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The Time That Is Not Ours:

Beginnings, Primary Forgetting, and the Paulinian Interruption of Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism and Islam

Sergey Dolgopolski



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Al-zman means "the time" and tacitly implies the time now, and in that sense “our time.” Yet before asking how we ought to think our time, we might first ask what makes a time become "our time" at all. How does a historical configuration acquire the authority to present itself as the present? Through what processes does a particular now come to seem so immediate, so undeniable, and so urgent that its own conditions of emergence no longer require examination?

These questions acquire a particular urgency in the interreligious and interpersonal constellation that animates Al-Zman: that of the Christian, the Jew, and the Muslim. Discussions of the respective traditions are frequently organized through narratives of beginning and supersession, whether by appeal to Abrahamic origins, fulfilled covenants, corrected revelations, or recovered foundations. The programmatic proposal of Anoush Ganjipour refuses “conversion” to such narratives insofar as one remains or becomes captive to the self-descriptions of the traditions involved. Along related lines, Elad Lapidot's reflections on defeat explore how a tradition may be engaged precisely through what appears to negate it, from without as well as from within. Both proposals invite us to see more clearly how the designation of "our time" remains bound to assumptions concerning beginning and supersession. The present reflections take up that conversation by asking whether the authority attributed to beginnings and to supersession already obscures another possible and, indeed, necessary relation to time, and to the urgency of the now.

Such inquiry emerges from a concern with presentism, but it is not exhausted by it. Presentism is often understood as an excessive preoccupation with contemporary events and concerns. Such a description is not entirely wrong, yet it remains insufficient. The problem is not that scholars investigate matters that are contemporaneous with them. Every inquiry necessarily begins from the circumstances in which it finds itself. Rather, presentism names a more subtle

operation through which the contemporary ceases to appear as historically constituted and instead comes to function as the unquestioned horizon of intelligibility itself.

Yet this apparent obviousness is itself historically produced. What appears immediate is never simply immediate. From this perspective, the contemporary may be understood not as the opposite of the historical but as one of history's most effective disguises. The past confronts us most forcefully precisely where it appears not as the past but as the present. We encounter the work of centuries while experiencing only the immediacy of the current moment.

Authority of Beginning

Once we read the present through a historical lens, however, we realize that the authority of the present and the authority of the beginning are more deeply connected than they first appear. Presentism challenges the authority of the past only because the past has already been conceived as something situated behind us, as a completed sequence of events leading toward the contemporary world. The contemporary acquires supremacy precisely because it occupies the endpoint of a narrative whose direction has already been established. Conversely, attempts to oppose presentism often respond by restoring authority to the origin. One seeks an earlier beginning, a forgotten inheritance, an obscured tradition, an ancient wisdom capable of correcting the blindness of the contemporary moment.

Both gestures remain organized by the same assumption: that thought must derive its orientation either from the present or from the beginning, or as Hans Urs von Balthasar[1] has it, in speaking about Old and New Testaments, from both: the new is latent in the old and the old unfolds in the new, so that the two exert authority on each other.

What, however, if neither possesses the authority we assign to it?

This question emerges with particular force in contemporary forms of archaeology and genealogy. Archaeological criticism seeks to uncover the

[1] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Hans Urs and Alexander Dru (trans.) *Martin Buber and Christianity: A Dialogue Between Israel and Church* (London: Harvill Press, [1958] 1961) p. 20.

hidden strata from which contemporary realities emerge. Genealogical criticism traces the contingent processes through which apparently natural institutions and categories were produced. Such projects remain indispensable. Yet they also contain a strategic ambiguity. Archaeology searches for an *arche*. The Greek term designates not merely a beginning but a beginning that exercises authority. An *arche* is an origin that functions simultaneously as a principle.

The critical gesture therefore often proceeds by replacing one authoritative narrative with another. Something once assumed to be immediate is shown to derive from a concealed beginning. The present is displaced by a deeper history. Yet the privilege of beginning remains intact. What changes is merely which beginning receives authority.

