

Three Sixteenth-Century Jewish Messiahs

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Abstract

Messianic movements and their messianic claimants are surprisingly ubiquitous in Jewish history. The hypothesis is that these movements always show some influence from a previous form of mysticism and reach their expression and culmination in a renewed urgency for messianic activity. This article demonstrates that sixteenth-century messianic tensions, as an example of this phenomenon, repeatedly had their genesis in one or another system of mysticism. The deeper the mystical component, the more dramatic the messianism. The messianic claimant believes he has the power to speak to kings and popes and is convinced he has the means to immediately effect a change in the religious, political, and cosmic order. This investigation focuses on three sixteenth-century Jewish messiahs, Asher Lemlein, David Reuveni, and Shlomo Molcho. Each, as I show, was rooted in an earlier form of mysticism.

Keywords: Asher Lemlein; David Reuveni; Jewish messianic claimants; mysticism; Shlomo Molcho

Introduction

Judaism is well-known for its rejection of the Christian Messiah, yet throughout the ages, its people have ironically and persistently embraced multiple other messianic claimants and developed an intimate and complicated relationship with messianism and messiahs. From around the beginning of the Common Era until the present, there have been “several dozens of Jewish messiahs” (Lenowitz, n.d.). With the current resurgence in messianism in the religious Jewish world in general and in Chassidic movements like Chabad in particular, it may come as a surprise that this messianic rejuvenation is nothing new. Throughout Jewish history there has always been the belief held by significant numbers of the population, that they were on the cusp of a once-off, unprecedented, unique, and great eschatological event heralding the imminent arrival of an identifiable messiah. Understandably, these episodes have often been relegated to the footnotes of Jewish history and are not offered as subjects for study in courses on popular Judaism. This article deals with three pre-Lurianic¹ messiahs of the sixteenth century: the first two were Sefaradim² (Jews of Spanish, Portuguese, or Oriental extraction), one of whom was a black messiah, and the third was the first Ashkenazi messiah (a Jew of central European extraction).

As a literature study, the research methodology adopted in this investigation is both descriptive and evaluative. First, an empirical and historical description of the personalities and ideologies of these three messiahs and the milieu in which they lived and operated is presented. Then, based on demonstrable and evident emerging theological patterns, they are conceptually evaluated and reflected back to contemporary Judaism. Thus, I begin by presenting empirical evidence to confirm my basic hypothesis that mysticism leads to messianism. In this regard, my overall intention is to expose a persistent model which reflects: (1) mysticism serving as a precursor to the messianic awakening in all three; (2) a typically large following indicating communal acquiescence which the messiahs were able to garner; and (3) an endorsement and encouragement (tacit or otherwise) of their activities by respected rabbinic leadership. My evaluation of these phenomena, however, involves a theological conceptualisation, noting that these patterns are reflective of other (if not all) messianic claimants both pre and post-sixteenth century and still manifest actively today within a world largely unaware of their participation in a recurrent cycle. I also discuss the conceptualisation of false, failed, and potential messiahs.

The reason for the selection of three sixteenth-century messiahs is that they lived during a period of heightened mystical and kabbalistic awareness which may have contributed

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- 1 The mystical movement established by R. Yitzchak Luria (1534–1572) and his students in Safed, northern Israel. Both Yitzchak Luria and his student Chaim Vital were messiahs as well (Lenowitz, n.d.) but that is beyond the scope of this study.
 - 2 This term is usually rendered in English as “Sephardim” but I use the transliterated version “Sefaradim” based on the Hebrew: סִפְרָדִים.

to their sense of messianic immediacy (Biale 1984). The general relationship between mysticism and messianism is discussed by scholars but the notion that mysticism precedes every messianic claimant is something worthy of further investigation.

Gershom Scholem has convincingly shown that during the seventeenth century when the greatest messianic outbreak in Jewish history in the form of the Sabbatian movement took hold, the sixteenth-century Lurianic kabbalah had sown seeds so “highly charged with messianic tension” that it found its outlet and “discharge” just decades later in the rampant messianism of the Sabbatian movement (Scholem 1973, 8).³ I will show that, similarly, earlier forms of pre-Lurianic mysticism (including Zoharic, Abulafian, and other systems) had been the major influencing factors in the messianism of three rabbis, Asher Lemlein, David Reuveni, and Shlomo Molcho. As we shall see, each of these messiahs underwent an incubation period during which they were exposed in some manner to mystical teachings. By exposing these patterns in the three sixteenth-century messiahs, as exemplars of this hypothesis, I demonstrate that, certainly within Judaism, mysticism is a major precursor to messianism. The more esoteric the mysticism the more pressing the messianism.

