

FLAWED MESSIAH

THE STORY OF SABBATAI SEVI AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TODAY

By

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For inside Front Cover –

Note on Transliteration

Several different systems are used for transliterating Hebrew letters. In some cases, as with Gershom Scholem's books, different systems have been used in the same author's works according to the preference of the particular publisher involved.

In this publication the following system, which assumes Sephardic pronunciation, is used:

Aleph	'	
Beth	b	v in soft form (after vowels and vocal shewa)
Gimel	g	in both hard and soft forms
Daleth	d	in both hard and soft forms
He	h	
Waw	w	
Zayin	z	
Heth	ch	
Teth	t	
Yod	y	
Kaph	k	in both hard and soft forms
Lamed	l	
Mem	m	
Nun	n	
Samech	s	
Ayin	'	
Pe	p	ph in soft form (after vowels and vocal shewa)
Sade	ts	
Qoph	q	
Resh	r	
Sin	s	
Shin	sh	
Taw	t	th in soft form (after vowels and vocal shewa)

However, exception is made for words where another transliteration has become more or less standard; thus the form 'Kabbalah' is used, not 'Qabbalah'; 'Hasidim' not 'Chasidim'. Using the above system, the name of the main subject of this paper should strictly be 'Shabbathai Tsevi', but he is more commonly known as 'Sabbatai Sevi' or some close variant; so this form of his name is used throughout.

The Jewish Messiah who made world news

In February 1669 the English diarist, John Evelyn, presented King Charles the Second with a copy of his *The History of Three Late Famous Impostors*, and when the King learned of the contents, ‘he told me of other like cheates.’¹ The larger portion of this short publication tells the story of Sabbatai Sevi, whose messiahship was announced to the world in May 1665. There then erupted what Gershon Scholem described as ‘by far the most significant and extensive Messianic movement’ to have occurred in post Christian Judaism.² Yehuda Liebes makes the same point: the Sabbatean movement was ‘the largest, most important, and most sweeping messianic movement that arose in Jewish history.’³

Evelyn’s account is a piece of plagiarism that follows closely the record kept at the time by Sir Paul Rycaut who from 1661 was the Secretary of the English merchant company trading in Smyrna, a town which features large in Sabbatai’s messianic career. Rycaut himself used this record in writing his *History of the Turkish Empire 1623 – 1677* which was published eleven years later in 1680. Rycaut’s interest in the events as they unfolded was undoubtedly fuelled by anxiety over the disruption to trade resulting from the outburst of messianic fervour that swept right across the Jewish world both within the Turkish Empire and throughout Europe in the years 1665 and 1666.

Evelyn has seized on the story as a most newsworthy item replete with extraordinary happenings: ‘all business was laid aside; none worked or opened shop, unless to clear his warehouse of merchandise at any price.’ Many Jews underwent such mortifications as having molten wax dropped on their shoulders, or rolling themselves in the snow or bathing in the sea or freezing water in the depth of winter. Anxious that the command to increase and multiply was being neglected, ‘they married together children of ten years of age or under without respect to riches or poverty, condition or quality.’⁴

But neither Rycaut nor Evelyn made much effort to understand the historical or religious circumstances of the Jewish people in this period that might in some way explain how this widespread messianic movement could arise and gain momentum so

¹ de la Bédoyère (ed.), p. 169.

² Scholem, 1971, p. 59.

³ Liebes, p.93.

⁴ Evelyn, 1669, pp. 54-55.

quickly. Rycaut does, however, refer to certain ‘Christian writers who expected 1666 to prove a year of wonders, particularly of blessing to the Jews either in respect of their conversion to the Christian faith or of their restoration to their temporal kingdom’.⁵ Here he has in mind the millennial expectations of certain English Christian radicals, but it hard to see how the Jewish world would be sympathetic to their kind of thinking.

The authorities today

Among modern treatments of the career of Sabbatai Sevi and the messianic movement associated with him, the magisterial work by Gershom Scholem stands unrivalled, but not without challenge on certain issues. Scholem, one of the original Professors of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, devoted his life-long academic career to the study of Jewish mysticism from its origins in *merkavah* mysticism in the early centuries CE to the Hasidic movement originating with R. Israel Baal Shem Tov (the Besht) in the 18th century and widespread among Orthodox Jews today. His *Life of Sabbatai Sevi: the Mystical Messiah 1626-76*, a major part of this enterprise, has been described as ‘an exemplary work of epochal significance for Jewish pre-modern history’.⁶ The short account I give below of Sabbatai’s career follows closely Scholem’s *Life* except where indicated.

However, following in Scholem’s footsteps, a new generation of scholars specialising in Jewish mysticism has now emerged, including in particular Yehuda Liebes and Moshe Idel. Inevitably they have made important reappraisals of some of Scholem’s stances, and I consider these in the appropriate places.

The historical background

Most Jewish historians, including Scholem himself, in explaining the background to the Sabbatean movement, place considerable emphasis on the disaster that befell the Jews in Poland beginning in 1648.⁷ In the Spring and Summer of that year some 30,000 Jews were killed in what are known as the Chmielnicki massacres. Chmielnicki was the leader of the Ukrainians who rebelled in that year against rule by the combined kingdom of

⁵ Rycaut, p. 201.

