in general, their role in shaping a monotheistic worldview and what lies at the core of religious violence.[1] These studies have taken him down a path that would ultimately lead toward a form of "weak (religious) thought", a type of religion that does not claim to be sovereign over others and that in recent years would be familiar to several similar lines of thought.[2]

The foundations of Assmann's work are not too difficult or broad to outline. He begins by recognizing the pivotal role which an earlier form of Egyptian monotheism played in shaping the Israelite religion. This was Assmann's bold foray into theories surrounding Moses' origin, and it was indeed what gave him some recognition in the English-speaking world (Assmann 1998). Following Freud's initial suspicions, his presupposition that Moses was in fact an Egyptian is what enables him to subsequently establish a structural parallel between two central religious concepts: *revelation*, on the one hand, or that which itself is bound by the processes of the canonical (e.g. characterized by remembering, progression and a monotheistic or "Mosaic" distinction between true and false) and *translation*, on the other hand, or that which remained more ancient and bound to an oral culture (e.g. characterized by forgetting, regression and a polytheistic worldview) (Assmann 1998, 3, 147).[3] As this tension between revelation and translation makes clear, he links revelation and canonization as fundamentally intertwined projects, and designates Moses as their historically unifying figure. That is, the merger of these two religious concepts gathers itself under the figure of Moses, therefore rendering mute his actual historical presence. Moses, then, appears as instrumental in constructing an idea of religion as based upon written revelation, and so not just simply the monotheistic ones, according to Assmann, for all written religions are "… founded on a corpus of canonical writings and thus on a highly authoritative codification of memory". Hence, 'the importance of the codification and canonization of memory is linked to the structure of the revelation" (Assmann 2006, 54). It is, in some sense, as David Halivni puts it, essential to the evolution of the monotheistic religions to consider the importance of the entwinement of canonization and revelation.[4]

In essence, according to Assmann, the Israelite people, once caught within the crisis of an immanent invasion and the seemingly inevitable decline of their tradition in exile, were given over to the task of revising and canonizing their sacred writings. This act, in turn, established the hope that this process would ensure the survival of the tradition through the ongoing faith practices of the

people. The canon would thus be able to provide God with a voice that would be perpetually given over to speak God's word into the looming silence of the future, one that included the possible eradication of their culture, at worst, and an exilic living, at best. As Assmann contends, this desire for the canonical form (perhaps best expressed as a desire of "canonicity"[5]) works according to a subsequently developed pattern, as the "… steps of canonization are … external to the inner dynamics both of tradition and of literary transmission. They come from outside, from the contingencies of history" (Assmann 2008a, 93). It is this step toward a structural discernment of the canonical form that enables Assmann to provide a unique insight into the origins of the monotheistic faith.

It is in this sense that a canon, unlike anything else history had previously witnessed, could thus provide the stability and identity which an exilic life would threaten to undo at any moment, for

> … there is no natural evolutionary path that leads from tradition to text. The natural path of tradition leads toward habituation, toward becoming implicit and even unconscious. In order to become explicit, a tradition has to confront a crisis or even a break. Impulses to make tradition explicit, to record or codify it in textual form, must come from without. (Assmann 2008a, 93)

As biblical scholarship has duly attested, and as Assmann views through the lens of the processes of canonization, such a force from without was what ancient Israel faced and subsequently dealt with in an extraordinarily unique manner. They were able to distinguish themselves, *through* the creation and perpetuation of a canon, both from their neighbors and from their predecessors in Egypt.

In effect, the process of canonizing a series of disparate traditional texts was a gamble on the part of the Israelites to see the tradition extended beyond the decline of a nationalized identity. It was also, however, the form which best suited the newly arisen tone behind the belief in one God, a tone which was to see the world divided into its most constituent elements, a rather stark division of all personal identities between Jew and non-Jew. This was the single act, what Assmann terms the "Mosaic distinction", which strengthened the Jews into a people beyond any national, land-based identity. And it was the "eternal" form of sacred revelation that functioned as the precise tool used in order to accomplish this identification. For Assmann's part, this is, no doubt, to conceive of the canon as a "cultural tool" of sorts as well, certainly as it is based on the transmission and regeneration of certain cultural forms. For this reason, he points out that "(i)t is not writing, but the damming up of the stream of tradition by the act of canonization that produces the decisive shift from ritual to textual coherence", and which also signaled a "fundamental change in cultural continuity" (Assmann 2006, 41 and 39). The canon had become the "tool" of choice for providing cultural legibility and, perhaps owing to its large success, would serve as such ever since.