The Mystical Pivot Point of the Sixteenth Century

The expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal in 1492 and 1497, respectively, and the ensuing exile, had created a widespread sense of mystical and messianic urgency. This was a departure from the style of the earlier Zoharic kabbalists, from the thirteenth century onwards, who generally did not try to relate their mysticism to current worldly events nor try to spread their teachings to the wider Jewish population. These earlier kabbalists “worked in small circles, exchanging manuscripts and passing on their esoteric teachings to a few initiates” (Biale 1984, 314).

However, a new stage in the development of Jewish mysticism can be said to have begun in the sixteenth century. Now the focus turned from small private circles discussing what Scholem suggests should rather be termed theosophy (the theoretical contemplations of God) instead of mysticism to a blatant mysticism and outward messianism in the full gaze of the popular society. Biale views the crisis following the expulsions of 1492 as the main reason for this pivot in Jewish mysticism. He writes that “[t]his shift was a clear consequence of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain” (Biale 1984, 314).

3 Not all scholars, however, agree with Scholem on the pivotal role Lurianic kabbalah played in formulating Sabbatian kabbalah. The other dissenting views are addressed in Michal (2022, 103–39) and my tendency to support Scholem, albeit with some modification, is explained in Michal (2022, 27–136).

Moshe Idel, however, contends this notion which he calls the “crisis theory.” He argues that if that were the case, then “we would have expected that the Spanish exiles themselves would have been inundated with messianic candidates” (Idel 1998a, 140). But we know that that was not the case. Idel is convinced that this messianism originated instead “among the Ashkenazi communities of central Europe and northern Italy” (Idel 1998a, 152).

Whether the influences were Spanish or Italian, the sixteenth century heralded great changes in the world of Jewish mysticism and can be considered a major tipping point in that it shaped much of future Judaism as it moved yet further away from Maimonidean rationalism and closer towards practical, political, and even theurgical mysticism. It is against this backdrop that we now turn to Asher Lemlein.

Rabbi Asher Lemlein Reutlingen (fl. 1500)—The First Ashkenazi Messiah

Until the sixteenth century and prior to the expulsions from Spain and Portugal,⁴ the earlier messianic claimants were Sefaradim.⁵ The first Ashkenazi⁶ messiah was Asher Lemlein (Reutlinger) who was active in Italy. He was the first messiah to appear after the expulsions, and yet he makes no mention at all of the crisis of exile, lending support for Idel’s view mentioned above. Lemlein displayed “virulent anti-Sephardic tendencies and ... had been in a sharp dispute with Sephardi Kabbalists” (Idel 1998a, 140). He, therefore, had no place for the Zohar which was produced centuries earlier in Spain. But he was still interested in other forms of mysticism and devoted himself to the study of older Heichalot mystical literature from talmudic times, and was deeply influenced by the extreme “prophetic” mysticism of Avraham Abulafia.

It may be suggested, contra Idel, that perhaps Lemlein’s strange antagonism towards the Sefaradim was the reason he did not mention the expulsion crisis. Notwithstanding, the crisis may still have implicitly engendered the popular trend towards messianism in the sixteenth century as per Biale.⁷

4 I have referred to the expulsions from Spain and Portugal as if the expulsions were technically similar and parallel, as they are usually depicted. Research by Andrée Aelion Brooks (2002), however, reveals that in Portugal, an expulsion order only existed on paper and Jews were, instead, restricted from leaving Portugal, having to undergo forced conversions.