⁶ Idel, 1998, p. 183.

⁷ For the general position of the Jews in Poland, see Edwards, pp. 114-33.

Poland and Lithuania. Then began 20 years of unmitigated suffering in Poland during which the country was ravaged not only by Ukrainian, Cossack and Tatar forces but also by invading Swedish and Russian armies. The Jewish communities were often delivered up to looting, slaughter or captivity, but some cities protected them. In the end some 20 per cent of the Jewish population (90,000 out of 450,000) may have perished.⁸

Idel makes some important qualifications to this account of the historical background. It should be understood that Idel deplores any simplistic equating of developments in beliefs and outlook with events taking place on the world-stage. He points out that none of the main players associated with this messianic movement refer to the recent tragic events in Poland. Moreover, although the movement had its devotees as far away as Poland and Lithuania where the lot of the Jews was dire, the strongest support came from the Jewish communities in the cities of Northern Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany, as well as in towns under Turkish rule such as Gaza, Smyrna, Safed and Jerusalem, in all of which places the Jews enjoyed relative freedom.. In fact, Idel sees here a different historical factor of greater significance than the massacres in Poland: the presence of large numbers of former *conversos* (forced converts to Christianity) who had sought refuge in these places as a result of the Spanish Inquisition and the later expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. He comments:

These [Sabbatean] doctrines struck a deep chord within those religiously tormented people, sometimes unsatisfied or in many cases also more strongly uneasy with the painful process of acceptance of rabbinic Judaism.⁹

With these historical factors in mind, I now turn to how Sabbatai Sevi came on the scene.

Sabbatai's early years

Sabbatai Sevi was born in 1626 on the Ninth of Av which that year fell on a Sabbath; hence Sabbatai's first name. The Ninth of Av is a day of mourning for the destruction of both the First and Second Temples, and by rabbinic tradition will be the day of birth of the Messiah. Sabbatai's father was a prosperous agent in Smyrna for some English merchants trading there. Sabbatai was the second of three sons and his older and younger brothers like their father became successful commercial agents. Sabbatai went through all

⁸ For a more detailed account of the Jews' sufferings, see Gartner, pp. 27-35.

⁹ Idel, 1998, p. 184.

the stages of Jewish education but, showing signs of talent, was encouraged to pursue rabbinic studies and in due course he was ordained while still an adolescent. He then devoted himself to an ascetic life and the study of Kabbalah (mystical tradition), in particular the *Zohar*.¹⁰

At the age of 20 Sabbatai married his first wife but claimed not to have consummated the marriage and divorced her a few months later. Soon afterwards he married another woman, but again the marriage soon ended in divorce. The true facts regarding these marriages now appear to be irrecoverable.

From this period on, Sabbatai began to show signs of what Scholem regarded as a manic-depressive illness. This was characterised by long periods of normality interrupted by bouts of intense exaltation followed by descent into melancholy and depression. In his high states, the ‘periods of illumination’, Sabbatai would often perform ‘strange actions’: these were either bizarre acts such as dressing up a very large fish like a baby and putting it into a cradle, or outrageous or offensive behaviour such as pronouncing in public the name of God, the tetragrammaton. While it is certainly possible that Sabbatai was a manic-depressive, an individual’s character and personality is not fully accounted for by such a description. This is a major weakness in Scholem’s presentation of Sabbatai. As a result, Scholem tends to relativise those features of Sabbatai’s character that enabled him to provide leadership to the messianic movement once it had got underway. Likewise Scholem does little to assess the precise nature of Sabbatai’s weaknesses.

Idel has offered another explanation for Sabbatai’s strange actions. Sabbatai is known to have studied the late 14th century work *Sepher ha-Peliy’ah*. This book, like certain other kabbalistic writings, associates the Messiah with *Binah*, the divine attribute of understanding and also the third *sephirah* (emanation) of the Divinity, but in addition the book also makes a connection with the planet Saturn (in Hebrew ‘Sabbatai’). The text may explain how Sabbatai may have ‘interiorized the peculiar emotional characteristic of those connected to that planet: melancholy.’¹¹

¹⁰ The *Zohar* (Splendour) is the classic expression of the theosophical form of kabbalism that developed in Provence and Spain in the 13th Century. It is a massive work, written in medieval Aramaic, and belongs to the last quarter of the 13th century.

¹¹ Idel, 1998, p. 195.

It was in 1648, the year when some kabbalists were expecting the beginning of the final period of redemption,¹² that Sabbatai first received a revelation that he was the Messiah. The testimony of R. Solomon Laniado, who was later to become one of Sabbatai's ardent followers, reads:

When he passed through Aleppo, he told us his personal experiences; how in the year 1648 the Spirit of God descended upon him one night while he was walking about two hours distance from the city in solitary meditation, until he heard the voice of God speaking to him, 'Thou art the saviour of Israel, the messiah, the son of David, and thou art destined to redeem Israel, to gather it from the four corners of the earth to Jerusalem',¹³
...

