

Messianic Archives: Agamben among the Medieval Rabbis

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Although Giorgio Agamben emphatically distances himself from medieval typology (that is, reading the Hebrew Scriptures as the [dead] letter fulfilled in Christian New Testament) in order to defend his vision of the messianic from a history of typological violence, scholars (including Kotsko, McNulty, Librett) have noted how, in spite of his protests, Agamben is, nevertheless, a typological thinker. The writings of Walter Benjamin, notably, his essay “Critique of Violence,” and Carl Schmitt’s text, *Political Theology*, constitute Agamben’s typological poles. In *Homo Sacer*, as Kotsko has carefully traced, Schmitt is the letter fulfilled by Benjamin (although in 1920 Benjamin could not have read Schmitt’s *Political Theology*, which appeared in 1922). In *State of Exception* Agamben reverses the relationship (and that is the symptomatic instability of the typological wheel)—Benjamin is the letter fulfilled by Schmitt. Medieval typology never lets go.

This paper argues that in order to deconstruct the medievalism of Agamben’s messianism, it is necessary to return to a reading of Benjamin’s essay. He sought to distinguish law-making and law-preserving mythic violence from divine violence which destroys the law. He further argued that an archive of blood, its presence or absence, is the trace that separates mythic (law making, law preserving) from divine violence (law destroying). In his examples taken from the metamorphosis of Niobe and the revolt of Korah brothers against Moses, he radically excluded what I call the collateral archives of these narratives, because they had nothing to do with blood. This paper puts disturbing collateral archives of these stories in the light of the noonday sun. If divine violence does have an archive, what are its implications for contemporary messianism? Medieval Jewish rabbis attempted to answer this question, and their archive breaks Agamben’s typological wheel.