SABBATAI ZVI AND JEWISH MESSIANISM

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The belief in the coming of a Messiah has been, down through the ages, a cardinal tenet of Judaism. Though many Jewish thinkers would not make this belief essential to Judaism—only a relatively minor issue—the vast majority concur that such a hope is nonetheless an important feature of Judaism.[1] Yet, it must be stressed that the Jewish view of Messianism differs radically from the Christian. The latter thinks in terms of a personal Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, who came once and for all in history; the former maintains that "Messiah son of Joseph appears from generation to generation. This is the suffering Messiah, who always, again and again, suffers mortal pain for God's sake."[2] Buber suggests that Jesus was the first in a long series of men who acknowledged both to themselves and to others that theirs was a messianic mission; but that that admission was tantamount to their lack of true messianic character. That is, true or genuine messianism is seen not in its self-proclamation but in its self-imposed secrecy. To Buber "Messianic self-disclosure is the bursting of Messiahship."[3]

If Jesus was the first of the Messiahs, the last, it seems, was Sabbatai Zvi of Smryna. The apostasy of this pretender, tragic enough in itself, was, moreover, the very means of bringing the Messianic series to an end for most of Judaism. This one, from whom so many had expected so much, plunged them into such despair that the concept of a self-revealing Messiah was forever lost. It is fitting, therefore, that any discussion of Jewish Messianism include a treatment of Sabbatai Zvi. The current within Judaism which led to his rise and wide acceptance and the contemporary interpretations of Messiahship which have followed in his wake find meaning only as they are related to this enigmatic personality.

Jewish Messianism has its roots, of course, in the Bible, and throughout history there have been various claimants to the Messianic office. But Messianic activity found its greatest impetus in the Middle Ages, an impetus provided largely by the Kabbalistic mystical movements found in large segments of Judaism in Europe. The speculative nature of Kabbalism naturally lent itself to Messianic speculation, and the emphasis on number and letter manipulation provided keys to unlocking Messianic secrets, including the identification of Messiah and the date of his advent. As Green-

1. Julius H. Greenstone, *The Messiah Idea in Jewish History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1966), pp. 8-9.
2. Martin Buber, *Hasidism* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1948), p. 113.
3. Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 109.

stone points out, many Jews "regarded those who could best establish their claims on such speculations and calculations as fit for the Messiah's crown."[4] Given such prompting, it is small wonder that a succession of pretenders arose to establish their claims.

Among the first of these men were Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291), Nissim ben Abraham, and Moses de Leon (1250-1305). de Leon, first publisher of the *Zohar,* inserted much Messianic material into the work. By a mystical calculation of the numerical values of the letters of "the Ineffable Name of God" he concluded that Messiah must come at about the 600th year of the sixth millennium. This advent will prepare Israel for the glories of the seventh millennium.[5] There was resistance to such Messianic speculation, of course. For example, Hayyim ben Galipopa (1310-1380) declared that all the Messianic prophecies in Isaiah and Daniel had been fulfilled in Maccabaean times, and that all present Messianic belief was without foundation. Yet, the Kabbalistic movement continued to gain momentum, carrying with it even more fanciful Messianic claims. One such expression was seen in the pronouncements of David Reubeni, a practical adventurer, and Solomon Molcho, a visionary of the first part of the sixteenth century. These two caused a great sensation all over Europe until the death of Molcho at the hands of Emperor Charles V (1532).[6]

In addition to Kabbalism, however, another encouragement was given to Jewish Messianic expectations in the form of the Protestant Reformation. This movement, with its emphasis on tolerance of the Jews and promotion of the classics and Jewish scholarship, caused many Jews to believe that the Messianic Age was at hand. Contemporaneous with and subsequent to the Reformation such outstanding figures as Abarbanel (1437-1509), Isaac Lurya (1534-1620), and Hayyim Vital Calabrese (1543-1620) either pressed Messianic claims or had them forced upon them by their followers. They were followed by Manasseh ben Israel (1604-1657), who managed to get Cromwell's permission for Jews to settle in England, and Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (1707-1747), who believed that he was Messiah and even wrote "Davidic" psalms which he hoped would replace those of David.[7]

The dominant figure in the series, of course, was Sabbatai Zvi (1626-1676) who, according to Greenstone, "will ever be regarded with abhorrence as the name of one of the world's greatest imposters."[8] A possible exception to this evaluation might be in the person of Yankiev L. Frank who, as the last of the pseudo-Messiahs, taught that all previous claimants had been true Messiahs. He, naturally, was the climax in the long line and was, therefore, Messiah *par excellence.* But further comment on him and his movement must await an exposition of the chief figure in the entire post-Zoharic Messianic movement—Sabbatai Zvi. Suffice it to say at this

4. Greenstone, *op. cit.,* pp. 162-163.
5. *Ibid.,* pp. 174-175.
6. *Ibid.,* pp. 192-199.
7. *Ibid.,* pp. 230-231.
8. *Ibid.,* p. 207.

point in summarizing the movement as a whole that the usual outcome of the psuedo-Messiahs and their disciples was conversion either to Islam or Christianity. This, as we shall see, was true of Sabbatianism, but Sabbatianism was able to adapt this apparent tragedy of conversion by its founder and make it part of the theology of the sect.