What are we to make of such a testimony? Liebes has argued that Sabbatai was a mystic who claimed and cultivated a special personal relationship with God: 'he resorted to the personal Kabbalah of the *Zohar* rather than to the mechanistic Lurianic one.'¹⁴ Idel has been able to trace the influence on Sabbatai of the 13th century mystic, Abraham Abulafia, a master of the ecstatic form of kabbalism and whose techniques for attaining *devequth* (cleaving to God) included the systematic repetition of combinations of the letters of the divine name (the tetragrammaton).¹⁵ If Sabbatai habitually used this technique, he might easily pronounce the name in public. A yet more significant link between Sabbatai and Abulafia is that in the latter's ecstatic kabbalism the peak of the mystic's journey into the Godhead is to partake of the divine nature and to be Messiah, a messiah whose nature is divine.¹⁶

It seems likely that Sabbatai shared the revelation of his messiahship with only a small circle of family and friends, but in any case he was not taken seriously. However, in the early 1650s the rabbis at Smyrna were scandalised by another 'strange action' – an attempt to make the sun stand still at midday – and banished him from the city.

Sabbatai then settled in Salonika where initially he made a good impression. Apparently he had considerable personal charm, combining a winning kindness with an air of nobility in his dealings with poor and rich alike. He also had an attractive speaking and singing voice as well as musical talents: he could pick up the melody of a Spanish

¹² Scholem, 1973, pp. 88-93.

¹³ Cited by Scholem, 1973, p. 136.

¹⁴ Liebes, p. 110.

¹⁵ Idel, 1988, pp. 97-103.

¹⁶ Idel, 1998, pp. 95-96.

love song and turn it into a mystical song of divine love. Nevertheless he outstayed his welcome when he set up a bridal canopy, had a Torah scroll put in it, and then symbolically married himself to the Torah. Thereafter his wanderings eventually took him to Constantinople in 1658. Here his strange behaviour caused far more offence than hitherto. One action – his celebrating the three pilgrimage festivals in one week – may have led the rabbis to consider that they had a new sect on their hands. On this occasion he was flogged and formally excommunicated. Now beyond the authority of rabbinic law, Sabbatai proclaimed a ‘new law’ and began to use ‘the blessing of the loosening of the commandments’ which conveyed the notion that at times of mystical illumination transgressions could become holy deeds.

In due course the ban of excommunication was for all practical purposes no longer applied. This was largely due to a friendship that developed between Sabbatai and David Chabillo, a pious and most respected kabbalist of that time. In 1662 Sabbatai arrived in Palestine and stayed in Jerusalem for about a year. In 1663 extortionate demands were made on the Jewish community there by the Turkish governor. Some time earlier, during a visit to Egypt, Sabbatai had formed friendly relations with the secular leader of the Jewish community there, the *chelabi* R. Raphael Joseph. It was natural therefore for the community to select Sabbatai as an emissary to Egypt to raise funds for their support. In this task Sabbatai was remarkably successful, collecting a very substantial sum for the poor of Jerusalem. It was on this visit that Sabbatai contracted his third marriage; this was to Sarah, ‘the Messiah’s consort’.

It is difficult to disentangle fact from legend where Sarah is concerned, but it seems that she and her brother were orphaned in the Chmielnicki massacres in Poland in 1648. The two Jewish children fled to Amsterdam, but Sarah later drifted to Italy where she spent some years as a maid-servant in Leghorn and then Mantua. The sources, whether friendly or hostile, report rumours of her having a licentious lifestyle and practising witchcraft, the latter meaning probably no more than that she was a fortune teller. In this capacity she foretold that she herself would become the Messiah’s wife. News of a beautiful woman who does ‘strange things’ reaches Sabbatai while he is in Egypt: he sends for her and they are married in 1664.

The rise of kabbalism within mainstream Judaism

At this point it may be asked, how did kabbalism play such a large part in the beliefs and practice of mainstream Judaism in the 17th Century?

Kabbalism takes its origin from a movement in Provence and Spain beginning in the 13th century CE. The early theosophical kabbalists were mystics who explored the ‘sources of creation’ through an inward journey to God, ‘the root of all roots’. Their description of the *sephiroth* (the 10 descending powers of God, each being characterised by a particular divine attribute) represents at least in part an attempt to explain the entrance of evil into the world without impairing the essential unity of God.

Scholars have offered competing accounts for the rise of kabbalism in the thirteenth century. Direct influence from the Albigensian heresy, an essentially Gnostic movement within Christianity, which broke out in Provence during the same period, has not been demonstrated.¹⁷ What is reasonably clear is that the first kabbalists were much influenced by the book *Bahir* (Brightness) which came to them through contact with the German Hasidim of the early Middle Ages. The *Bahir* itself mediates some much older Jewish speculative literature associated with the *merkavah* mysticism (contemplation of the Chariot – see Ezekiel 1) that flourished in the first three centuries CE and continued in the East up to the 11th century.¹⁸

Lurianic kabbalism

It was one particular school of kabbalism that by 1650 had become both influential and widespread among rabbis across the Jewish world. This form of kabbalism was developed by a small group of pious kabbalists in Safed in the Galilee. Of these Isaac Luria Ashkenazi of Safed (1534 – 72) was the foremost and most authoritative exponent. His teaching was given expression in writing by his disciple Chayyim Vital. Vital maintained that the mysteries he had learned from his master should not be shared with others without Luria’s permission; in other words they were to be confined to the select group of Safed mystics. But another kabbalist, R. Israel Sarug, obtained stolen copies of

¹⁷ Scholem, 1962, p. 15.