5 Jews of Spanish or Portuguese extraction.

6 Jews of central European, particularly German and northern French extraction.

7 Idel does not even seem to be absolutely convinced of the certainty of his argument because he writes, “It *appears* that messianic agitation did not arise in the main centers of Sephardic populations [of Italy—GM]” (Idel 1998a, 141). Italics are mine for emphasis. But Idel does make the point that there is no real evidence of messianism in the immediate aftermath of the expulsion “if the 1520s and 1530s, unlike the years immediately following the expulsion, are marked by messianism, it is logical

But it was more than just the crisis of the expulsions alone that affected the people. Gedalya Ibn Yachya (1526–1587), an early Jewish chronicler, shows that Jewish society was not always cohesive. He writes:

I heard that the Roman Jews approached the pope with an offer of 1000 gold crowns to bar Spanish Jews from entering Rome. This was due to their fear of making themselves loathsome in the eyes of the town's noble courtiers. This angered the pope, and he asked them how they could treat their brethren so cruelly. (*Shalsholet haKabbalah* MS 209v)⁸

I am inclined towards the view that the expulsions, persecutions, and subsequent internal societal insecurities did account for the popularisation of mysticism during that century because it gave cosmic significance to suffering, and acted as a cathartic redemptive literature. Also, the emergence of the various mystical schools of Safed, largely composed of Spanish exiles, indicate that this mysticism was a consequence of the expulsions. The Safed mystics included Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570), Yitzchak Luria (1534–1572), and even sober jurists like Yosef Karo (1488–1575) who were all deeply steeped in mysticism and mystical practices which led to messianic imaginations, to the extent that “one can hardly imagine Safed mysticism without its strong messianic flavor” (Biale 1984, 319).

In whichever way one chooses to view the causes of sixteenth-century mysticism and messianism, one thing is clear: its many messianic claimants, including its first, Asher Lemlein, were all steeped in mysticism, particularly that of Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291). This is in line with Idel’s view that there was a “nexus between messianism and mysticism that has been exposed in Abulafia's writings” (Idel 1998a, 140).

Lemlein had studied Abulafia’s mysticism which was perhaps the most extreme form of Jewish mysticism ever to be produced. It is known as “prophetic” or “ecstatic” kabbalah: “No Jewish mystic has been associated more with the idea and experience of *unio mystica* than Abraham Abulafia” (Afterman 2016, 151).

Significantly, Abulafia himself, as a consequence of his own mysticism, fell prey to the idea that he too was the messiah (Idel 1998b, 500 n. 21). Abulafia’s mystical ideas were treated, cautiously and intentionally withheld from the public, even by other kabbalists. This mysticism was so radical that it caused Abulafia and his followers to “lead an underground life” because of “a clash between the mystical revelation and that of Mount Sinai” (Scholem 1941, 125).

to suppose that at least there was a certain merger of preexpulsion Spanish messianism and Ashkenazi messianism, which has no visible links to the act of expulsion from Spain” (Idel 1998a, 142).

8 Russian State Library in Moscow, Ginzburg collection no. 652, MS 209v. Translation from David (1996, 53).

At the start of the sixteenth century, there were numerous rabbinic predictions as to the year of the messiah's arrival, with Yitzchak Abravanel predicting 1503, and Avraham Zacuto predicting 1504. There was also a prediction for the year 1500. Rabow (2002) suggests that Lemlein may have had his redemptive aspirations ignited, growing up as he did, in a milieu filled with multiple messianic predictions. In 1500, while still a young student, he declared himself to be the prophet Elijah whose task it is to introduce the messiah. On the condition that the Jews repent, he set 1502 as the date for the messiah to reveal himself. That year became known to Jews as well as some Christians as "The Year of Redemption."

Lemlein managed to attract a wide following that was not just localised in Italy but spread throughout Europe. He secluded himself in a room within a room and performed "miracles." An example of just how seriously people took Lemlein is illustrated by an incident recorded by David Gans (1541–1613), known as the *Tzemach David*, a disciple of R. Yehuda Loew of Prague, the famed Maharal of Prague (d. 1609) concerning David's grandfather Zlickman Gans. His grandfather intentionally destroyed his oven used for baking Passover *matzot* (unleavened bread) saying: "Without a doubt, next year we will bake our *matzot* in our holy land" (Hamburger 1989, 101).⁹

There is some disagreement as to whether Lemlein called himself the messiah or was just his proclaiming or announcing prophet: "Sometimes, a messiah denies the title or seems ambivalent about its application, but that is tantamount to taking the title" (Lenowitz, n.d.).