The same ambiguity appears, in a different form, in Heidegger's notion of the "other beginning." Heidegger sought to escape the conception of history as a succession of epochs. The other beginning was not intended as another event added to a historical sequence. In his terms, it named instead an ongoing arrival in and through transforming relationship between thought and Being itself. Beyond his terms, it names an opening beginning, that one that works through and despite the epochs. Yet despite this radical displacement, the beginning remained operative. Thought still received its orientation from an inception. Authority remained tied to beginning even where beginning had ceased to be chronological and became future and past oriented despite all the chronological epochs.

My proposal is neither another other beginning, nor several other beginnings, however many. Nor is it a critique of one other beginning in the name of another other beginning. I invite asking instead whether beginning itself has become the unquestioned form through which Western thought authorizes itself.

The issue, thus, is not which beginning ought to guide us. The issue is why beginning should possess such privilege in the first place.

Suspension without Supersession

It is here that the question of supersession becomes important. Supersession is commonly understood as a theological structure through which one covenant succeeds another, one revelation fulfills another, one community replaces another. Yet the logic of supersession extends well beyond theology. Entire philosophies of history are organized by supersessionist assumptions. One age replaces another. One world supersedes its predecessor. One disclosure renders a prior disclosure obsolete. Even anti-supersessionist projects often reproduce the same logic through the claim that the age of supersession has itself been overcome.

Supersession presupposes that history can be gathered into the unfolding of a beginning. What comes later derives its intelligibility from what came first, while simultaneously claiming to fulfill, surpass or pass through and despite.

Against this logic I want to propose what might be called suspension without supersession. Such suspension does not reject beginnings. That would be impossible. Human existence unfolds through inheritances, foundations, inscriptions, and traditions. Nor does suspension establish itself as yet another beginning. It does not announce a new epoch beyond supersession. Rather, it seeks to restrain the authority that beginnings claim for themselves.

The implications of this proposal become clearer when we turn to the traditions that continue to shape much of our contemporary world. These traditions are typically grouped under the designation "Abrahamic." The term appears inclusive. It emphasizes kinship and shared origin. Yet precisely for this reason it remains deeply tied to the authority of beginning. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam become intelligible through reference to a common ancestor. Their differences are interpreted against the background of a shared origin. Perhaps, however, origin is not what most fundamentally links them. Perhaps what binds these traditions together is not primarily a common beginning but a common exposure to instability. It is at this point that I would introduce what I call the Paulinian moment, but only after situating it within a much older drama.

The G-d Who Refuses a Name

This drama begins not with Paul but with the G-d of Exodus. The decisive scene occurs when Moses asks God for a name. The question itself is not innocent. Moses does not ask whether God exists. He asks what he should say when Israel inquires about the one who sent him. "What is his name?" is not merely a request for information. It is a very Egyptian question. It concerns identification, intelligibility, and authority. It seeks a designation through which the divine can be recognized, remembered, invoked, and distinguished from other powers.

Within the ancient Near Eastern world, such a question was entirely natural. Names belong to an economy of recognition. To name is to situate. To know a name is not merely to possess a label but to establish a relation within an order of intelligibility. The question therefore demands something more than a word. It seeks a place for a god within a system of knowledge.

The remarkable feature of Exodus is that G-d refuses to answer the question in the form in which it is posed. The response, Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, has been translated in countless ways: "I am who I am," "I will be what I will be," "Ich werde dasein als, der ich dasein werde."[2] What matters here is not choosing among these translations but recognizing that none of them functions as an ordinary name. Moses asks for a noun and receives a verbal formulation. He asks for an identifier and receives a refusal of identification. The response does not satisfy the question. It interrupts it. The G-d of Exodus does not simply withhold a name. More radically, this G-d refuses the very logic of naming through which the question seeks an answer.

To say this is not to deny that names subsequently appear. Immediately after the refusal there is a concession. The G-d who refuses a name allows himself to be designated as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Later Rabbinic tradition will surround that refusal with elaborate practices of reverence, in which "The Name" comes to reverently refer to the refusal of naming. The refusal therefore does not abolish naming altogether. Yet this elaborate concession never cancels the refusal. The G-d of Exodus becomes nameable only under the sign of an antecedent resistance to being named.

