



Beauty, Pathos, and Apostolic Bodies

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Second Corinthians is full of descriptions of things that happen to bodies. Many of these allude to the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, as in “we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken” (4:8–9).¹ However, the letter also speaks of “contemplating and reflecting the glory of the Lord as though in a mirror,” an image early Christians associated with the biblical personification of Wisdom (3:18).²

How do we interpret these images? How do we understand them in relation to each other? What relevance, if any, might they have for us today?

This essay addresses these questions by examining how 2 Corinthians depicts bodies and relationships as revelatory phenomena. Beginning by locating its analysis in relation to classic and contemporary appropriations of these images and then offering an interpretation of how Paul draws on both sets of images in his depiction of apostolic ministry in 2 Corinthians, it concludes by making a case for the relevance of Paul’s depiction of apostolic bodies and their relationships for our own era, a time many have described as an “age of anger.”³

¹ See Isa 52:13–53:12.

² See Wis 7:22b–30 and Sir 24:1–34 (cf. 2 Cor 3:18, 4:4).

³ Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes to a community in turmoil. He urges them to contemplate the beauty of the suffering Christ and to understand how this suffering can, ironically enough, be a beautiful form of redemption for a suffering humanity.

BEAUTY AND PATHOS

The concept of “contemplating and reflecting” and being “transformed” by the image of Christ (3:18) has had an illustrious influence on Christian theology. In his magisterial volumes in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Hans Urs von Balthasar traces the centrality of “seeing the form” in the work of patristic and medieval theologians (from Irenaeus, Augustine, and Dionysius the Areopagite to the Franciscan Bonaventure), showing how they related Pauline and Johannine traditions to biblical wisdom and ancient philosophical practices. Augustine, who would be especially influential on Western Christianity, maintained that divine beauty, which reveals God’s truth and goodness in creation, but especially in Christ, not only inspires fallen humanity’s faith and hope but also transforms its loves, restoring it to the form and beauty it had lost.⁴ In Augustine’s words, “Beauty grows in you to the extent that love grows, because love itself is the soul’s beauty.”⁵

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Luther rejected this aesthetic link between the love of God and love of self. The “wisdom of the flesh”—our natural proclivity—is to seek its own interest or advantage.⁶ Only the “wisdom of the Spirit” seeks the common good, enabling us to reject our personal good in order to love all things, including God, in God and for God’s sake only (Romans 8).⁷ As Luther argues in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, we cannot look upon the “invisible things of God” as though they could be perceived as visible phenomena. We can only comprehend the “visible” and “manifest things of God” through the pathos of “suffering and the cross.” Although wisdom in itself is not evil, without a theology of the cross, human beings “misuse the best in the worst manner.”⁸

These differing depictions of revelation have often been set in opposition.⁹ They portray differing religious experiences. Mystics and sages speak of how ecstatic union with God transforms what we see and what we desire. By contrast, prophets only speak and hear God’s word; we cannot see the God who must remain the subject of all divine-human encounter since sight is the most objectifying sense.¹⁰ Moreover, these depictions draw on divergent biblical traditions. Those

⁴ See Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, Ninth Homily, 9.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1958–86), 25:344–47 (series hereafter cited *LW*). Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke, 121 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009) 56:355–58. Hereafter WA.

⁷ *LW* 25:350–353 (WA 56:360–64).

⁸ *LW* 31:39–70 (WA 1:353–74).

⁹ See, e.g., Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953).

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 172.

centered on Zion have tended to highlight the vision of messianic hope and the Torah's embodiment as Wisdom. Those centered on Sinai have emphasized hearing the word of the law and prophets.¹¹ Finally, these divergent strands continue to have influence, but in dissimilar ways. The ancient Christian emphasis on God's beauty has informed contemporary theological responses to postmodern philosophical nihilism and to the problem of overweening desires created by capitalist economies.¹² Further, it has indirectly influenced philosophical attempts to speak of transcendence in a "secular age" characterized solely by an "immanent frame" of reference.¹³ In turn, Luther's *destruuntur* of worldly wisdom in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, which echoes Paul's quotation of Isaiah—"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise"—continues to reverberate in contemporary theologies of the cross and their philosophical counterparts, from Martin Heidegger's *Destruktion* of metaphysics to Jacques Derrida's "deconstruction" of the internal workings of language and conceptual systems.¹⁴

