**Divining History: Prophetism, Messianism and the Development of the Spirit**, by Jayne Svenungsson, Making Sense of History, trans. Stephen Donovan, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2016, xiv + 223 pp., US$110.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78533-173-2

Jayne Svenungsson’s *Divining History* is concerned with defending ‘a “theopolitical” interpretation of the prophetic motif, invoking of a form of justice that does not allow itself to be reduced to any existing political order, in contrast to what in the modern era has come to be known as “political theology” - the tendency to use theological claims to support a specific political agenda’ (xiii). This contrast between theopolitics and political theology is developed through an exploration of prophetism, messianism and the spirit (x) as Svenungsson engages with Biblical literature, theology and philosophy.

The first chapter develops an understanding of prophecy through a reading of the Hebrew Bible. This literature is key in its development of a distinctive understanding of history ‘in which the memory of previous divine acts not only lends meaning to the present but enables a forward-looking orientation within history - a kind of dialectic of memory and hope’ (6). This notion of history is employed by the prophetic voice to offer a critique of sovereign power. Svenungsson uses this opposition of prophetic and sovereign to differentiate theopolitics and political theology. The latter is defined as ‘theologically sanctioned politics’ while the former offers an ‘idea of a justice that transcends the existing political order’ (12). This transcendent justice does not offer a concrete alternative, but is the basis for the perpetual interrogation of any currently existing order. Divine justice enables critique and facilitates change, but is part of an intrahistorical process of redemption rather than an external apocalyptic intervention (22-23).

Chapter 2 turns from biblical studies to the theology of history. Much of the chapter focuses on Joachim of Fiore’s tripartite theory of history and his ‘non-eschatological apocalypticism’ (37). Svenungsson again emphasises the intrahistorical nature of redemption, helpfully challenging the reductive and overly dramatic version of Joachim often found in philosophies of history. For Svenungsson, this more nuanced reading reveals a theology more in continuity with Buber’s theopolitics than political theology.

The third chapter traces the legacy of prophetic, messianic and apocalyptic tendencies in Romanticism. Svenungsson provides an overview of the Romantic movement and its historical context as well as more detailed attention to Novalis, Schlegel, Schelling, Jacobi and Schleiermacher. She argues that early Romanticism’s concern with the past is not conservative nostalgia, but a prophetic recovery of the past’s ‘redemptive potentialities’ (72-73). This chapter also begins to draw more sustained attention to the ways that the ‘Christian theological imaginary’ (97) simultaneously adopts emancipatory themes from Jewish thought, while trafficking in anti-Jewish sentiments in the name of progress, universalism and spiritualisation.

Chapter 4 discusses the famous 1994 meeting of Derrida, Trías, Vattimo and others on the island of Capri. Their work is united by a concern with recovering ‘prophetic, messianic and pneumatic motifs… without repeating the violent utopias of the preceding hundred years’ (108). Having shown how these efforts repeat themes from the Romantic tradition, she then turns to the ways in which they also repeat anti-Jewish tendencies. Derrida is the exception, revealing universalism’s Christian inheritance (141). It is Derrida’s anti-apocalyptic messianism that offers a model for a theological informed politics capable of sustaining the pursuit of justice (146).

The fifth chapter highlights similar tendencies in Badiou, Agamben and Žižek’s recent work on Paul. Badiou and Žižek in particular emphasise a disruptive apocalypticism and universalism. While others have noted supersessionist tendencies within their work, Svenungsson adds to this discourse by providing the genealogy of these tendencies, stretching from Romanticism to the present.[[1]](#endnote-1) Svenungsson also delivers a defence of the law. From Benjamin to the contemporary antinomianism found in Badiou and Agamben, the law is persistently presented as ‘an obstacle to emancipation, rather than its precondition’ (176). These dismissals overlook the role of law in revolutionary transformations such as the shift in attitudes towards gender and sexuality (195).

Svenungsson’s genealogy of ‘contemporary politico-philosophical debates’ (x) provides a wealth of historical and theoretical insights—much more than this brief summary can reflect. Her work is particularly important for drawing attention to the ways that the certain Christian understandings of progress, universalism and spiritualisation continue to influence thinking about history and the future. Her demonstration of anti-Jewish and supersessionist tendencies adds historical depth to recent theoretical analysis.

This scope necessarily has to sacrifice some detail and, though her complex tracing of conceptions of history is generally worth this sacrifice, the breadth of Svenungsson’s study leaves some issues unresolved. Most importantly, there is the difficulty of maintaining the distinction between theopolitics and political theology. For example, in the second chapter Svenungsson discusses Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*. While acknowledging that this work could be described as an early example of political theology, she rejects characterisations of Eusebius as a court theologian, arguing he provided the empire with ‘theological meaning’ rather than ‘theological legitimacy’ (41-42). This discussion is particularly interesting given his place in the dispute between Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt.[[2]](#endnote-2) Peterson offers Eusebius as an example of the kind of political theology Svenungsson aims to critique, while Schmitt offers a defence of Eusebius that is closer to Svenungsson. In *Divining History*, however, Schmitt is an example of the problematic form of political theology.

This brief discussion of Eusebius shows the difficulty of maintaining the distinction between theopolitics and political theology – a difficulty that Svenungsson acknowledges (37). While her notion of theopolitics is developed from the work of Martin Buber, the origins of her definition of political theology are less clear. There is a significant body of the political theological that does not allow itself to be reduced to any existing political order. For instance, the non-eschatological apocalypticism she finds in Joachim can also be found in Jacob Taubes’ ‘negative political theology’ and, while Svenungsson offers a critique of Benjamin’s notion of divine violence, recent work shows its applicability to complex political situations.[[3]](#endnote-3) These approaches, political theological and often apocalyptic, blur the distinction drawn between theopolitics and political theology. As Svenungsson argues in her postscript, theopolitics may be defined by its ability to sustain a ‘distinction between the political and authority that remains transcendent to the political’ (205), but it is less clear that political theology can be limited to the legitimation of particular political projects.

Svenungsson sets out to demonstrate ‘that the theology of history to which the biblical legacy gave rise is nowhere as one-dimensional as postwar anti-utopian writers often imply’ (ix). She certainly accomplishes this goal, but at times concedes too much to the anti-utopian critique: the messianic at the expense of the apocalyptic, the theopolitical at the cost of the theological political. There is room for even further degrees of multi-dimensionality in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

1. For discussions of this supercessionism, see Part VI of Hent de Vries and Ward Blanton (eds.), *Paul and the Philosophers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Erik Peterson, ‘Monotheism as a Theological Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman Empire’ in *Theological Tractates*, ed. and trans. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 68-105. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology*, trans. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge: Polity, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Martin Terpestra and Theo de Wit, ‘”No Spiritual Investment in the World As It Is”: Jacob Taubes’s Negative Political Theology’ in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, eds. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laruens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000);Ted A. Smith, *Werid John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

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