¹⁸ Scholem, 1962, pp. 117-18.

Vital's writings, and between 1592 and 1598 actively disseminated the Lurianic teaching in Italy. From there, in the first half of the 17th century, Sarug's interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah spread to the Netherlands, Germany and Poland, assisted by the dissemination of printed books as opposed to hand-copied manuscripts. A notable publication was the '*Emeq ha-Melek* (The Valley, or Mystical Depths, of the King) which was published in Frankfurt in 1648.¹⁹

The Lurianic system made certain daring innovations to earlier forms of kabbalism. One of the most important was to place the origin of evil within the creative processes of God himself. Related to this is the doctrine of *tsimtsum* or retraction. The first step in the beginning of things, according to Lurianic Kabbalah, takes place when '*Ayn Soph* (literally, 'there is no end') the infinite Divinity, withdraws into himself, leaving an empty space for the worlds to be.

The Lurianic account of how the spiritual and material realities of the universe arose is highly complex. As with Kabbalah generally, the ideas are expressed by the use of symbols that are not intended to be taken literally but to point to inner realities that cannot be described any other way. Although any summary will inevitably be unsatisfactory, I will touch on the salient features.²⁰

Into the empty space left by the divine retraction there bursts forth the first ray of light, 'the straight line': this is the cosmic primordial man, Adam Qadmon. This produces the, as yet undifferentiated *sephiroth* or divine lights, but as the light increases they separate and each of these requires a *qelippah* – a vessel to contain it. But when the divine light was emanated at full force, the vessels could not contain it and were shattered. In this process the 'hard lights' of the divinity (stern judgement) are purged and their dross separated from the Godhead, so making 'the Other Side' or sphere of evil.

In one sense 'the breaking of the vessels' is a 'fortunate fall' enabling the programme of *tiqqun*, that is, restoration or reintegration, to begin. The divine emanations now form five *partsuphim* or configurations of divine creative power. From these result,

¹⁹ Scholem, 1946, pp. 256-58. For some reservations on the extent and depth of the penetration of Lurianic kabbalah into the wider Jewish world, see Idel, 1998, pp. 175-78. But that there was a wide and effective dissemination is quite clear.

²⁰ For fuller descriptions with commentary, see Scholem, 1946, pp. 258-84; 1973, pp. 22-55.

in descending order, the four lower worlds, but even the lowest of these is still spiritual in nature. Then Adam, the first man, is formed as a spiritual body who was intended to bring about *tiqqun* by uniting the divine sparks of light and returning to the root of all being, so depriving the realm of the *qelippah* or ‘Other Side’, of the source of its existence.

In fact Adam failed: rather than uniting the sparks of light, ‘he separated the fruit from the tree’ and in consequence his previously spiritual body became a physical body and all the created, but spiritual, beings descended into the world of the *qelippah* and became clothed with gross matter, that is, the material world was produced.

We now come to the more familiar story of the Bible. As told by the Lurianic kabbalists, a further opportunity for accomplishing restoration was given by the revelation of the Law on Mount Sinai but the sin of the Golden Calf set everything back again. Nevertheless, the process of restoration is carried forward in every generation by the keeping of the commandments; each of the 613 commandments of the Law restores one of the 613 parts of the cosmic primordial man. This means that the people of God, especially the pious mystics, have themselves a messianic role: their faithfulness to God throughout the long and painful process of exile and suffering paves the way for the final stage of redemption which is marked by the arrival of the promised Messiah.

Sabbatai’s meteoric rise

Before his marriage to Sarah in 1664, Sabbatai’s messianic claims were not taken seriously by his family, his friends, and perhaps not even by himself. There may therefore have been no messianic movement that shook the whole Jewish world, had there not also been a man of some stature having a vocation rather like that of John the Baptist, that is, to announce the arrival of the Messiah. This man was Nathan, the prophet of Gaza.

Nathan had been a brilliant Talmudic student in Jerusalem before settling in Gaza. At the age of 20 he began to study Lurianic kabbalism. About this time – in 1664 – he experienced a mystical awakening that shook him to the roots. Nathan described the experience thus:

The Spirit came over me. My hair stood on end and my knees shook and I beheld the *merkavah*, and I saw visions of God all day long and all night, and I was vouchsafed true prophecy like any other prophet, as the voice spoke to me and began with the words,

‘Thus speaks the Lord.’ And with the utmost clarity my heart perceived toward whom my prophecy was directed ...²¹

That person was Sabbatai Sevi. Nathan was to meet Sabbatai on the latter’s return from his fund-raising in Egypt. When Nathan addressed him as Messiah, Sabbatai laughed and said, ‘I had it [the messianic vocation], but have sent it away.’ However, at the end of May 1665, Sabbatai was convinced and announced himself during prayer by the title ‘Anointed [Messiah] of the God of Jacob’.