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[2] Buber, Martin, and Franz Rosenzweig. 1930. *Die fünf Bücher der Weisung* (Berlin: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1930) P.177

This tension is crucial because it transforms how memory itself must be understood. Ordinarily, memory presupposes presence. Something first becomes present and is subsequently remembered. Forgetting then appears as a secondary phenomenon, the loss of what was once available. Memory is primary; forgetting is derivative. Yet, the narrative of Exodus suggests a different possibility.

What if Forgetting is Primary?

What if the relation to G-d begins not from possession but from an impossibility of possession? What if there is no original presence capable of becoming fully available to memory? In that case forgetting does not arise because something once present has been lost. Rather, forgetting belongs to the relation from the beginning.

The G-d who refuses nomination cannot become an object of complete recollection. One may remember the covenant, the deliverance, the commandments, the signs, the words, and the stories. Yet none of these exhausts the speaking from the burning bush. The G-d of Exodus always exceeds what a name can name or memory can retain.

The consequence is not to underestimate. Israel's central drama is no longer simply the struggle to remember. It becomes the struggle to remember a relation whose very structure exceeds memory. This is why Deuteronomy is so preoccupied with forgetting. Again and again Moses warns Israel that entry into the land will be an onset of forgetting. Once houses are built, fields cultivated, and institutions established, Israel will forget. The warning is usually interpreted as a moral admonition: prosperity breeds complacency, success leads to ingratitude. No doubt this is part of the meaning.

Yet there may be something more fundamental at stake. The danger is not merely that Israel will fail to remember enough. The danger is that settlement in a land, in any land, even in the land designated by G-d, encourages the illusion that memory can be secured. The land offers stability. Stability creates institutions. Institutions preserve memories. Yet precisely through this process the radical instability disclosed in Exodus risks disappearing from view. The land therefore introduces a tension that will govern virtually everything that follows.

Exodus names a movement whose source cannot be stabilized. Settlement seeks stabilization. Exodus points toward a God who refuses incorporation into existing orders of intelligibility. Settlement requires precisely such orders in order to sustain communal life.

The tension is unavoidable. It is also productive.

The establishment of kingship provides perhaps the clearest example of its instability and attempt at stabilization. Israel's first king is Saul. This is not an accidental detail, and I will return to it. Saul stands precisely at the threshold where anointment seeks to become enthronement. The king is designated through a prophetic (unenthusiastic) election. Yet kingship simultaneously creates a political structure capable of obscuring the source from which it arose. The anointed one becomes ruler. The ruler becomes institution. The institution becomes permanence.

At every stage the risk grows that the G-d who cannot be remembered will be replaced by forms of remembrance that appear capable of securing his presence. The biblical narrative repeatedly returns to this danger. Saul fails in one way. David navigates it in another. Solomon attempts a different response altogether.

Solomon’s Temple represents perhaps the most ambitious effort to address the problem. If the G-d of Exodus cannot be housed, perhaps his name can. If divine presence cannot be secured, perhaps the place of remembrance can; and for all nations alike. The Temple thus becomes a remarkable compromise between refusal and permanence.

Yet the compromise remains unstable. The G-d who refused a name cannot finally be contained within a house dedicated to the name. The tension therefore survives the Temple just as it survived kingship. Indeed, one might say that Israel’s history unfolds through successive attempts to negotiate this instability without ever eliminating it.

Saul, Paul, and the Suspension of Enthronement

Returning to the first of these attempts, the figure of Saul acquires an importance that is often overlooked. Saul is usually remembered as the failed

king who precedes David, the necessary but ultimately unsuccessful first experiment in Israelite kingdom. Within the biblical narrative, his significance is frequently reduced to the role of precursor. He is the king who must be surpassed so that another and more adequate kingship may emerge.

Such a reading is already supersessionist. Saul becomes intelligible only through what comes after him. His significance lies in preparing the way for David. Failure serves success. The first king acquires meaning through the second. Yet if we suspend the supersessionist logic that quietly governs this interpretation, Saul appears differently. Saul is not simply a failed king. He is the manifestation of a problem. He occupies the point at which anointment and enthronement are joined together and, at the same time, begin to separate. In Saul, Israel acquires what Israel asked for: a king like the nations. Yet the granting of this request simultaneously threatens the relation to the God who refuses stabilization.