The canon, of course, was at the time little more than a simple refinement of the archives and literary schools which had been functioning for centuries already (Davies 1998). Yet, the addition of a religious (divine) quality to the text changed the entire way in which both texts and archives were now viewed. Here, the canonical text came to be seen as a "combination of the qualities of cultural and sacred texts", stretching itself to encompass the people it identifies, though at the same time providing the norms of living which would shape their lives and identifications in *diaspora* (Assmann 2006, 42). But it was also to do more than this, for

> [w]ith the appearance of writing on the horizon, tradition increases in complexity. It ceases to be based exclusively on memory, but with the assistance of the media of external storage, it also acquires new forms of forgetting and re-remembering, of displacement and renewed access, of latency and return, of renaissance. (Assmann 2006, 100)

Indeed, the then new processes of canonization were to transform the ways in which culture itself was understood, the way it can be said to shape its people, from its inception to its even tiniest

moment of transmission. As history records, for the Jewish people specifically, the transmission of the text through ceaseless acts of commentary was essential for the perpetuation of the tradition throughout time. This, indeed, is what enables Assmann to claim that, "… interpretation becomes the central principle of cultural coherence and identity". And this is so because the "normative and formative impulses of cultural memory can only be gleaned through the incessant, constantly renewed textual interpretation of the tradition through which identity is established" (43). The people are brought back to the text again and again in an attempt to re-write themselves into the canonical narrative (Boitani 1999).

In this way, the canon becomes a quasi-total entity, offering itself as the means by which identity is culturally inscribed and recognized. It identifies the people at the same moment as they identify with it. It circumscribes the boundaries of cultural intelligibility and grants a sense of what is possible (the "sayable") and what is not (the "unsayable"). "Ultimately, writing, having been canonized, comes to replace art, public life, and tendentially, the world" (Assmann 2006, 78). This is the separation from the world, as Assmann sees it, that would come to define Judaic tradition forever afterward, and it was the beginning of a division that would stake out the basic contours of the monotheistic principle of idolatry, a principle certainly in-line with the role of the canon as signifier of meaning and value (and as evidenced through the use of the "Mosaic distinction").[6]

3. A "WEAK NOTION OF TRUTH"

In general, scholars receiving these initial claims on the nature of canons formulated in Assmann's work, both from a religious perspective and from without, have not found too much cause for criticism (Smith 2004; Schwartz 1998). It is rather when Assmann begins to draw conclusions on the relationship between these claims and violence (either being inherent to it, which he at times seems to indicate, or that it is a perversion of the original intent, as he later tries to clarify) that he begins to run into firm critiques as such. The reasons for this (mis)understanding perhaps could be summarized as follows. In short, Assmann will attempt to incorporate the "messianic" into his account of the canonical form as his work increasingly came under fire for its seemingly inherent linkage of monotheism and violence. Indeed, his presentation of the monotheistic canon, which seemed at times to aim only toward its dissolution in favor of a more polytheistic worldview, even provoked then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, to respond in kind to these charges (Ratzinger 2004, 210-230). In response, Assmann's latest work has offered more of a conciliatory role toward the monotheistic canons of scripture. He is attempting thus further to clarify his position and trying to draw attention to the "nonviolent" core of monotheism which lies latent under its historical manifestations. This is what allows him, in the conclusion of his work, *Of God and Gods*, to state that "the power of religion rests on nonviolence. Only through a complete rejection of violence is monotheism able to fulfill its liberating mission of forming an alternative counterpower to the totalizing claims of the political" (Assmann 2008a, 145).