At this point it is pertinent to consider what the Lurianic form of kabbalism taught concerning the expected Messiah. Three features should be noted. First, as we have seen, the role of Messiah is not to be the sole means of redemption of the universe; rather his coming will signify the advent of the last stage of the process of redemption. Second, it is the people of God, especially the pious, who play a large part in the restoration of the world by choosing the good and rejecting the evil: ‘a man who observes a commandment is no longer merely observing a commandment: his act has a universal significance, he is amending something.’²² This means of course that a number of righteous or ‘messianic’ people can be expected in any generation. Third, ‘little importance is attached to the human personality of the Messiah.’²³ More significantly, as with all human beings, the Messiah’s soul would need to be delivered from the *qelippah*, that is, something of the *qelippah* or the power of evil would be in him.²⁴ In other words, the Messiah to be expected, although a righteous man, will still in some sense be a *flawed* Messiah.

Nathan’s proclamation of Sabbatai as Messiah quickly set off a chain reaction. Very quickly most of the Jews in Gaza and Hebron became ‘believers’ in Sabbatai (‘believers’ was the Sabbatean term). But resistance was encountered among the rabbis in Jerusalem who knew Sabbatai well. Their resistance was strengthened by further scandalous actions: Sabbatai, to mark the coming of the Messiah, now abolished the fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz, and lifted the prohibition on eating the fat of the liver. Although some leading rabbis including the eminent Rabbi Galanté became believers, Sabbatai was excommunicated and banished from Jerusalem. He then went to Aleppo

²¹ Scholem, 1973, p. 204.

²² Scholem, 1971, p. 47.

²³ Scholem, 1971, p. 48.

²⁴ Scholem, 1973, pp. 57-58.

where his arrival set off a wave of enthusiasm. It is here that we first have accounts of the prophesying that would characterise the new movement. The following is taken from a letter sent from Aleppo at the time:

Already they had felt the abundance of grace, and their wives and children had begun to prophesy. Some of them had fallen to the ground at the sound of the *shophar* and remained lying there, cold and without pulse or movement, and a wonderful voice came out of their open mouths, articulating Hebrew words which they themselves did not understand, and in the end they exclaimed, ‘Sabbatai Sevi, our redeemer and holy one.’²⁵

In September 1665 Nathan received a further revelation that the Messiah, the son of David would become manifest. He then wrote a long letter to R. Raphael Joseph, the *chelebi* in Egypt, that became in effect the manifesto of the new movement.²⁶ It is in two parts; the first conveys Lurianic Kabbalah and gives advice on meditative prayer in the light of the arrival of Messiah; the second part is a prophecy of the course of events soon to unfold following the manifestation of Sabbatai as Messiah. Nathan’s bringing together these two very different elements – Lurianic kabbalism and traditional Jewish apocalyptic expectations – does much to explain the explosive growth of the Sabbatean cause. The Lurianic element appealed to the large numbers of rabbis exposed to that form of kabbalism through the efforts of Israel Sarug and his successors, while their communities would root for the apocalyptic ingredient.

In early September 1665 Sabbatai moved to Smyrna, his home town. Much reliable information on what transpired there comes from the reports of Thomas Coenen, the Protestant minister sent out from the Hague in 1662 to be Chaplain to the Dutch merchant community in Smyrna. For some two months Sabbatai lay low, but following a visit of a delegation of believers from Aleppo to pay homage to their Messiah, Sabbatai entered another period of ecstatic exultation and celebrated Hanukkah in royal apparel and intoned the morning psalms in his sweet, melodious voice. But also that week he pronounced the ineffable name of God and ate forbidden fats, pressing others to do likewise. The ensuing uproar was hardly surprising and divided both the rabbis and the merchants of the Jewish community, although the poor were fully behind Sabbatai. The most resistance came from the Portuguese synagogue in Smyrna, and this occasioned

²⁵ Cited Scholem, 1973, p. 258.

²⁶ The letter is reproduced in Scholem, 1973, pp. 270-74

Sabbatai's most outrageous action to date: accompanied by a crowd of the poor who had become believers, he demanded entrance to this synagogue on the Sabbath. This was refused, and, taking an axe, Sabbatai smashed the doors on the Sabbath and took control of the synagogue.

Sabbatai formally declared himself Messiah on Monday, 14 December, 1665, and thereupon an outbreak of enthusiasm took hold of the Jewish community in Smyrna. Many appearances of a pillar of fire were reported; many claimed to have seen Elijah in the streets or at banquets; the prophesying witnessed at Aleppo was seen on a yet greater scale, with Sarah, Sabbatai's wife, being one of the first prophetesses. Trade and commerce in the city was brought to a standstill. Sabbatai now made preparations for a journey to Constantinople to accept the confidently anticipated allegiance of the Sultan. At the same time, from among his faithful followers he appointed kings to rule under him and distributed the kingdoms of the earth among them.