Saul is therefore neither merely obedient nor merely disobedient. He inhabits a structurally impossible position. He must embody sovereignty while remaining subordinate to that which cannot be contained within sovereignty. He must convert divine election into political institution without allowing political institution to replace divine election.

The task is impossible. Not because Saul is personally deficient, but because the relation itself is unstable. One might say that Saul's tragedy consists in becoming king at the precise moment when kingship threatens to eclipse the source from which it derives legitimacy. His failure is therefore not merely psychological or moral. It reveals a fault line within the very attempt to transform anointment into enthronement.

From Saul to Paul

This observation becomes important when we turn to Saul of Tarsus. The continuity of names should not be treated merely as coincidence. Of course, the Paul in the letters does not identify himself with Israel's first king in any straightforward sense. Yet the name nevertheless invites reflection. For Paul also appears at the point where anointment and enthronement become separated.

The difference is decisive. Where the first Saul belongs to the completed movement from anointment toward enthronement, the second Saul interrupts that movement. Paul's concern is not simply that Jesus is anointed or Messiah. Such a statement, taken by itself, remains entirely intelligible within existing messianic expectations. What is remarkable is the form that messiahship assumes. The Messiah is acknowledged, but enthronement remains suspended. Paul arguably writes from within this interval: “the appointed time has grown short” (1. Cor. 7:29) and “the form of this world is passing away” (1Cor. 7:31). Recognition occurs without fulfillment in the ordinary political sense. The anointed one does not occupy the throne around which historical expectations had traditionally been organized.

The interruption thereby becomes constitutive. Messiahship no longer serves as a bridge leading from promise to sovereignty. The bridge remains permanently unfinished. This unfinished character is decisive. For what Paul discovers is not another stage in the succession of historical epochs. Rather, he discovers a way of inhabiting the interval itself. The messianic event does not close the gap between anointment and enthronement.

It opens the gap.

To put the matter somewhat differently, the significance of Paul's thought lies less in fulfillment than in suspension. Traditional accounts often describe Paul as the thinker of fulfillment. Christ fulfills prophecy. The new covenant fulfills the old. The nations are incorporated into what had previously belonged to Israel. Whether one views these developments positively or negatively, the underlying structure remains supersessionist. Something earlier is overcome through something later.

Calling Those Who Are Not

The key issue, I ask to submit, is not doctrine. It is calling. Paul is often understood as the one who delivers the call. Yet his significance lies equally in the fact that he is constituted through the call that he delivers. Saul becomes Paul, yet Saul never entirely disappears into Paul. The transformation introduces not a completed identity but a division. The call does not reconcile this division. It sustains it.

This instability becomes more pronounced in the call addressed to the goyim.[3] Those addressed by the call are those who are not. They are summoned as though they were. The call constitutes the community to which it is addressed. The recipients do not simply preexist the summons and later respond. They become recipients through the very act of being called.

Yet another possibility becomes visible if we attend to the peculiar status of the call itself. Paul's call does not resolve instability. It distributes instability. The recipients of the call are not invited into an already completed order. They are summoned into the very interval that the messianic interruption has opened. They are called into a belonging that lacks the ordinary guarantees of belonging.

This is why Talal Asad's critique of "religion" as a universalizing category[4], and even more Alain Badiou's[5] account of Paul as the thinker of a "universal address" that traverses differences, remain important, though neither fully captures what is at stake. The *goyim* are not merely included within a previously existing community. Nor are they simply universalized. The call constitutes them through a peculiar operation. They are addressed as though they already belonged to what they do not belong to; as though they were what they are not.

Paul formulates this logic in Romans when he speaks of "calling into being those which/who are not, as (or as if) they were " (Rom. 4:17). The phrase does not merely concern creation from nothing. It names a peculiar logic of address: *ta me onta* are addressed as (if it were) *ta onta*; those who are not are summoned as though they were. The call thereby constitutes the very sender and recipients to whom it is addressed. This logic applies both to the never-ending production of the goy out of the ethnoi and to the emergence of Paul from his namesake Saul. The call thus calls non-being into being: not absolute

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[3] I drew upon Ophir, Adi, and Ishay Rosen-Zvi. Goy: Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), but, as I do elsewhere, narrow their notion of Paulinian goy to refer not to all "non-Jews" but only to those whom Paul construes as responding to the call he delivers to accept Israel's G-d.