Although these divergent pictures of revelation have often been set in contrast, they nonetheless both draw on Paul as a source, and for Paul the revelatory encounters they depict are rooted in his bodily experience as an apostle. Of course, Protestants in particular may have difficulty with portraying saints as media of revelation. However, as Paul Tillich has pointed out, in addition to the word, nature, history, groups, and individuals are media for revelation in Scripture.¹⁵ Indeed, in Paul's letters, the faith, hope, and love of saints—and even of ordinary believers—often serve as part of a constellation that functions as a revelatory sign-event for others.¹⁶ In the next section, we examine precisely how Paul depicts his own and others' bodies as loci of revelatory encounter in 2 Corinthians.

CONSOLATION AND AFFLICTION

Paul is responding to a range of issues in 2 Corinthians. A major concern is that other missionaries are undermining his legitimacy as an apostle. In addition, he seeks reconciliation with the Corinthians after having written them a "tearful" letter of rebuke.¹⁷ Most importantly, he hopes the letter itself will serve as a mode of apostolic proclamation and exhortation.

¹¹ See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

¹² See, e.g., David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), and James A. K. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

¹³ See, e.g., Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

¹⁴ See Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart, eds., *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (London: Routledge, 2005), 29.

¹⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 118–26.

¹⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 122.

¹⁷ David E. Fredrickson, "Through Many Tears' (2 Cor 2:4): Paul's Grieving Letter and the Occasion of 2 Corinthians 1–7," in *Paul and Pathos*, ed. Thomas H. Olbricht and Jerry L. Sumney (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 161–79.

As scholars have pointed out, sages in ancient wisdom traditions taught by enacting the very truth they sought to impart. Their actual participation in Wisdom (or the Logos) was what they sought to transmit so that others could also participate in it and be formed into new selves and communities grounded in that same Wisdom.¹⁸ Paul appears to be doing something similar, whether away (through letters) or present (through speech and physical presence).¹⁹ Nonetheless, what Paul disseminates is only enacted through affliction, pathos, and even death. In the rest of this section, we will use the blessing (*berakah*) that introduces the letter's central themes as a frame for understanding Paul's apostolic practice.²⁰

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For just as the sufferings of the Messiah overflow for us, so also our consolation overflows through the Messiah. (1:5)

If in 1 Corinthians, Paul proclaims “the Messiah crucified” (1:23)—a proclamation based not on human wisdom and power—then in 2 Corinthians, he speaks of the “sufferings of the Messiah”—a rabbinic allusion to the travail, the birth pangs, that usher in the messianic age.²¹ This allusion draws on the imagery in Isaiah of the Suffering Servant (whose suffering with the people after exile in Babylon not only heals their afflictions and atones for their sins but also prepares them for restoration in their homeland)—a picture that would later be used by Jesus's followers to interpret the significance of his death and life. With this image, Paul depicts how the Messiah's “birth pangs”—his pathos amidst our affliction—actually give birth to something within, among, and around us so that we too now are able to carry on God's ministry and message of reconciliation through the Messiah (2 Cor 5:18–19). As Paul puts it, “the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation” consoles us in “all our affliction” through the Messiah so that we, in turn, might have power to console others “in any affliction” with the same consolation with which God has consoled us (1:4).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (New York: Blackwell, 1995). On Paul, see Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ See 2 Cor 10:10.

²⁰ Although there is controversy over whether 2 Corinthians is a single letter or composed of many sub-letters, I will be treating it as a literary whole in this essay.

²¹ Victor Paul Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, Anchor Bible 32A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 118–20.

However, in this allusion to the Suffering Servant, Paul plays on the double meanings of *sufferings* (*pathēmata*) and *consolations* (*paraklēsis*). The Messiah's pathos transforms our false pathos—our distorted desires (see Rom 7:5), which falsely yearn for a different kind of Messiah and consolation—even as it incorporate us into its own pathos for others. In turn, the consolation we receive and give is neither merely a self-promoting exhortation (which actually serves our own false interests by making us superior to those we comfort) nor merely a platitude or general principle (which ultimately is impotent as consolation). Rather, it overflows with the vibrant potency of the consolation we ourselves have received from God.