According to David Gans, he just claimed to be the messianic *Mevaser* (Proclaimer). Even though, from a strategic point of view, he may not have called himself the messiah, lest he fails, nevertheless, through his students and followers he managed to bring "the masses of the House of Israel, to believe personally in him" (Hamburger 1989, 107).¹⁰

According to the sharp condemnation by Yosef haCohen (1496–1575), author of *Emek haBacha*, Lemlein was "insane and a foolish prophet" (haCohen 1895, 109).¹¹ Nevertheless, *Emek haBacha* acknowledges that "the Jews were drawn in their masses towards him and said 'Even if he is only a prophet, God has sent him to lead his nation of Israel and to gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth,'" (haCohen 1895, 109).¹²

9 My translation.

10 My translation.

11 My translation.

12 My translation.

However, according to Lemlein's townsman and colleague, Avraham Farissol (c. 1451–1525/6), the author of *Magen Avraham*, he was the messiah and the messiah, therefore, had already arrived.¹³ The Lemlein messianic movement was centred in Venice:

where the Jews ignored their businesses and regular affairs and devoted much of the year to fasting and public self-flagellation. ... When 1502 passed without the messiah, the Jews were devastated ... [M]any of Lemlein's Venetian followers underwent baptism and conversion to Christianity. (Rabow 2002, 58)

Asher Lemlein thus presents us with a pattern that was to be repeated by the other messianic claimants of the sixteenth century. Intense involvement in mysticism feeds the need for not just personal but national (and cosmic) redemption and this leads to messianic aspirations.

Asher Lemlein was our first exemplar of how mysticism begets messianism. We now turn to the next messiah, David Reuveni.

Rabbi David Reuveni (1490–1535)¹⁴—The Only Black Jewish Messianic Claimant

No one is quite sure where the adventurer, traveller, and kabbalist (mystic) David Reuveni was born. Nor are we sure of his true name and identity. Weisberger describes him as “one of the most bizarre and still-unexplained characters in Jewish history” (2019, n.p.). Scholars disagree as to Reuveni's origins. According to *Shalsholet haKaballah*, David Reuveni was “a man of dark complexion, like an African” (Ibn Yachya 1962, 112) and only spoke Hebrew and Arabic. When he visited Portugal, he needed an interpreter, which eliminates the possibility that he was born in Portugal. Birnbaum (1958) places Reuveni's birth at the harbour city of Cranganore on the Malabar Coast of India. Jews have a two-thousand-year history in India. Other accounts suggest that Reuveni was born in Afghanistan, where the local people still refer to a folk hero called Daoud Roubani. Jews have also had a long history in Afghanistan. Moti Benmelech, however, cautions us to be aware that “many scholars have been unable to define the limits between reality and imagination in the episode nor to discern the purpose and attitude of the mysterious traveller whose identity is still unknown” (2011, 36).

Reuveni, by his own account, said that he was born in Habor¹⁵—perhaps identical to the Khaybar in central Arabia—which was inhabited and ruled by Jews (Jacobs 1906). He introduced himself as “a Jew from the wilderness of Habor, [and part of]¹⁶ an envoy

13 *Magen Avraham*, ch. 24.

14 Some accounts put his death at 1541.

15 Possibly as in I Chronicles 5:26.

16 Square brackets are mine.

sent by the seventy Elders” (Aescoly 1993, 31–33). Thus Reuveni, whose diary is held in the Bodleian Library in Oxford,¹⁷ claimed that he was the representative of his brother Joseph, the king of Khaybar and that this independent Jewish kingdom, in the middle of the Arabian desert, had 300 000 Jewish subjects. The Hebrew of the diary is unlike any other Hebrew and Verskin (2013, Notes on the Translation, n.p.) assumes it was designed to “represent the native Hebrew spoken in his invented Jewish kingdom in Arabia.”

David Reuveni had a grand scheme to convince three Christian rulers to create an alliance with his brother, the king of Khaybar, to conquer the Moslems. Marranos and Conversos,¹⁸ particularly, would be encouraged to serve in this army which would eventually free the Jews living in the Holy Land from Moslem rule. Weisberger refers to this alliance as a “joint Jewish-Christian crusade” (2019, n.p.).

Reuveni, the kabbalist and mystic, engaged in this mission because he believed that the nation of Israel was soon to be redeemed and that the Ottoman Turks had to be expelled from the land of Israel. However, for this messianic redemption to take place, Pope Clement had to come on board and assist. Reuveni set off for Rome where he arrived riding upon a white horse and was surprisingly well-received by the pope. He told the pope about the Jewish kingdom in Arabia and that they lived near the legendary Sambation River. He brought letters of reference from influential people who claimed to verify his statements (Sherlock-Taselaar 2009).