[4] Asad, Talal *Genealogies of Religion : Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

[5] Badiou, Alain. 1997. Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

non-being, of course, but social, political, and covenantal non-being. Those who are not part of Israel are addressed as if they were already implicated in the promises given to Israel. The call thereby constitutes what it addresses.

The goyim become recipients of a summons that creates the very condition under which they can receive it.

This places them in an even more unstable position than Paul himself. Paul never ceases to be Saul because he never ceases to belong to Israel. The division introduced by the call occurs within a prior belonging. The goyim, however, are called from outside. Their belonging is constituted entirely through the summons itself. They therefore exist in a condition of doubled instability. They become what they are only through a relation that cannot be grounded in ancestry, territory, or inherited inscription.

The *ekklesia* emerges from this instability of the call, *klesis*. Not as a stable people. Not as a nation. Not as a replacement for Israel. But as a gathering constituted through an unresolved relation to what calls it. The real recipient of Paul's letters may therefore not be the nations (*ethnoi*) at all.

The nations are undoubtedly addressed, but they are addressed within a drama whose center remains Israel. Paul's fundamental concern is Israel's relation to the G-d of Exodus, the G-d who can neither be forgotten nor remembered. The call to the nations becomes one way of thinking that relation anew. It does not leave Israel behind. On the contrary, it intensifies the question of Israel.

For this reason, Paul's move should be seen not as a departure from the biblical drama but as a radicalization of one of its deepest tensions. The unresolved relation between Exodus and settlement, between anointment and enthronement, between remembrance and forgetting, now appears in a new form. The interruption that haunted kingship becomes the principle of a new communal existence.

The importance of the Paulinian moment therefore lies neither in a new beginning nor in a new doctrine. Its importance lies in making visible a problem that neither kingship, nor Temple, nor memory, nor even messianic recognition can finally resolve. A relation to what cannot be made fully present. A relation to what remains constitutively susceptible to forgetting. A relation whose

instability every tradition inherits, even as each seeks to stabilize it in its own way.

Neither Descendants nor Successors

What matters here is not Christian doctrine as such. Nor was the above reading of Paul doctrinal. Indeed, the significance of the Paulinian moment extends beyond Christianity, indeed beyond any doctrine. The instability disclosed by Paul becomes available for multiple trans- and extra-doctrinal receptions. Christianity develops one vast and intricate response to it. Rabbinic traditions develop another. One might locate the rabbinic analogue of the Paulinian suspension to the same interruption in the displacement of Temple service and kingdom into study as the privileged site of the non-forgetting through ongoing interpretation and ongoing disagreement. Here too, the beginning or originary event of exodus remains authoritatively present only through forms of transmission and memory that always approximate and never coincide with the movement of Exodus. The instability inaugurated by Exodus and landing is therefore not overcome but inhabits the rabbinic sense in another register, that of ongoing disagreement rather than a doctrinal settlement. Much later, Islamic traditions will inherit the same instability while reconfiguring the relation between revelation, inscription, recitation, and community in a different register altogether.

Islam, then, may also be understood as a goy responding to what Paul articulates as the *klesis* of the goy, yet without assuming that dimension of the call bound to Israel—or, more precisely, to Israel's scriptures, whether inscribed on parchment or upon the heart. This should not be understood as a claim of historical dependence, textual reception, or genetic derivation. Nor is Paul treated here as the origin, first witness, or privileged bearer of the configuration under consideration. Rather, what Paul articulates as the *klesis* of the goy is approached as one articulation of a configuration that cannot be identified with any one of its articulations. The question is therefore not one of influence, genealogy, or precedence. Christianity and Islam are neither descendants nor successors of Paul in the sense intended here. Each articulates, in its own way, tensions belonging to a configuration that traverses

them without belonging exclusively to either. No articulation authorizes the configuration by virtue of coming earlier; none exhausts it by virtue of claiming to come later. Nor are Paul, King Saul, or even Moses beginnings. They are only articulations of a drama held in suspense by the initial refusal to provide a name by which that which cannot be forgotten might be remembered.