This was to be a clarification much needed in response to both his critics and allies alike, for his position had often been misread as advocating a return to some form of a primordial polytheistic worldview.[7] To counter this caricature, he carefully elaborates his position by stating that he is

> not suggesting that one return to "Egypt", to the polytheistic system of mutual translatability and recognition, but rather that one step forward toward a religion that clings to the idea of the unity of God and commits itself to the moral commandments, while at the same time returning to a weak notion of truth in the sense expressed by Lessing and Mendelssohn: a truth that exists beyond the absolute knowledge of human beings, one that can only be aimed at but never possessed. (Assmann 2008a, 145)

It is at this point, with reference to a "weak notion of truth", one made often in relation to a non-sovereign theology, and similar thus in many respects to other popularized theologies of today, that Assmann comes extremely close to restating some of the central principles behind the work of Walter Benjamin (Assmann 2010, 48). This is not a coincidence, I am here asserting, but rather an indicator of the continuum that can be established between the forces of the canonical and those of the messianic, as I have already outlined.

The omission of Benjamin's name here, and of his claims on behalf of a "weak messianic power" that sought, in some sense at least, to overcome the violence of a universalized ("sovereign") reading of history, is somewhat surprising, especially given the fact that only a few pages earlier, Assmann developed his views on religious violence solely in reference to Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence" (Benjamin 1996a). There, Assmann sought to expand upon Benjamin's polarized scheme of divine versus mythical violence in order to propose five different types of violence, culminating in a thoroughly re-worked definition of "religious violence" given in relation to monotheism, and its canon, specifically (Assmann 2008a, 142f.). As one might expect considering his work on the "Mosaic distinction", Assmann inquires before answering: "What then is religious violence? By this term I mean a kind of violence that stems from the distinction between friend and foe in a religious sense. The religious meaning of this distinction rests on the distinction between true and false" (144). However, he is also careful to nuance his position now in ways that he had previously failed to do, and thus he states that there is yet an allegiance to religious truth which can yet be presented non-violently. In this regard, Assmann admits at least this much:

> It has by now become imperative to dissociate religion from violence. Violence belongs to the sphere of the political, and a religion that uses violence fails to fulfill its proper mission in this world and remains entangled in the sphere of the political. The power of religion rests on nonviolence. Only through a complete rejection of violence is monotheism able to fulfill its liberating mission of forming an alternative counterpower to the totalizing claims of the political. (Assmann 2008a, 145)[8]

Assmann is intending to sever the theological from the political, to divide the "theo-political", in a sense to refute Carl Schmitt's assertion that the theological and the political are inextricably intertwined. Yet, how distinct a religious violence that divides the world into a friend/enemy dichotomy could be from the realm of the political remains relatively unclear in his work; he does little more than state that they are not identical (143).[9] Thus, here, at the end of these essays, he concludes with a "weak" conception of truth offered as a message of non-violence that echoes many themes running throughout Benjamin's own work (perhaps best captured in his bid for a "bloodless" violence [Derrida 2002]). For Benjamin, indeed, this would be familiar terrain, especially as he concluded his oeuvre with his remarks "On the Concept of History" where a "weak messianic force" is said to work, and which I will take up in the second half of this paper (Benjamin 2003).

In the context of Assmann's conjectures, however, I feel it necessary to ask: Can violence be so easily removed from the sphere of divine dealings with humanity? Or, conversely, can it be (even if ideally) eradicated from what constitutes political interaction? Though the logic of his claims is often fuzzy and thus subject to alleged misreading and misunderstandings on these matters, the train of thought that led Assmann to move from the history and usage of the canonical form to the "weak forces" moving throughout history is a parallel notion of what Benjamin would pursue throughout his lifetime (though in a different manner to be sure), beginning with a focus upon these same messianic forces and moving toward the canonical, sacred scriptures in some sense. As Brian Britt has pointed out, the sacred text was an implicit guiding thread throughout Benjamin's entire career, despite his efforts at times to distance himself from its concrete traditions and religious practices (Britt 1996). What Benjamin evidences, moreover, not only confirms Assmann's basic intuitions (despite their possible shortcomings), but actually advances the fundamental connection between them much further, providing a clear "line of sight" between the canonical and the messianic that

does not in fact sever the political from the religious, in sharp contrast to what Assmann is here intending.