This is what Reuveni told the pope:

I am David, the son of the late King Solomon¹⁹ and my brother King Joseph is older than I, and he sits on his throne in the desert of Habor and rules over three hundred thousand people, over the people of Gad, the people of Reuben and half the tribe of Manasseh. I travelled from before the King, my brother, and his counsellors, the seventy Elders and they commanded me to first go to Rome and seek an audience with His Holiness the Pope. (Sherlock-Taselaar 2009, 135)

Although the pope was sympathetic to Reuveni, he declined to get involved in the messianic mission, and instead referred him to the king of Portugal, who also happened to be related to the influential emperor Charles V (who had married the Portuguese king’s sister). This connection promised to be a potentially powerful and widespread alliance. Rebekka Voss considers Emperor Charles, with his claim to universal monarchy, to have been a hero to the Jews because he meshed well with their eschatological aspirations at that time:

17 Ms. Heb. f. 14.

18 The terms *Marranos* and *Conversos* refer to baptised Jews suspected of secret adherence to Judaism.

19 Not to be confused with the biblical King Solomon.

Jewish witnesses of Charles's reign perceived the Catholic emperor and his politics of crusade and church reform [favourably],²⁰ contextualizing their reactions within Jewish messianic thought, on the one hand, and political realism, on the other. (Voss 2016, 82)

Emperor Charles thus emerges as a protagonist for both Jews and Christians. Taking their cue from the Christians, Jews tended to “identify Charles V as the glorious universal monarch who would reign at the culmination of human history as a quasi-messianic figure” (Voss 2016, 81). Initially, King Joao (John) of Portugal agreed to Reuveni's plan and even offered him eight ships and 4000 cannons. He thought the Jewish kingdom would be a strategic ally against Selim I, the sultan of the Ottoman Empire who had conquered Egypt and disrupted the spice trade. The Muslims were a convenient enemy because:

The Ottoman sultan threatened to invade the heartland of Christian Europe, and indeed he would reach Vienna—the capital of Habsburg Austria—for the first time in 1529. (Voss 2016, 83)

The glorification of Emperor Charles as the “Last World Emperor” represented “Christian apocalyptic thought” which had dominated “throughout the medieval Latin West” (Voss 2016, 84). The Portuguese King Joao, on the other hand, was reluctant to openly engage with Jews as officially his policy was one of persecuting Marranos. As it happened, during the period of negotiations, the Portuguese king did not prosecute any Marranos—this was a result of pressure and influence from David Reuveni.

Reuveni's intended destination for the ships he hoped to secure was the port of Jeddah (Benmelech 2011). The problem was, however, that Reuveni had now apparently declared himself the messiah. There is some debate as to whether he actually declared himself the messiah or whether his followers, especially the crypto-Jews in Portugal, simply regarded him as the messiah (Sherlock-Taselaar 2009). Either way, Reuveni had garnered massive support from the Marrano/Converso community and the Portuguese king feared a popular uprising. For that reason, Reuveni was eventually asked to leave Portugal (Sherlock-Taselaar 2009). The Conversos did indeed play an important role during the 1520–1521 popular Revolt of the Comuneros against the Spanish monarchy. Reuveni's expulsion did not curtail his continued strategy to form his alliance with the Christian world to liberate Jerusalem by expelling the Moslems.

Benmelech attempts to understand these events in light of the “messianic arousal and activities among Jews at that point in history” so soon after the expulsions from Spain and Portugal, but significantly for this study, he also points to the “deep influence that Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi, the famous Jerusalem Kabbalist and messianic propagandist, had on Ha-Reuveni” (Benmelech 2011, 37).

20 Square brackets are mine.

The Jerusalem kabbalist, Abraham Halevi, had written on two occasions about messianic redemption predicted to take place close to Mecca in Gadya (Jeddah?) in 1522 (Benmelech 2011). This, again, corresponds to my hypothesis concerning the pattern of the radical relationship between mysticism and messianism.

Remarkably for a rabbi: “Ha-Levi was aware of religious developments in the Christian camp in the forms of the Christian Kabbalah, and he attributed, for example, an eschatological significance to Martin Luther's reform” (Idel 1998a, 134).