Sabbatai Zvi was born of poor parents in Smyrna, Turkey, but evidenced an unusual interest in the Talmud, *Zohar*, Lurya, and Vital at an early age. Kabbalism had been teaching the advent of Messiah in 1648 and following a great persecution of Jews that year in the Ukraine, Sabbatai proclaimed himself Messiah. This was accomplished by pronouncing the Tetragrammaton for which he was exiled from home. He went first to Salonika, then to Constantinople, Palestine, and Cairo. Finally he went to Jerusalem to strengthen his claims. While in Palestine he gained his most important follower, Nathan of Gaza (Nathan Ghazzati), who spread the word of Sabbatai's messiahship. Actually, it appears that Nathan, a visionary prophet, had found mystical purification for his own soul and convinced Sabbatai, who had come to him for a similar experience, that he (Sabbatai) was Messiah. Scholem believes that this was the first time that Sabbatai so regarded himself seriously.[9]

In any event, Sabbatai returned to Smyrna where he was now well received. On Rosh ha-Shanah, 1665, he was formally proclaimed Messiah before delegates from all over the Jewish world. Prophets, speaking ecstatically, supported his claims. The masses, reeling under persecution from many quarters and goaded on by Kabbalistic speculative excesses, gladly welcomed this entire phenomenon as the fulfillment of Israel's ancient hopes. Eventually, however, the bubble burst, first indicated by Sabbatai's arrest by the Turks in Constantinople. This was explained by the faithful as Messianic suffering for atonement of the masses. Through intrigue of a certain Nehemiah Cohen, moreover, Sabbatai was sentenced to death by the Turks, a sentence which was commuted when he converted to Islam. Even this inexplicable turn of events was interpreted by the faithful as a Messianic function. Some said that only a representation of Sabbatai had done this dastardly thing while the real Messiah had gone to heaven. Others, after his death, maintained that he had gone "down into Islam" in order to release the sparks of holiness which resided even there. In any event, the Sabbatian movement gradually lost support until most of its remnants were assimilated by the Frankists who followed some years later. A tiny residue still exists in parts of the Mediterranean world, but its influence is negligible.[10]

There have been many efforts made to understand Sabbatai Zvi and opinions concerning him have ranged from those which assert that he was a good man who went astray unconsciously to others who label him an outright charlatan and purveyor of heresy of the rankest sort. Regard-

9. Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), pp. 294-295.
10. "Sabbatai Zevi," *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia,* Vol. IX (New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, Inc., 1939), pp. 292-295.

less, it seems clear that Buber's assertion that "Sabbatai believed in something absolute, and that he believed in himself in relation to it"[11] must provide some clue to his "messianic consciousness." Scholem, in a penetrating and original treatment of the matter of Sabbatai's personality, analyzes the pretender as a manic-depressive. He says that Sabbatai showed the first signs of this mental affliction between his sixteenth and twentieth years, and under its influence committed acts which run counter to religious law. The major explanation for Sabbatai's messianic consciousness is, in Scholem's view, Sabbatai's constant alternation between periods of normalcy and times of melancholy depression. These latter experiences exposed him to a severe mental and physical strain which expressed itself in delusions of messianic grandeur.[12]

Scholem's position is intriguing and perhaps correct, but it is obviously impossible to prove beyond any doubt. It seems safer to maintain with most scholars that Sabbatai Zvi passionately believed in himself and his cause, largely because of the encouragement he received from Nathan and others.