In no uncertain terms, it unfolds as such: Assmann, in his early work on the canonical form, neglects to account for this "messianic" aspect of a religious canon. Hence, as his later work will testify, he, on the one hand, starts from an analysis of the canonical form and slowly extends his study toward a logic of the messianic in order to clarify his claims, as we will see in a moment. Benjamin, on the other hand, starts from the "weak force" of the messianic functioning in history only to later reach back toward canonical forms (even his earlier work on scripture and language), something in many ways he likewise could only point toward, or indicate as the direction in which his work tended on the whole. It could perhaps also be said that it is no coincidence that Benjamin's work was formed in the face of a dissolution of Jewish identity, a time when the meaning given to history by a canonical form would acquire a great deal of significance and perhaps meet its greatest challenge.

4. WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE SACRED TEXT

Benjamin's work has undergone a steady ingestion in the English-speaking world for some time now, though critical scholarship on his writings has gone through cycles of more or less prominence (Eagleton 1981; Buck-Morss 1991; Wolin 1994; Cohen 1996; Gilloch 1997; Caygill 1998; Weber 2008; Steinberg 1996; Benjamin 2005; Hanssen 2006; Santner 2006; Mosès 2009). And though his views on the "weak messianic forces" moving through history have received numerous comments and applications, his views on scripture have remained far more muted (Britt 1996). Any connection between the two, however, and as I here intend to posit, has remained entirely without mention. By setting the stage thus, I will accordingly move through a close-reading of some of Benjamin's fundamental texts concerning the role which the canonical form might have played in his work, rather than present a more general overview of his writings, as was more easily done in the work of Assmann, for example. This will be the case, likewise, because the presentation of Benjamin I wish to let unfold is a more original interpretation of his work that will also hopefully serve as a unification of some of his most fragmentary writings.

Regarding the messianic, however, and here utilized in order to get our bearings within his corpus of diverse writing, it has become almost commonplace to demonstrate how Benjamin's use of the term was not only directly adapted from its Jewish heritage, but also central to understanding the theological thematics of his work on the whole (Handelmann 1991; Jacobson 2003).[10] Despite the frequent use of the concept in his work,[11] it was not until near the very end of his life that the term acquired the connotations for which it has subsequently been known. In a difficult-to-date piece of writing appropriately labeled "Theological-Political Fragment", Benjamin gave some initial flesh to his conceptualization of the term through his pronouncement that "(o)nly the Messiah himself completes all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the messianic" (Benjamin 2002b, 305). Conceived there as a counter-force to the secular idea of happiness, all of history is thereby charged with the messianic impulses which run like an electric current throughout its length, giving it its consequent shape and understanding, and this despite its apparent externality to it.

Though I will not here rework the numerous readings that his notion of the messianic has received, I will briefly outline the manner in which it functions. In his series of theses "On the Concept of History", Benjamin refers to a "secret agreement between past generations and the present one", an agreement wherein a "weak messianic power" holds a past claim on us, one that "cannot be settled cheaply" (Benjamin 2003a, 390). In essence, history contains a limitless series of images, of those marginalized (or "dangerous") memories which hold the power to overthrow our

present perceptions of the past, that is, our traditions as we have constituted them (391). When these "dialectical images" are thereby realized, the "objective" (canonical) version of historical events is overthrown so to speak. This counter-force (as a "tradition of the oppressed") indeed shatters the illusion of the homogenous time of history, positing instead a "messianic arrest of happening", what he otherwise calls "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed" (396). For the historian who can envision such a clash within historical normativity, there is only "a conception of the present as now-time [*Jetztzeit*] shot through with splinters of messianic time" (397). And if there was any doubt that Benjamin was here attempting to reformulate a predominantly Judaic term, he concludes his much celebrated theses with reference to the Jews who had first begun to see history "splintered" in just such a fashion, past, present, and even future: indeed, for the Jews, we are told, "… every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter" (397).

In this radical re-conceptualization lies a profound critique of any historicist "objective" approach to historical understanding, for there is no monolithic ("homogenous") time to which one can make unobjectionable reference. As Benjamin was to formulate many times over in his *Arcades Project*, the historicist project, as the viewpoint of the "victors" of history, was a bankrupt endeavor bound to be brought down (eventually, ultimately) by the "weak messianic forces" latent beneath any contemporary understanding of historical events. This reading of history would in fact give rise to Benjamin's critique of, and departure from, Marx: for any reading of history that would consistently side with the oppressed of history, and hence over and against the oppressed when they become those holding political power, is one that would bring all "dialectics to a standstill" (Fritsch 2005). It is also an interpretation of history which will find many deep resonances with its Jewish reading, something captured only directly through the role of the Judaic scriptures in determining Jewish self-understanding. For this reason, it becomes imperative to link Benjamin's comments on the messianic, as the disrupters to any "objective" historical record, to their Judaic origins in scripture, something which Benjamin himself contemplated from time to time, and which seems never to have vanished altogether from his horizons as we will now witness.