Abraham Halevi's kabbalistic position shows surprising correspondence with the view of Calabrian abbot Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202) for whom Emperor Charles, as the “Last Emperor,” represented the final stage of world history. According to Joachim, all of history was divided into three phases paralleling the Trinity. The phase of the Father was the period of the Old Testament, followed by the phase of the Son which was the New Testament, and the third phase of the Spirit, or religious revival, would be ushered in by the “Last Emperor.” However, the Christian golden age would commence only “after both defeating the Muslim infidels and reforming the church” (Voss 2016, 85).

Such an eschatological position would have been conveniently expedient to a kabbalist like Abraham Halevi and his student, David Reuveni. Since the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in around AD 70, and particularly after Rome adopted Christianity in the fourth century, the Jews considered the biblical Edom to represent both Rome and Christianity. Genesis 25:23 describes the destruction of Edom where “the might shall pass from one regime to the other, and the elder shall serve the younger.” For that to be fulfilled, Christianity would have to collapse, and the Protestant Reformation represented that fragmentation. Emperor Charles's involvement in the “events that were highly charged in messianic terms—the Reformation and wars with the Ottomans” turned him into a hero for the Jews (Voss 2016, 89).

This extreme mystification of the geopolitics by Jews and Christians created the spiritual environment for Reuveni's messianism to flourish. Once the cosmic order was conjured, all hitherto intractable boundaries were likely to become blurred. Yet Benmelech (2011) points out that Reuveni was more focused on preparing for redemption by political rather than “magical” means. In a technical sense, perhaps one could say that Reuveni inspired more of a millenarianism (militaristic and political) movement than a messianic (eschatological) one. This may tie in with Reuveni's claim in his diary that “I am not the Messiah ... I am not a kabbalist, neither am I a prophet ... I am merely an army commander.” Adolf Poznanski, however, points out that Reuveni loved “boasting about his humility,” and anyway, despite his denials, the Jews still regarded him as the messiah (Verskin 2013, Introduction). Nevertheless, even if we take Reuveni at his word, one could still say that eschatology and mysticism provided the backdrop for the militaristic means through which the messianic movement was to find its fulfilment.

Benmelech writes:

I have presented Ha-Reuveni as the product of the messianic “pressure cooker” created by Halevi ... The central innovation in this model is the conception of the historical and political situation as the arena for messianic drama and the focusing of messianic activity on this arena in particular, so that there would be no forbidden (magical, mystical, or metaphysical) intervention in the messianic process itself but only in its background. (Benmelech 2011, 60)

This notion of a “pressure cooker” effect from a pre-existing mystical ideology is another example of mysticism exerting some incubation consequence on the messianism that usually follows in its wake.

Let us now turn our attention to another character who formed a “messianic duo” together with David Reuveni, namely Shlomo Molcho.

Rabbi Shlomo Molcho (1501–1532)—A Martyr Acclaimed by the Rabbinic Elite

During the short period of respite, while the Portuguese king was negotiating with David Reuveni, a certain Converso, named Diego Pires, suddenly surfaced on the messianic scene. Diego Pires had been greatly influenced by David Reuveni’s presence in Portugal, and he decided to return to his original Jewish roots. Not only did he do that but he was later to declare himself the messiah as well—the third messiah in just 30 years.

Diego Pires then changed his name to Shlomo Molcho (Sherlock-Taselaar 2009). This was no accident because the names Shlomo (Solomon who built the temple) and Molcho (melech = king) both indicate universal messianic aspirations. David Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho became friends; together they engaged in the study of mysticism and were filled with a spirit of messianism.

Rachel Elijor finds convergence between the messianism of David Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho which followed soon after the expulsions of 1492, and the dissemination of the foundational mystical work known as the *Zohar* (first published around 1290). This way both Elijor and Benmelech note some form of mysticism as a catalytic agent for this messianism.²¹

21 For Elijor, the catalyst was the classical work on Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*—for Benmelech, it was the Jerusalem kabbalist, Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi (at least in Reuveni’s case). Both support my hypothesis of mysticism as a precursor to messianism (Michal 2022).