Events at Constantinople

In the meantime the sensational news regarding Sabbatai's stay in Smyrna had preceded him and had produced a similar situation in the capital. A wave of messianic fervour marked by prophesying by all and sundry swept over the city, with the rabbis and other leaders divided over the new movement. There was an understandable fear that the Turkish government would suppress the new movement with violence and that the Jewish communities throughout the Turkish dominions would pay a heavy price. From reports from Smyrna the Turkish authorities themselves will have been aware of the revolutionary character of the movement, notwithstanding that Sabbatai and his followers had no army and posed no military threat. So it is not surprising that, probably at the instigation of some of the Jewish leaders, Sabbatai was arrested shortly before his little ship reached Constantinople. What is surprising is that instead of being executed for treason forthwith, he was treated leniently by the moderate and statesmanlike Grand Vizier, Ahmed Köprülü. At first Sabbatai was imprisoned in a filthy dungeon but, on receipt of a huge bribe funded by wealthy 'believers' in the city, Ahmed had him transferred to the fortress of Abydos at Gallipoli. This was hailed as a triumph by the believers who along with Sabbatai himself still expected the final redemption to be just

around the corner. To them the fortress became known as ‘the Tower of Strength’, a reference to Proverbs 18.10.

The wider Jewish world

At this point it may be helpful to sketch the effect the dramatic happenings in Smyrna and Constantinople were having on the Jewish communities across Europe. Although by present-day standards news travelled slowly in the 17th century, there were nevertheless very close commercial ties between Smyrna and the European countries. Moreover, there were close links between the different Jewish communities, and often members of the same Jewish family might be found in say, Amsterdam, Venice, Salonika or the Levant. So reports of the proclamation of the Messiah in Smyrna began to reach most parts of Europe by October or November 1965. Before long the messianic awakening engulfed most of the continent, taking hold of the Jewish communities in Salonika, Leghorn, Venice, Hamburg and Amsterdam, and many other places. It also spread further afield to Morocco and the Yemen.

As pointed out earlier, the widespread embracing of the new movement was facilitated by its combination of traditional popular messianism and the Lurianic kabbalism that by then had penetrated scholarly circles. Nathan of Gaza spoke the same theological language as many of the leading rabbis. Nathan himself was a highly respected scholar. His call to repentance led to a deep penitential movement characterised by the severe mortifications described by Rycaut and Evelyn. As elsewhere, the movement was accompanied by outbreaks of mass prophesying which at the time lent credence to the new cause.

But, unlike the position in Constantinople, there was little official opposition within the Jewish communities. Rabbi Jacob Sasportas of Amsterdam, one of the movement’s most formidable opponents, conceded that the ‘rabble had the upper hand and only a few rabbis courageously supported me.’²⁷

The collapse

²⁷ Scholem, 1973, p. 476.

Sabbatai had been transferred to the fortress of Abydos in April 1666. The castle was used for detaining important political prisoners. While held there, Sabbatai was allowed the liberty to take ritual immersions in the sea and to ‘hold court’ to the thousands who came to visit him from all parts of the Turkish Empire and beyond even as far as Poland. For about four months it seemed to the believers that indeed Sabbatai was about to reign, and expectations reached a peak as the Ninth of Av approached. This was to be Sabbatai’s fortieth birthday. Sabbatai proclaimed this day to be no more a day of fasting but one of rejoicing because the Messiah had come. He had letters sent to this effect to the Balkan countries, Palestine and Egypt. Sarah, his wife who had been left behind in Smyrna now joined him in the castle, and Nathan the prophet was also expected to come from Gaza to the celebration. But it was shortly after the abolition of the fast of the Ninth of Av that another prophet was to see Sabbatai: R. Nehemiah Cohen. His visit was to have a disconcerting effect.

The circumstances surrounding Nehemiah’s visit are obscure. It seems that Nehemiah was a wandering charismatic from Poland who may have thought himself to be a messiah but in his case the Messiah of the House of Joseph. This messiah, according to Jewish apocalyptic expectation, as found, for example, in *'Othoth Mashiach* (Signs of the Messiah), would be the suffering messiah who would precede the Messiah of the House of David.²⁸ In his visit Nehemiah argued that Sabbatai could not be the Messiah of David, because the suffering messiah had not yet made his public appearance. Sabbatai refused to accept this argument but may well have been troubled by it.

Perhaps still more disturbing to him would have been the recollection that Abulafia, the 13th century mystic, who, as we have seen, may have had a formative influence on Sabbatai, had deliberately courted a martyr’s death as a corollary to his consciousness of being Messiah. Abulafia was clearly acting on the declaration made by Nachmanides in 1263 that:

... when the end of time will have arrived, the Messiah will go to the pope under the command of God and say, ‘Let my people go that they may serve Me,’ and until that time we will not say regarding him that he has arrived, for he is not [yet] the Messiah.²⁹

²⁸ A rabbinic tradition about ‘the killing of Messiah son of Joseph’ is also briefly referred to in the Babylonian Talmud at *bSuk.* 52a.

²⁹ Cited Idel, 1998, p. 61.