Granting the magnetism of Sabbatai Zvi personally, we still must look for more compelling reasons for the rise and spread of the movement which he originated than that fact alone. Any ideology or schism which could call itself the "first serious revolt in Judaism since the Middle Ages"[13] must find its source deep within Judaism and apart from a single personality. Most scholars feel that Lurianic Kabbalism, with its doctrine of *Tikkun*, caused thousands of Jewish mystics to believe that the restitution of cosmic harmony could be achieved only through the earthly medium of mysticism. Messiah must journey into the hell of this world in order to draw forth from it the holy sparks which have become incarcerated therein.[14] At the same time, Lurianic Kabbalism placed the emphasis upon the regeneration of the inner life rather than upon that of the nation as a whole. Moral improvement on an individual basis would be a prerequisite to the delivery of Israel from its exile.[15] This led the attention of the masses from a scholastic Judaism to a more personal, mystical commitment to a spiritual reality. All that was needed was a messianic spark to ignite, unify, and symbolize the new trend, and such a spark was Sabbatai Zvi. From the Balkans, Sabbatai's brand of mysticism spread to Italy, Lithuania, and Poland. In the last of these places the struggle between rabbinism and mysticism became particularly acute because of the new messianic movement.[16]

In Sabbatianism the chief doctrine, naturally, was that of the Messiah and his relationship to the cosmos. According to the Messianic theory of

11. Buber, *Hasidism,* p. 10.
12. Scholem, *op. cit.,* p. 293.
13. *Ibid.,* p. 299.
14. Buber, *Hasidism,* pp. 8-9.
15. Scholem, *op. cit.,* pp. 305-306.
16. "Hasidim," *The Jewish Encyclopedia,* Vol. VI (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1925), p. 252.

the Sabbatians, the original elements (sparks) are scattered everywhere and cannot be reunited because of the constant interference of the *Kelippoth* ("scalings of impurity"). Only Messiah, because he possesses sparks of the original soul and is, indeed, a part of Deity, is able to redeem completely the soul elements from this imprisonment throughout the universe.[17] Nathan of Gaza, with his view of an "imprisoned" and "released" Messiah, was able to fit Sabbatai Zvi into his system very well. This was especially true after Sabbatai's apostasy. From a practical viewpoint, the coming of Sabbatai Zvi and his enthusiastic reception by the *'am ha'aretz* ("people of the land") brought large segments of Judaism into an experience of inner freedom and spiritual exaltation which few of them had ever known before. Furthermore, now that they had come to believe that Messiah was personal and among them, they also believed that there must be a complete fulfillment of the historical aspects of the Messianic promises.[18] Israel's destiny was seen now not in idealistic terms only, but in stark reality and in time and space.

It is tempting to see parallels between the Messianic movement of Sabbatianism and that of Christianity. In both instances there is the paradox of the Suffering Servant; a certain mystical "attitude of belief crystallizes round an historical event which in turn draws its strength from the very fact of its paradoxicality";[19] both look for an advent of Messiah, the second advent to both Sabbatianism and Christianity; both have a certain degree of antinomianism in relation to the Mosaic covenant; and both seem to teach a type of divine incarnation. Yet, most of the above are similar only in their externals; in detail the differences are more observable than the similarities. Nowhere is the difference between the Christian Messiah and Sabbatai Zvi more apparent than in their mode and purpose of redemptive completion. As Scholem points out, "The paradox of crucifixion and that of apostasy are after all on two different levels."[20] That Sabbatianism drew upon Christian elements as it did Lurianic and other elements cannot be denied, but it must be maintained that the movement was essentially Jewish and found most of its support from within historical, normative Judaism.

The turning point in the Sabbatian tragedy was the apostasy of the "Messiah." And yet, this apostasy, as we have suggested before, was the very means of clarifying to the world the real purpose and nature of the Messiah's ministry. Some of Sabbatai's followers saw in his conversion to Islam the invasion of Messiah into the realms of impurity so that he might liberate the sparks there in anticipation of full redemption.[21] Indeed, it was thought that in the final analysis the process of *Tikkun* demanded that Messiah and Messiah alone go into the depths of sin in order to accomplish the divine will. Besides, the apostasy of Sabbatai "provided an emo-

17. Greenstone, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-220.
18. Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 306.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 307.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
21 David Rudavsky, "The Birth of Hassidism" (Unpublished mimeographed notes), p. 7.

tional outlet for the tormented conscience of the Marranos [who had converted to Christianity in Spain]."[22]

Jews in later generations were not to so regard Sabbatai's behavior, however. The Besht (Baal Shem Tov) said of him:

> Many have trodden the same steep path [in the Kabbala] and have attained the fortunate goal. He, too, had a holy spark in his being; he fell, however, into the net of Samael, the false deceiver, who thrust him into the role of a Redeemer. This overtook him only because of his arrogance.[23]

Far from being Messiah, Sabbatai Zvi was one of the most tragic and innocently (?) dangerous men in history.