If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation. (2 Cor 1:6)

For this reason, our consolation can only be manifest in suffering or “affliction.” Paul is not talking here about mastering—or becoming more enlightened through—suffering. Moreover, he is not talking about appeasing or acquiescing to oppressors. Indeed, he addresses both false notions of suffering later in the letter.²² (Unfortunately, these two misappropriations of redemptive suffering have had deleterious consequences within the history of Christianity.) Rather, he is speaking about the suffering Messiah's mode of contact, which—to use Emmanuel Levinas's language—can be described as a “sensibility” (experience or sensation) and “expression” (communication) in an exposed vulnerability to and responsibility for the other, even to the point of expiation.²³

Thus, “in the Messiah,” Paul finds himself being led as a prisoner of war in a “triumphal procession” (2 Cor 2:14). Yet, it is precisely as conjoined with the crucified Messiah's shame that Paul manifests (*phaneroō*) the “fragrance” that comes from knowing the Messiah. Indeed, Paul says, “we are the aroma of the Messiah”—alluding not only to his depiction of the Messiah as the “Wisdom of God” in 1 Corinthians but also to the vivid portrayal of Wisdom (as Torah) spreading her fragrance and aroma like a verdant tree in Sirach 24.

The sufficiency (*hikanos*)—the criterion—grounding this ministry lies neither in being a subject (who self-promotes) nor in being an object (of judgment, say, of their letters of recommendation) (2:17, 3:1). Rather, it lies in an excluded middle: the call to a ministry of the new covenant in which the Messiah has “died for all” (5:14).

In the event of this death—the death of the righteous one for the weak and ungodly (Rom 5:6)—there is an event of what Elliot Wolfson calls a “hypernomian” crossing of boundaries.²⁴ Neither an antinomian abrogation of the law nor a nomian enforcement of it, this event is rather a merciful transgression that turns hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. In this event, “all of us”—like Moses—“turn to the Lord” (2 Cor 3:16). And through the Spirit of this Lord—who writes the Torah

²² See chapters 10–13.

²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1981).

²⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

on our hearts—all of us “contemplating and reflecting as in a mirror” (note the double meaning of *katoprizomenoi*) the Lord’s glory in one another’s “unveiled faces” are “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (3:18; cf. Wis 7:26).

If we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which becomes effective as you persevere in the same sufferings that we are also suffering. (2 Cor 1:6)

This ostensibly impossible hope empowers Paul to speak with *parrēsia*—a candor that manifests truth (3:12, 4:2). However, just as the idolatry of the golden calf kept the people of Israel from seeing the glory on Moses’s face, so the god of this age—who blinds with wisdom, wealth, and power²⁵—keeps the unfaithful from “seeing and shining forth” (note the double meaning of *augazō*) the light of the Messiah’s glory. The Messiah, who is God’s Wisdom—the very radiance, spotless mirror, and image of God²⁶—is nonetheless a *crucified* Messiah. The light of God’s glory created in our hearts shines in the face of this crucified Jesus (4:3–6).²⁷

Accordingly, we have this treasure in vessels of clay, which can easily be broken, so that it can be clear that his excess of power comes from God and not from us. Like the Suffering Servant, “we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed.” Death is at work in us in order to produce life for others (4:8–11). We are sustained in the midst of this by trusting and speaking in the Spirit of faith that inspired the righteous sufferers of Scripture, clinging to the promise of being raised together with all others by the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead (4:12–14).²⁸

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Thus, it is precisely in and through all that we experience—in our bodies that waste away—that the Spirit produces the excess “burden” and “fullness” (Paul here is playing on the double meaning of *baros*) of “glory” that we see in one another’s “unveiled faces” (cf. 3:18). The eternal cannot be seen; there is no naked leap into the invisible (4:16–18). It is precisely within “earthly tents” that the Spirit produces a shared dwelling (*oikodomēn*) from God within and among us—as we groan, as women do when giving birth, “longing to be clothed” with the Messiah’s righteousness, indeed desiring to be “further clothed,” so that “what is mortal may be swallowed up with life” (5:1–5). Thus, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (5:7), making it our aspiration to please God in all that we do, knowing that we will be held

²⁵ Jer 9:23–24; cf. 2 Cor 10:17; 1 Cor 1:31.

²⁶ 2 Cor 4:4; cf. 2 Cor 3:18; Wis 7:26.

²⁷ Cf. Gen 1:3; Isa 9:2; Ps 112:4.