For example, in a note written to himself on the back of a letter dated December 22, 1938, and as what were to be perhaps his last additions to the outline of his monumental *Arcades Project* (No. 25 in "Materials for the Exposé of 1935"), Benjamin sketched some notes concerning the "ephemeral nature" of the dialectical image, that revolutionary image of the oppressed which had been silenced from history. As a recurring central concept in his work, the dialectical image, or the always singular and yet entirely fluid result of bringing "dialectics to a standstill", is here shown to be the object of history presented in contrast with the "fixity of the philological object" (Benjamin 1999, 917). Certainly not a "timeless truth", as a universal approach to history might prefer, the dialectical image was a process of awakening to what lies already singularly pronounced within history, not that which is caught up in a progression toward an historically immanent end or goal. As he had already outlined among the cards preserved of the project, the image, in its legibility, in the "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*) of its recognizability, is present in a singular sense at a particular time only; but this time, as with the relevant image it accompanies, changes for each epoch (462-4). In this manner, it presents a unique portrait of what it means to do justice to history, from *within* history, and to seek the fulfillment of time as an infinite process that is ever-changing in each epoch, or for each age.

It is also here that the theological motifs which saturate his work surface again most directly in accordance with his use of the "messianic" as a "weak force" working from within, to fulfill or redeem a history yet only presentable in a (renewed, or "more just") canonical form. Indeed, the weak messianic force is portrayed as a movement to make history theological in some sense, over and beyond its secular form as the "Theological-Political Fragment" had hinted at, to posit history thus as an act of remembrance and as opposed to science:

> What science has "determined," remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts. (Benjamin 1999, 471)

Theology, again, must be veiled, or hidden, as the dwarf inside the puppet (to borrow the image of the "magical" chess-playing automaton from Benjamin's theses on the concept of history), yet its essential importance is not reduced in the least (Benjamin 2003a, 389). Consequently, this is also why he is able to state that his thought is 'saturated" with theology though his direct engagement with the discipline is often mute (471).

As Benjamin's thought progresses toward the projected end of *The Arcades Project*, we find on the back of the same letter that the very next sentence reads, "Where the text is itself the absolute historical object – as in theology – it holds fast to the moment of extreme ephemerality in the character of a 'revelation'" (Benjamin 1999, 917). This is, then, revelation seen as in some sense defined by its precarious placement at the "moment of extreme ephemerality", and that presents itself only through the absolute historical object, here identified as the sacred text. In this sense, history itself could be said to spring from the sacred text as it were, or, as he succinctly renders it immediately afterward, "the idea of a history of humanity as idea of the sacred text. In fact, the history of humanity – as prophecy – has, at all times, been read out of the sacred text" (917-8). Just as Assmann was wont to link revelation and the sacred canon to the rise of cultural identity and history, so too does Benjamin seem to signal something in this direction, though the intimations of this relationship are at this point vague and in need of connection with the larger scope of his previous work.

Here, though in rough fragmentary form, however, he contemplates what the next successive move might look like, what questions it would need to address in the context of the overall *Arcades Project*. As he rather enigmatically penned it in direct sequence with the citations mentioned above: "the new and ever identical as the categories of historical semblance. – How stands the matter with regard to eternity?" Again, the semblance of history, as a universalized history which Benjamin opposed throughout his work to the messianic dialectical image, is brought into close relief against the backdrop of the sacred, or the eternal, and left there as if this juxtaposition alone were enough to properly guide our thoughts. What seems to be clear, at least to Benjamin, however, as he ends this fragmentary note, is that the "dissolution of historical semblance must follow the same trajectory as the construction of the dialectical image" (Benjamin 1999, 918). That is, the justice wrought from the focusing of the dialectical image, the fulfilment potentially brought to history through its realization – which was for him a theological premise – must run counter to the universal history offered by a school of historicism itself too indebted to its hopes of becoming a science. It's reliance upon "historical semblance", a realm of distorted, ideological (mis)readings of historical events, must be dissolved. It is this school of historicist thought, in fact, which misses the fundamental relationship of identity construction that takes place in the continuum spanned between the messianic and the canonical. In place of maintaining any tension between them, historicism would opt for a strict, and always becoming stricter, canonical reading of history, hence attempting to fully utilize the canon's inherently ideological nature. It is thus the sacred text, for Benjamin, from which history springs, what now, thanks to Assmann's insight, we can say is *the basic structure of the (monotheistic) canonical text in determining the meaning given to history*.

