The Jewish-German cultural and literary critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1949) once wrote to his friend Gershom Scholem, the eminent scholar of Jewish mysticism, that, “If I ever have a philosophy of my own, somehow it will be a philosophy of Judaism.” Benjamin is widely considered to be one of the most important thinkers of his generation, and yet his commitment to Judaism and the influence of Judaism on his writings are often dismissed. In his youth, Benjamin espoused a kind of theological antipolitics, what he and Scholem called “theocratic anarchism,” which they both considered “the most sensible answer to politics.” Benjamin’s theological politics were based upon his conviction that the demands of politics and the imperatives of morality were somehow incommensurable. His utter aversion towards politics and violence were only reinforced by the events of World War I.

Many scholars and modern interpreters of Benjamin focus on his Marxist writings during the 1930’s, thus ignoring his youthful stance against politics and violence. This essay explores Benjamin’s youthful political theology in relation to his later writings, with a particular focus on his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” which he composed shortly before committing suicide on the French-Spanish border while fleeing from the Nazis in 1940. By exploring the continuity of themes between Benjamin’s youthful and more mature writings, this essay argues that Benjamin returns to the antipolitical stance of his youth in his final essay.