The proposal that follows is therefore offered as a post-archaeological configuration of non-beginnings rather than as a settled historical account. It is submitted in anticipation of responses, revisions, and corrections from the critical scholarship of and in Islam and in Islamic studies, whether or not such scholarship proceeds from within Islam as a doctrinal tradition. Such responses are not external to the argument but belong to its very method. If the configuration described here exceeds every one of its historical articulations, then no single articulation—including the present essay—can claim to delimit its scope.

Approached in this way, Islam discloses a further tension within what Paul articulates as the *klesis* of the goy. Israel and scripture emerge as simultaneously unavoidable and unnecessary. They cannot simply be dispensed with, yet neither do they function in the same manner as they do within Paul's own articulation of the call. The tension lies not in whether Israel remains, but in how Israel remains.

Islam, no less than the Christian articulation of the goy, cannot dispense with Israel. Yet it takes up Israel otherwise. Whereas the Christian ecclesia, responding to what Paul articulates as the *klesis* of the goy, comes to designate itself the "new Israel," thereby rendering Israel the "old" Israel, and pigeonholing it as the “Jew,” Islam configures its relation through another genealogy. It identifies itself with Ishmael while retaining Israel as the descendants of Isaac. Israel is therefore neither erased nor simply replaced. Rather, its place within the configuration is redistributed. The people Israel increasingly comes to be detached from descent as the privileged locus of divine election and rearticulated primarily in religious terms – for which, ironically, “Jew” becomes the name, too.

In this respect, the supersessionist operation differs from its Christian counterpart without ceasing to be supersessionist. If the goy articulated by Paul

already suspends ethnicity as the decisive criterion of belonging, the Islamic articulation renders that suspension even more visible. Israel remains indispensable, but increasingly as religion rather than as people. The supersession is therefore not one of replacement (however never complete) but of reconfiguration: Israel is retained while its mode of belonging is transformed in terms of Ishmael-Israel/Jew genealogy.

Whether this configuration can indeed be recognized within Islamic textual, juridical, and theological traditions remains a question for sustained inquiry rather than assertion. In the spirit of responsible agonism, the aim here is not to settle that question but to open it. The hypothesis is that the goy names neither a Christian identity nor a Pauline invention, but a configuration whose articulations exceed every claim of origin, priority, or exclusive ownership.

Three Responses to a Shared Impossibility

The decisive point is then that none of these traditions simply begins. Each emerges as a response. Each inherits a tension it did not create. Each seeks forms of stability without ever fully overcoming the instability from which it arose.

From this perspective, the Paulinian moment does not function as a beginning. It functions as the opposite of a beginning. A beginning gathers; explains; founds. The Paulinian moment unsettles every such operation. It exposes a constitutive incompletion at the heart of communal and historical existence. It reveals that transmission does not proceed from a secure beginning toward a determinate end, but from an interruption that cannot finally be closed.

What the three traditions share, then, may not be a common ancestor but a common exposure to this interruption. Their histories, doctrines, practices differ profoundly. Yet all three remain occupied, in one way or another, with the problem of sustaining relations to what cannot be made fully present and cannot be transformed into a stable foundation.

The question then becomes whether this instability should be regarded as a deficiency awaiting resolution, or whether it names something more fundamental. Perhaps what the traditions repeatedly attempt to stabilize is

precisely what cannot be stabilized. Perhaps the endless production of institutions, commentaries, legal systems, theological syntheses, mystical renewals, reforms, and restorations testifies not to failure but to the impossibility of completing the task.

If so, then the significance of the Paulinian moment lies not in beginning a new history but in revealing why history never becomes complete. It discloses a relation to what exceeds memory, exceeds sovereignty, and exceeds every attempt to gather time into a single unfolding narrative, to make it *the time*, *Al Zman*. It is this relation, I would suggest, that allows us to reconsider Judaism, Christianity, and Islam not as three branches growing from a common root, but as three enduring responses to a shared impossibility.