²⁸ Cf. Ps 115:1 LXX; cf. Ps 116:10.

accountable for what we do with our bodies—whether good or evil—on the day of the Lord (4:10).

Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation. (2 Cor 1:7)

Imbedded in the Messiah's love, our hope for others—and the world around us—is unshaken because this love presses us together not only with the Messiah but also with all others: "One has died for all; therefore, all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them" (5:15). Walter Benjamin describes the messianic event as a moment of "arrest," a "cessation of occurrences," accompanied by a "shock," after which we are able to live on, but only by dint of a "weak messianic power."²⁹ In this event, all the schemas we use to judge and objectify others—or with which they judge and objectify us—are shattered. At the same time, wherever pain and death is at issue and the resurrection is a promise, "there is new creation" in and through the Messiah: "everything old has passed, see, everything has become new" (5:17).³⁰

Thus, the very "material density" of the cross—the Messiah's willingness to suffer the same death that threatens our very existence—is what enables us to become, in turn, this "righteousness of God" for others (5:21; cf. Rom 3:21).³¹ We now become ambassadors through whom God announces the "the now-time," which is also "the yet-time" (*jitzt zeyt*)—"not even time or hour, but an eternal moment [*ewiger Augenblick*]."³² Paul quotes Isaiah: "'At a favorable *kairos* I have heard you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the *kairos* of welcome; see, now is the day of salvation!" (6:2).³³

Nonetheless, we can only make this announcement in and through the Messiah's death and life—in and through our exposed bodily vulnerability to others and to the "genuine love," the "truthful speech," and the (weak in human terms) "power of God" that the Spirit produces within us (6:4–7). It is only made in faith and hope amidst "glory and shame, slander and approbation . . . as dying, and see—we are alive; as disciplined, and yet not killed; as lamenting, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything" (6:8–10).

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), thesis 17, 396, quoted in L. L. Welborn, "The Culture of Crucifixion and the Resurrection of the Dispossessed," in *Paul and the Philosophers*, ed. Ward Blanton and Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 137.

³⁰ On "scheme" (*schema*) and its variants, see 1 Cor 7:31; cf. Rom 12:12. See also 2 Cor 11:13–15; 1 Cor 4:6; Phil 3:32.

³¹ Welborn, "Culture of Crucifixion," 138.

³² See Vitor Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther: The Planetary Promise of Luther's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 158, drawing WA 10:3:192.20–21; cf. WA 33:404ff.

³³ Cf. Isa 49:8.

APOSTOLIC BODIES

So what relevance does all this have for us today? In *The Age of Anger*, Pankaj Mishra calls attention to the cultural and political chaos that emerges when the modern ideals of equality and freedom elude many in the increasingly unequal societies created by the unchecked forces of global capitalism.³⁴ What is at issue here—as global capitalism increasingly defines cultural and political processes—is not simply that the vulnerable are exploited, as they have been in the past, but that “now, more seriously, human sociality may be alienated from itself,” as traditional ways of life are increasingly destabilized by these developments.³⁵ As Larry Welborn observes, the “supreme danger” may be “that the residue of the other, the neighbor, upon whose alien reality my own humanity depends, may be fully metabolized by the perpetual motion of capital, which homogenizes all identities.”³⁶

In view of these developments, it is interesting to note that some philosophers—many of them atheist and Marxist—have become interested in the apostle Paul as a resource for addressing the tensions created by globalization and the identity politics that often accompany it.³⁷ However, as Welborn has sought to make clear, the “collective subject” Paul seeks to awaken is not the philosopher’s “universal subject” but a “singular one, whose identity and ethics are determined by the Messiah.”³⁸ It is the *crucified* Messiah—“the one who died for all (2 Cor 5:14), for the weak, for the ungodly (Rom 5:6–8), for the nothings and nobodies (1 Cor 1:26–28)—who confers “unity, identity, and mission.”³⁹ Thus, if as Giorgio Agamben puts it, “the messianic vocation is a revocation of every vocation,”⁴⁰ then this summons is not simply “devoid of content, that is, of identity,” but is a summons by and through the crucified face of Messiah Jesus.⁴¹

POWER IN WEAKNESS

Nonetheless, the face of the Crucified summons in ways that are apposite to each situation. Thus, in response to the hyper-apostles—who question the legitimacy of Paul’s strong letters while away, given his weak physique and unimpressive speech when present—Paul spotlights that true (divine) power is only actualized through weakness.