We can trace this same line of thought elsewhere in Benjamin's writings, especially in his work on language and translation where the biblical text becomes a model for a larger pattern of thought, one wherein the interlinear translation of the scriptures served as an exemplary form.[12] As Benjamin succinctly renders it in his essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", a title that alone bears witness to the split between the universal and particular with which history wrestles:

> If in what follows the nature of language is considered on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis, the object is neither biblical interpretation nor subjection of the Bible to objective consideration as revealed truth, but the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language; and the Bible is only *initially* indispensible for this purpose, because the present argument broadly follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical. The Bible, in regarding itself as a revelation, must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts. (Benjamin 1996b, 67)

The sacred text provides a unique insight, and point of departure, for viewing the "fundamental linguistic facts" of our existence, and Benjamin seems content to leave this at face value. We are led to believe then that the sacred text says something profound concerning the "fundamental linguistic facts" of our existence and is therefore "only *initially* indispensible" for discerning the structure of our linguistic existence. Just as Assmann had pointed toward the significance of revelation within the act of canonization, Benjamin situates revelation in the linguistic being of humanity, something which the canonical form attempts to capture. This is so, for

> … the equation of mental and linguistic being is of great metaphysical moment to linguistic theory because it leads to the concept that has again and again, as if of its own accord, elevated itself to the center of linguistic philosophy and constituted its most intimate connection with the philosophy of religion. This is the concept of revelation. (Benjamin 1996b, 66)

As Giorgio Agamben, Benjamin's Italian translator and editor, will later comment, what is revealed, what appears as sacred, is the starting place of language itself, the very fact that language exists and which itself cannot be stated; this is the fact that religion aspires to present (Agamben 2000, 41; Agamben 1993). The canon, in some sense, then, appears to be that form which most directly deals with the linguistic fact of our being, and which attempts to preserve that being in the face of a catastrophe that threatens to silence this precarious nature of existence.

From this vantage point, we are able to see how Benjamin was in a sense always only working in the domain of history opened up by the processes of canonization, indeed articulating the forgotten byways of history in order to "blast" away at their continuity and to reassert the messianic force of justice. His was a project directly indebted to the Judaic tradition's inscription of meaning within history, a search for the origin of revelation which could not be conceived otherwise. It was also an effort to conceive of the dialectical image as the seeker after origins lost to history, lost within history, within the originary canonical form and in great need of recovery if justice was, or is, ever to be performed. This is to speak of origins that can perhaps only be touched, if ever so slightly, through the messianic elements *within* a particular canonical formulation.

In many ways, this recovery was always one concerning origins. Indeed, Benjamin himself had only slowly begun to realize through the course of his work that the concept of "origin" he had been dealing with in his book on the *Origins of German Tragic Drama* was the same central motif hidden deep within his voluminous *Arcades Project* (Cf. Benjamin 1998, 66f). What he discovered was that both senses of origin had a profound religious heritage, a trajectory that in effect mirrors Assmann's contentions that Judaism's most fundamental insights were originally (pagan) Egyptian. As Benjamin saw it, "(o)rigin – it is, in effect, the concept of *Ur*-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history. Now, in my work on the arcades I am equally concerned with fathoming an origin" (Benjamin 1999, 462). The "Jewish contexts of history" were not to fall away once being initially utilized either; they were to form the basis, in a sense, though perhaps remaining only structural throughout his work, of representing humanity's encounter with the always particular historical catastrophe, giving this interaction a religious twist beyond simply

evoking the almost routine questions of theodicy. Catastrophe, in essence, was that which threatened to obscure or hide away forever the origins sought after.