Just immediately before and after Sabbatai's death his followers expected him to return to life and live among them once again in a renewed society. When, after several years, this hope did not materialize, Sabbatianism changed its character from a popular movement to a sectarian one whose work was carried on mainly in secret. This lack of open, popular support did not mean that the movement was ended by any means. There were, in fact, many successors to Sabbatai Zvi including Michael Cardoso (1630-1706), who taught a doctrine of two Gods, and Mordecai of Eisenstadt, who considered himself as the resurrected Sabbatai Zvi. There was also Jacob Querido, who claimed to be the son of Sabbatai and who believed that the only way to overcome immorality was to practice it excessively.[24] Such bizarre distortions of the already distorted views of Sabbatai were bound to develop into sects and elements of the basest sort.

Perhaps the most devastating of the ideas which developed in the aftermath of Sabbatianism was that of antinomianism, a lawlessness beyond anything practiced by the original Sabbatians themselves. These new radicals maintained that "we must all descend into the realm of evil in order to vanquish it from within."[25] This especially gave rise to Frankism with its nihilistic results. The new motto became "Praise be to Thee, O Lord, who permittest the forbidden." Nothing was too evil to be done if in the doing of it the process of redemption could be furthered. The abandonment of the old law of normative Judaism in favor of the new antinomianism was justified by the Frankists and others on the basis of the new order introduced by the coming of Messiah. This advent of God into the cosmos rendered the old law unnecessary and undesirable. In Buber's words, "With the fulfillment of the meaning of the new, the Messianic aeon, the yoke of the old Torah, valid only for the unredeemed world, is

22. Scholem, *op. cit.*, pp. 309-310.
23. Louis I. Newman, *Hasidic Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), p. 251.
24. Greenstone, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-227.
25. Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 315. Frankism was a mystical Jewish sect named for Jacob Frank (1726-1791), a Polish devotee of Sabbatai Zvi. They claimed to reject the Talmud and to embrace only the *Zohar*, finding in it the doctrine of the Trinity, the "Son," however, meaning to them Sabbatai Zvi. See S. M. Dubnow, "Jacob Frank and the Frankists," *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. V (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., n.d.), pp. 475-478.

broken. The new revelation that permits all, that sanctifies all is here."[26] Abraham Perez, one of Nathan's disciples, wrote in a treatise in 1668 the concept that whoever remained faithful to rabbinical tradition or historical Judaism in favor of the new standards of law was to be regarded as a sinner.[27] Whereas Sabbatai maintained that only he must delve into the world of impurity to redeem the fallen sparks, Frankism and other perverted forms of Sabbatianism taught that all of the faithful must do the same. Thus an unbridled license was issued to sin in any way imaginable.

Of course, the pendulum must inevitably swing back to a less extreme position in any matter, and it was so in post-Sabbatian mysticism. There were many moderate forms of the movement in which the orthodox and Sabbatians existed side by side. It is even believed that there were large numbers of outstanding rabbis who were secret adherents of the new sectarian mysticism, though orthodox scholars are loath to admit this. The point at which the moderate and extreme interpreters and exponents of Sabbatianism parted company was the question of the redemptive role of the Messiah. Were his actions relative to the world of impurity examples to the believers or not? The moderates, of course, felt that only the Messiah was faced with the awful demands of the messianic mission; but the radicals felt that it was obligatory that all of the pious witness to their faith by similar acts of messianic fulfillment. The middle position between the two, a kind of latent antinomianism, came to be the dominant theory of action. This school held that there was in fact no old law to be observed, but they shunned the opinion that wickedness was an essential part of the new order, even if it were done in the name of spiritual advancement.

The cause of mysticism and the doctrine of Messiah were tremendously altered and reinterpreted by the Sabbatian revolution, but it would be an overstatement to say that either had disappeared because of it. Greenstone asserts that "the belief in a personal Messiah is still a doctrine of faith with the majority of Jews,"[28] but he also must agree that the meaning of the doctrine is much different from its pre-Sabbatian meaning. And mysticism has had to undergo a most intensive soul-searching as a result of the catastrophes described in this paper. It has gone through the fires of purgation, and though it has suffered at the hands of its friends as well as its enemies, who can dare say that it has not come forth the better? Perhaps an oblique word of gratitude should be offered Sabbatai Zvi, a word which would surprise nobody, perhaps, more than him; for is it not entirely possible that someone had to shock legitimate Jewish mysticism into an awareness of its latent dangers so that it might continue to be the force for spiritual vitality which it undoubtedly is in modern Judaism? We would like to give him the benefit of the doubt. And Christianity, too, has inherited a hidden blessing of its own, for the incomparable Christ has been made to be seen even more unique and even more demonstrably the Messiah, the Son of God, in comparison with those, like Sabbatai Zvi, who would seek to rob Him of His glory and praise.

26. Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, p. 31.
27. Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 312.
28. Greenstone, *op. cit.*, p. 241.