The “revelation” of the Zohar in the late medieval period was considered by the [Spanish and Portuguese]²² exiles and their followers as a significant expression of the emergence of eschatological times The traumatic historical event of the Expulsion was perceived in the first few decades of the sixteenth century as the foundation and background for the coming redemption, since the events were interpreted as pre-messianic tribulations ... which would culminate in the inevitable coming of the Messiah, delivered from heaven through the study of the Zohar. (Elior 2004, 15)

After the vicissitudes of the inquisitions and expulsions, the victims and exiles believed that the intellectual and cerebral acts of study of the mystical *Zohar* now became the means through which messianic redemption could play itself out, if not bring it sooner. It is no surprise, therefore, to see that Shlomo Molcho was well associated with mystics, again pointing to the relationship between mysticism and messianism.

Shlomo Molcho was born in Portugal in 1501 to a noble family of Conversos. At 22, he became the official scribe to King Emanuel I of Portugal. After being inspired by David Reuveni, he travelled to Salonica where he joined the yeshivah²³ of Yosef Taitazak, known as the Maharitats.²⁴ According to Aryeh Kaplan, the Maharitats was influenced by the extreme esotericism of Abulafia (1240–1291) and similarly became one of the most mystical of all the kabbalists of the generation. He made generous use of amulets and magic squares. Idel, on the other hand, proposes that Taitazak’s “precise relationship to Kabbalah is as yet unclear,” but he does agree that he may have had access to various “messianic-visionary works.” Idel suggests that Taitazak may not have been a “Kabbalist in the full sense of the word,” yet he acknowledges that he was actively involved with “angelic revelations.” Even Idel’s cautionary framing of Taitazak’s kabbalistic component still allows for my hypothesis that “some form of mysticism” served a typical embryonic function resulting in a nascent messianism. Still, concerning Molcho himself, Idel states in no uncertain terms that “the connection between mystical revelation and messianism is abundantly clear” (Idel 1998a, 145).

The Maharitats was also regarded as an authoritative legalist or talmudist,²⁵ with Yosef Karo acknowledging his erudition. Besides Shlomo Molcho, another well-known student of the Maharitats was the mystic Shlomo Alkabetz (1500–1576) who composed *Lecha Dodi*.²⁶ Later Shlomo Molcho journeyed to Turkey where he met Shlomo Alkabetz as well as Yosef Karo. Molcho was thus associated with very mystical circles,

22 Square brackets are mine.

23 Religious or ecclesiastic seminary.

24 *Maharitats* is the acronym for **M**oreinu **ha**Rav **Y**osef **T**aitazak.

25 A talmudist is a master scholar of the Talmud, the body of Jewish legal and traditional law. The Talmud comprises both a Babylonian (in Aramaic) and Palestinian version (in Hebrew), originating during the early centuries of the common era. Rabbinic Judaism as practiced today is essentially based on the Babylonian Talmud, which later became codified (particularly in the *Shulchan Aruch* of R. Yosef Karo).

26 The liturgical poem recited at the onset of the Sabbath.

which inevitably lead him to a heightened state of messianic expectation (Benmelech 2016).

Although Yosef Karo authored perhaps the most authoritative code of Jewish law, known as the *Shulchan Aruch*, he was, as his diary (entitled *Magid Meisharim*) attests, also extremely involved in esoteric mysticism. The journal was compiled over fifty years of nocturnal visits from what he said was a *magid* or angelic being also called the “Mishna.” Karo’s journal reveals that he was far from being just a dry and sober jurist as he is often perceived to have been (Brody 2011).

Molcho started giving fiery speeches encouraging his audiences to do actions which would hasten the coming of the messiah. Interestingly, both Jews and Christians—including members of the Christian clergy—attended his talks (Ruderman 1992). As a result of his stirring teachings, many Conversos were inspired to return to Judaism. Shlomo Molcho, like his “partner” David Reuveni, also met with Pope Clement who permitted him to give public talks in Rome on the proviso that they were not anti-Christian.

Some Jews, who were unhappy with Molcho’s emphasis on messianism, informed on him to the Inquisition. His main Jewish opponent was Doctor Yakov Mantino who tried to have Molcho arrested and brought to trial by the Inquisition for, being a former Converso, the sin of converting back to Judaism. Ironically, Molcho was protected by the pope who hid him, and the wrong man was burned at the stake instead of him (Benmelech 2016).