³⁴ Mishra, *Age of Anger*.

³⁵ L. L. Welborn, *Paul’s Summons to Messianic Life: Political Theology and the Coming Awakening* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), xii.

³⁶ Welborn, *Paul’s Summons*, xii.

³⁷ For discussions of philosophical scholarship on Paul, see Blanton and de Vries, *Paul and the Philosophers*; and John D. Caputo and Linda Martín Alcoff, eds., *St. Paul among the Philosophers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

³⁸ Welborn, *Paul’s Summons*, 68 (italics in the original).

³⁹ Welborn, *Paul’s Summons*, 69.

⁴⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 23, quoted in Welborn, *Paul’s Summons*, 66.

⁴¹ Welborn, *Paul’s Summons*, 66, 69.

We do not know who these hyper-apostles were, but we do know something about their behavior, as seen, at least, through Paul's eyes. They define criteria for ministry based on accomplishments (the ability to endure physical hardship and attain heights of spiritual mastery) and identity markers: ethnic (Hebrews), religious (Israelites), generically human (descendants of Abraham), and even messianic (ministers of the Messiah). Most significantly, however, for all their achievements and use of status indicators, they are abusing the Corinthians. Masquerading (*metaschēmatizomenoi*) as "ministers of righteousness," they use their abilities and credentials in demonic ways: to take advantage of the Corinthians and treat them like slaves (11:1–28).

By contrast, Paul maintains, the event of messianic grace is the only sufficiency we have. And this grace is only actualized in the weakness that is vulnerable, even to the point of physical exigency, to the "cries of the broken, the forsaken, and the frail."⁴² In proclaiming the Messiah as Lord, we bind ourselves to others as slaves for Jesus's sake (4:5).

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AUTHORITY FOR UPBUILDING

Yet, Paul also has a critique of the Corinthians, whom he loves dearly as a parent (6:13). To them, he emphasizes "upbuilding" (*oikodomei*)—a word that recalls his earlier depiction of the Spirit producing a "dwelling from God" within and among us.

If the apostles are abusing their authority in *demonic* ways, then the Corinthians have believed their *idolatrous* promises of greatness. They have lost the simplicity (*apoplētos*) of faithful dwelling in the Messiah and as a result have become susceptible to the allure of powerful figures (11:3)—tolerating their abuses while thinking they are being shrewd (*phronimoi*) in doing so (11:19).⁴³ Not being rooted in the Messiah's righteousness, their God-given freedom has become empty and thus vulnerable to "anomie" (*anomia*) (6:14)—which could be described in contemporary terms as the spiritual anxiety and moral confusion associated with the loss of communal bonds.⁴⁴ As a result, their relationships with one another have

⁴² Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther*, 193.

⁴³ Cf. Gen 3:1.

⁴⁴ As Paul Tillich observed (in response to the rise of Nazi socialism in Germany), anomie not only affects individuals but also renders masses of people captive to new heteronomies, including fanatical sectarianism, totalitarian systems, and the allure of shameless demagoguery. See Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian*

become dysfunctional and their bodies debased with sexual practices that indicate a lack of self-respect (12:20–21).

Paul responds to these concerns not by asserting his authority (a common misreading) but by urging them to examine themselves in order to discern (*dokimazete*) for themselves what is true (whether of themselves or of Paul) so that they can do what is “fair” (the word here is *kalos*, which can also mean *beautiful*). In the Messiah, there is no need for an external master. Thus, Paul’s task as an apostle is simply to make them aware that the Messiah is in them, so that they too can share in the sufferings and consolations of apostolic ministry—overflowing by receiving and receiving by overflowing.⁴⁵

Paul’s depiction of bodily sharing in the sufferings and consolations of the Messiah has a poignant significance for us today. It speaks of the “weak messianic power” that exposes the god of this age, whose beguiling with technology, wealth, and power has permeated all arenas of life—including the church—causing us to be alienated from ourselves and one another, on communal and personal levels. Yet perhaps most poignantly, it also speaks of the upbuilding enacted through faith and hope in this Messiah’s death and life—an upbuilding that, precisely as it upends all other identities markers, nonetheless gives birth to an overflowing of life with and for our neighbors. ⊕

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Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968).

⁴⁵ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).