In 1280, on a journey to Rome, Abulafia sent in advance a request for an interview with Pope Nicholas III. The Pope gave orders that rather than being admitted to his presence Abulafia should be arrested on arrival in Rome and burnt to death outside the City. Abulafia was informed of these instructions but continued his journey notwithstanding. When he entered the city-gate, he learned that the Pope had suddenly died in the night.³⁰

The final dénouement came when in mid-September 1666 Sabbatai was transferred to the Sultan's Court at Adrianople where he was examined by a Privy Council with the Sultan watching through a latticed alcove. Sabbatai did not understand Turkish and asked for an interpreter; he was given the Sultan's physician, a Jew who had apostatised to Islam. On being examined by the Council, Sabbatai denied having entertained messianic claims or having had a share in the messianic agitations among the Jews. He was then given the choice of either converting to Islam or being tortured to death. The accounts vary as to the kind of death threatened. According to one account, the apostate physician described in gruesome detail the agonies Sabbatai would undergo when burning torches were tied to his body and he would slowly burn to death. Sabbatai forthwith signified his readiness to embrace Islam. The Sultan graciously accepted the new convert, and granted him an honorary appointment with a pension.

The ensuing collapse of the Sabbatean cause as a mainstream movement within Judaism was swift and inevitable. Sir Paul Rycaut in his *History of the Turkish Empire*, writing close to the time, commented:

The news that Sabatai had become a Turk and that the Messiah was now a Mahometan spread throughout Turkey. The Jews were extremely surprised at it, and ashamed of their easiness of belief, of the arguments with which they had persuaded others, and of the proselytes they had made in their own families. Abroad, they became the common derision of the towns where they inhabited ... So that this deceived people for a long time after remained with confusion, silence and dejection of spirit.³¹

A core of followers remained loyal to Sabbatai, and Nathan the Prophet justified Sabbatai's apostasy on the grounds that the Messiah must descend into the abyss of the *qelippoth* in order to overcome evil.³² Sabbatai was subsequently banished to Ulcinj on the coast of Montenegro, and died ten years later in 1676. His little band of followers

³⁰ For a fuller account, see Scholem, 1946, pp. 127-28.

³¹ Rycaut, p. 215.

³² Scholem, 1973, pp. 800-801.

became an underground sect, the Doenmeh, with increasingly antinomian practices, a remnant of whom could still be found in Salonika in the 1920s.

It is difficult at this remove in time to put one's finger on just where the flaw in Sabbatai's character lay. Was he an impostor all along? If so, what were his motivations? To indulge a tendency to exhibitionism? To bask in the adulation of his followers? Certainly these factors may well have come into play, but I am more inclined to believe that he had a sincere (but misconceived) messianic conviction arising from his mystical experiences. But he was lacking in moral fibre when put to the test, and so crumbled under pressure from the Sultan and the threat of torture and death. It is, however, unfair to compare a self-convinced messiah who seems to have had little perception of the need to suffer a cruel death with one for whom this was central to his calling, as was the case with Abulafia and pre-eminently with Jesus.

Sabbatai's significance

Believers in Jesus, gentile or Jewish, on first encountering this episode in Jewish history, may be surprised at the extent and persistence over the last two thousand years of a vibrant stream of mystical religion within Judaism. This would not be a false impression. Take a good general work on Judaism such as Dan Cohn-Sherbok's: in its thirty chapters dealing with Jewish history from the Jewish War with Rome up to the formation of the State of Israel there are no fewer than five chapters specifically devoted to the successive mystical movements.³³

While mysticism of any kind may be alien territory to many believers for whom 'evangelical' may be the label that best fits,³⁴ a closer investigation into the world of the Jewish mystics brings out some unexpected affinities. Two, in particular stand out. The first is a concern with what has gone wrong with God's world, and the second, a corollary, the importance attached to the figure of the Messiah and his role in bringing about, not simply national revival, but 'a cosmic process involving both the corporeal and spiritual components of reality'.³⁵

³³ Cohn-Sherbok, Chapters 34, 35, 36, 38, and 40.

³⁴ But not so alien to those, for example, who have been introduced to the Temple model of prayer, and the practice of 'Adoration' by meditating on the vision in Revelation 4-5; see Stibbe, pp. 127-50.

³⁵ Idel, 1998, p. 191.

So, one finds in Kabbalah generally that the fall of Adam, its cosmic effects, the need for reparation and for a restorative programme has become a major preoccupation, in effect displacing both the call of Abraham and the giving of the Law to Moses as the primary topics within Judaism. The messianic process envisaged for achieving restoration varied with the kind of Kabbalah and the individual personalities. With Abulafia, all depended on the mystical attainment of the individual: ‘someone may become Messiah, not because he is of Davidic descent … but because he is able to plug in the omnipresent and incessantly active supernal intellectual structure by means of acts of intellection and ecstasy.’³⁶ In Lurianic Kabbalism ‘the classic role of the Messiah was divided between the Messiah himself and the other messianic figures that pave the way for his advent by performing acts of *tiqqun*.’³⁷ Nathan proclaimed that in 1670 Sabbatai, in his ascent into the Divinity would present the Shekinah or *Malkuth* (Kingdom), the lowest *sephirah*, to *Kether* (Crown) the highest *sephirah*, so releasing the hidden light of ‘the Holy Ancient One’ to become manifest on earth. So the final act in the process of cosmic and human restoration would unfold.³⁸