As he was to express in his *Arcades Project* concerning the nature of the historical phenomena in need of saving from oblivion,

> What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their "enshrinement as heritage". – They are saved through the exhibition of the fissure within them. – There is a tradition that is catastrophe. (Benjamin 1999, 473)

Dealing with the essence of this "tradition that is catastrophe" is, we might here assert, the basis of the Judaic canon, center of the experience of Judaism and its "enshrinement as heritage". It is a tradition formed (*canonized*) in the face of catastrophe, a tradition that responds to catastrophe with the introduction of the canon into our world. This would be, if Benjamin is here read correctly, as a second catastrophe equal to the first, the enshrinement of a heritage (*as canon*) that is itself catastrophic. Yet it is also an enshrinement that would raise up its own internal messianic elements (the "fissure" within) to disrupt its own "catastrophic" attempts at canonization. In no uncertain terms, this is why the messianic figures so prominently for Benjamin and yet it also might serve to explain why the (Judaic) canon was always kept at a distance, though never that far removed from him either, even if it was seen by him to be a catastrophe of some sort because it sought to "objectify" history in a very concrete *canonical* sense.

In other words, Benjmain's efforts could also be read as an attempt to save the meaning in history (its "theological" element because external to historical events) while discarding the objective accuracy of history itself, something always bound to its potential misreading, bound in fact to be catastrophic in some sense. This could also ultimately be the reason that Benjamin could never develop a form of "nonviolence" (as Assmann will attempt to do), precisely because he realized the always ideological manner in which cultural-canonical representations operate. In his personal life, Benjamin faced the resurgence of another catastrophe so great as to nearly destroy the Jewish population of Europe, a crisis that indeed did bring immense devastation to the people of history and the book, and in which his life story could only appear as emblematic (Friedländer 2007, 127f). He was dealing with the shattering of tradition, caught simultaneously in the midst of the modern forces of reason and a fascism bent on destruction. In short, he was grappling with the upending of certain canonical forms of cultural memory and of history, upended by the forces of the messianic working from within and by external forces of destruction working from without … a time of crisis indeed. It would seem in some sense almost justifiable that Benjamin came to rely so heavily upon a one-sided reading of the relationship between the messianic and the canonical, for it was the former which provided so much hope in the face of destruction, in the face of those nationalist, ideological-canonical readings which sought to perform a most perverse violence upon the "oppressed traditions" of history.

5. CONCLUSION

As some commentators on Benjamin's work have noted, and as Assmann's uniting of Benjamin, the canon and violence illustrates, Benjamin's remarks on divine violence are not to be read in isolation from his comments on scripture (Fritsch 2005). In so many words, this is to say that we cannot separate his views on divine violence from the forces that work through the canons of history and their accompanying messianic elements. This link is indeed what enables us to utilize Benjamin's work in order to form an account of what I would here term a "just canon", a canon becoming conscious of its relationship to violence, something the Judaic canon, with its focus on the victims

and marginalized figures of history, can be said to accomplish in some sense.[13] Through this formulation, we might thus be able to see how in contrast to lawmaking which is always "powermaking", "(j)ustice is the principle of all divine endmaking …", a reversal of the norms which have inspired political thought since its inception (Benjamin 1996a, 248).

In short form, the hypothesis of this paper develops as such: if there is a "messianic arrest of happening" which is also a "revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed", it interrupts (or "blasts") the continuity of history presented in canonical form, but only truly more or less in accord with the degree to which the canonical representation unveils its own relationship to violence. The less the canonical element does it, the louder must this "weak messianic force" be sounded; the more the canonical element exposes its own proximity and propensity to violence in an effort to stem its tide, the quieter may the messianic forces grow (Derrida 2002). Though Assmann might like to escape from an always violent "matrix" of cultural-canonical representations, Benjamin makes clear that this is neither desirable nor possible. Rather, if canonical-representational identities are to be justly formed in our globalized age, then a deeper understanding of these forces at work is necessary, for those inside religious structures as much as for those external to them.