Readers of the New Testament may be reminded of various passages that speak of or allude to a cosmic Messiah who is both the creator and restorer of all things, namely Jesus. The passage that most explicitly conveys these ideas is Colossians 1.15-20. Most scholars now agree that this passage is based on a very early Christian hymn which Paul has incorporated with some adaptation into his letter.³⁹ The hymn itself would seem to reflect Jewish reflection on Wisdom as the master worker in Proverbs 8.22-31 who assisted God in creating the universe, and the heavenly Son of Man figure found in Daniel 7.⁴⁰ Like Adam Qadmon of the Kabbalah, ***in him [Jesus] all things in heaven and on earth were created.*** The ‘all things’ include both spiritual beings and material things: ***things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers.*** And like the Messiah of the Jewish mystics, Jesus also came to bring restoration, both to

³⁶ Idel, 1998, pp. 93-94.

³⁷ Idel, 1998, p. 174.

³⁸ Scholem, 1973, pp. 270-71, 275-76.

³⁹ Dunn, pp. 83-87.

⁴⁰ Both concepts are brought together in the Son of Man figure of 1 Enoch, Book 2 (this part of 1 Enoch is to be dated probably towards the end of the 1st Century CE – see Isaac, pp. 6-7). For the Jewish background to the cosmic Christ praised in this hymn, see Dunn, pp. 88-92; Lohse, pp. 45-48. For the Jewish tradition of the ‘heavenly eschatological agent’, see van Kooten, pp. 88-95.

fallen human beings and the now flawed universe: *through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

It is the last phrase that stands out as marking the essential difference between Jesus and the mystic Messiah of the Kabbalah. It is Jesus, not Abulafia nor Sabbatai who is the entirely sinless one who died for the sin of the world: *Look, here is the Lamb of God!* (John 1.36).

Yet even here it is perhaps surprising to discover that in some cases the Jewish mystics did expect a messiah who would give his life in order to achieve redemption, as witness Abulafia and the prophet Nehemiah Cohen.⁴¹

Still more surprising is the fact that the followers of Sabbatai called themselves ‘believers’ and the significance of what lies behind this term. In his letter to Raphael Joseph, Nathan claimed of Sabbatai:

It is in his power to do as he pleases with the Israelite nation, to declare them righteous or ... guilty. He can justify the greatest sinner, and even if he be as Jesus, he may justify him. And whoever entertains doubts about him, though he may be the most righteous man in the world, he may punish him with great afflictions.⁴²

As Scholem points out, the ‘pure faith’ required here is the same as that extolled in the Gospels and contended for in Paul’s ‘justification by faith.’ Is this because of Christian influence? Scholem argues, ‘No’: ‘it is difficult to imagine how Christian doctrines could have come to Nathan’s knowledge.’ Instead, he suggests, not wholly convincingly, that the respective situations of the two movements were so similar that ‘the early Church and early Sabbateanism went similar ways.’⁴³

But perhaps the most surprising feature of this brief eruption of messianism in the mid-Seventeenth century was its widespread character. It swept through the Jewish world, from Yemen to Amsterdam, from Morocco to Poland, and in most Jewish communities for a time the ‘believers’ became the majority. Was this simply mass frenzy? The most sober rabbis were impressed by the penitence of the people as they

⁴¹ Another notable case is Shlomo Molkho, another Jewish mystic, who deliberately courted a martyr’s death and was burnt at the stake in 1532 (see Idel, 1998, pp. 144-52). But, because he was an ex-*converso*, it is not possible to rule out altogether some Christian influence on his Messianic beliefs and ensuing conduct.

⁴² Scholem, 1973, p. 272.

⁴³ Scholem, 1973, pp. 282-83.

awaited the rule of the Messiah. Scholars may make links with the preponderance of Lurianic Kabbalah among the rabbis, or the recent sufferings of the Jews in Poland, or, further back, the shock of the expulsion from Spain, but the simple fact is that Jews in their thousands were turning to a Messiah who offered both individual and cosmic restoration.

The irony is that these are the very things the Gospel holds forth: *we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God* (Romans 6.4; 8.21).

The tragedy is that for the Jews who followed Sabbatai Jesus was merely an example of an arch sinner such as was not beyond the power of Sabbatai to justify. In view of the Inquisition, the forced conversions, the expulsion from Spain, the massacres in Poland, to name but a few of the traumas carried in the Jewish psyche, we can hardly blame them for not looking for restoration in the right place.

But we who believe in this Jesus can be assured that the deep longings for redemption evidenced by the rise of Sabbatai will not have disappeared for ever. Such longings lie dormant within every human heart, but especially among the Jewish people whose religious heritage makes them more aware than most of God's great concern for his sin-ravaged world and for fallen humanity in all our helplessness.

In humility and, if we are gentiles, deep sorrow for the past, may we who have come to know Jesus as Messiah continue to strive to introduce his own people to 'the second Adam who to the fight and to the rescue came.'⁴⁴

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen. (Romans 11.36).

⁴⁴ From 2nd verse of the hymn 'Praise to the Holiest in the Height' by Cardinal J.H. Newman.

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