ENDNOTES

[1] His *Of God and Gods* and *The Price of Monotheism* are works generally conceived in response to criticism of his earlier claims. Some of the most pointedly direct criticism was a collection of papers gathered together as an appendix to Assmann's *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder Der Preis des Monotheismus*. It includes papers by Ralf Rendtorff, Klaus Koch, Erich Zenger and Karl-Josef Kuchel.

[2] Cf. on the work done in relation to Assmann's theses directly, see Mark S. Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* as well as his *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World*. There are also the similarities which Assmann's work shares with Regina M. Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* and Ronald Hendel's *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible*. In regard to the development of "weak thought", and though Assmann himself does not refer to their work, see, among others, John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God* and John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* for a more sustained discussion of the topic.

[3] Cf. the comments on orality in Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. In relation to his Freudian point of departure, see Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*; Richard J. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*; and, James J. DiCensio, *The Other Freud: Religion, Culture and Psychoanalysis*.

[4] This transitional phase toward an "extraterritorial nature" of the Law, as Halivni describes it, is also able to underscore a qualitative difference between *revelation* and *canonization*, two events now essentially forever intertwined: for though "Moses received the Torah at Sinai; the people of Israel received a canon in Jerusalem" (Halvini 2001, 85). This pivotal difference serves as well to highlight their intended relationship as an ideological interpretation of the Mosaic event, forever (re)construed for political purposes: "the covenant of Sinai was realized by means of Ezra's canonical Torah; thus Ezra's canon received retroactively a Sinaitic imprimatur" (85). The legitimacy of the canon was fabricated upon an original revelatory event mired in Mosaic tradition and now intricately interlaced with it. This is to say that even though this historical difference is sufficient to produce a gap of some considerable significance, it is the mutual intertwining of the two concepts, and the *fabricated proximity* between them, which was to dissolve any conceptual difference and instead establish a unified sense of "sacred scripture".

[5] The term "canonicity" has received a very limited treatment in theological studies and virtually no notice in philosophical ones. Cf. the limited but relevant handling of the term in Chauvet (1995, 195f).

[6] If the canon can be said to function as a signifier of sorts, separating believers from idolaters, it yet performs this division on a "sliding scale", one that can be said to both fluxuate over time and at times provide a critique of itself, something pursued here under the rubric of messianicity. Cf. the conclusion to Halbertal and Margalit's *Idolatry*.

[7] Cf. the readings of Schwartz in *The Curse of Cain*, as well as Smith in *The Memoirs of God*. For Smith, this context is centrally fixed upon the similarities shared in the work of Assmann and Hendel. Smith has since developed his critical interaction with Assmann more substantially in his *God in Translation*.

[8] He subsequently adds the following: "Religious violence is nothing original, nothing necessarily implied in the idea of monotheism. Monotheism originally meant the liberation of man from the omnipotence of political power. This was at first conceivable only as counterviolence, religious violence against political violence. Essentially this is a question not of violence against violence but of power against power. The basic idea behind biblical monotheism is to erect a counterpower against the all-encompassing power of the political. Religion can exert its counterpower against the political only if it has recourse to totally different means and values" (145).

[9] One could perhaps note the difficulty of this separation if viewed through the lens of Carl Schmitt's formulation of a political theology, one wherein the nation-state is determined upon the friend/enemy distinction. Assmann himself establishes his brief definition of political violence in relation to Schmitt, but does not develop it beyond a few terse lines. See Schmitt (1996). This insight is made even more fortuitous considering Benjamin's acknowledgement of Schmitt's influence upon his own work in the *Trauerspiel* book. Cf. Benjamin (1998).

[10] In at least one case, his use of the messianic has also been explicitly linked to the (Christian) writings of Paul. See Giorgio Agamben's *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*.

[11] Cf. the use of the messianic throughout his work, including its sporadic, but essential references in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Works*. See "The Life of Students", vol. 1, 41; "Trauerspiel and Tragedy", vol. 1, 55-6; "The Currently Effective Messianic Elements", vol. 1, 213f; 'the Idea of a Mystery", vol. 2, 68; "Franz Kafka", vol. 2, 497; "Theological-Political Fragment", vol. 3, 305-6; and, "On the Concept of History", vol. 4, 389f.

[12] Cf. the conclusion to Benjamin's paper "The Task of the Translator", *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 263.

[13] Cf. Paul Ricoeur's development of "happy memory" in his *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

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