Shlomo Molcho wrote a book called *Sefer haMefoar* which was a collection of his lectures, mainly from his time in Italy. It has many kabbalistic and messianic references. There are 22 essays on the topic of redemption in accordance with the secrets of kabbalah. He mentions that he is reluctant to publish the work because he is aware of its controversial nature. This pattern is typical of mystics who indulge in esoteric kabbalah, become messianically inspired, and then need to hide their eschatological aspirations (Michal 2022). Nevertheless, *Sefer haMefoar* was eventually published in Salonica in 1527 during the author’s lifetime.

Shlomo Molcho predicted that the messiah would appear in the year 1540. The Jewish Museum of Prague has some items on display which belonged to him. Molcho had the unusual custom of carrying a flag around with him wherever he went. It was a flag similar to that of the Maccabees, which contained the acronym for “Maccabee”: *Mi Kamocha BaEilim Hashem* (Who is like You God among the gods?). This flag was also

incorporated into his signature. His unique *tzitzit* (ritual fringed garment) with dyed green²⁷ strings has disappeared over time.

Just how seriously some halakhic leaders took Shlomo Molcho can be seen from the fact that he is quoted by the legalist Avraham Abele Gombinger (c. 1635–1682), known as the *Magen Avraham*²⁸ regarding his view on the number of windings on the *tzitzit* (10, 5, 6, and 5 which correspond through gematria [numerology] to the name of God, ה ,ו ,ה ,')—a custom followed by some Sefaradim to this day (Green and Kahn 2011). Gershon Shaul Yom-Tov Lipmann (1579–1654), known as the *Tosafot Yom Tov*, in his commentary on Asher ben Yechiel (1250–1327), known as the *Rosh*, also mentions this and says that he saw the actual *tzitzit* belonging to Shlomo Molcho in the Pinchas Synagogue in Prague. This is further evidence that Molcho was well acquainted with and even quoted by highly respected and authoritative halakhists. This pattern of messianic claimants and their brushing with respected rabbinic leadership was similarly and typically to be repeated in many other instances of future messianic endeavours (Kahana 2012), particularly during the time of the seventeenth-century messianic claimant, Shabbatai Tzvi, whose Sabbatian movement was supported by some of the leading figures of the rabbinic world, even many decades after his apostasy to Islam in 1666 (Scholem 1973).

The David Reuveni and Shlomo Molcho “messianic duo” continued for some time until, while in Italy, they quarrelled and each went their own way. Eventually, David Reuveni was arrested and taken to Spain where he died in prison, probably after being poisoned. Shlomo Molcho had suggested to Emperor Charles that he convert to Judaism to fit in with the messianic scheme, but the emperor was not impressed and had him arrested. The pope, who had a good relationship with Shlomo Molcho, was unable to intervene this time because of a personal feud he had with Emperor Charles. Shlomo Molcho was then burned at the stake at the age of 31, in Mantua, Italy, on the fifth day of the Hebrew month of Tevet.

Shlomo Molcho died with the knowledge that his name was known to almost every Jew, king, rabbi, and pope in his generation. Many of his teachings went on to influence future generations of kabbalists as well. He is regarded by many as a *kadosh* or martyr. Yosef Karo said that he envied Molcho’s death. As is often the case with such personalities, even after his death many of his followers believed that he did not really die (Weisberger 2019).

However, not all rabbis endorsed Molcho in such glowing terms. R. Chaim Vital (1543–1620), the foremost student of the great kabbalist Yitzchak Luria, rebuked Molcho for

27 Reference to the colour green is often used by messianic kabbalists (see Saperstein and Marcus 2015). When Shabbatai Tzvi went to meet the sultan, he was afraid to wear a green belt, the Muslim colour of distinction forbidden to Jews (Liebes 1993).

28 Not to be confused with the earlier reference to the work of Farissol by the same name.

having a so-called angelic being as a teacher and abusing mysticism for his messianic pretensions.

Another rabbi who also adopted an open and forthright critical approach to Molcho is Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo (1591–1655) of Crete, known as the Yashar miKandia. He does not hesitate to mock Molcho and his “supposed Kabbalistic powers.” Delmedigo refers to Molcho as a *shoteh* (fool) (Weisberger 2019, n.p.).

Conceptualisations of a Messiah in Judaism

Alan Verskin (2013) writes²⁹ that he was cautioned against using the term “false messiah” because “it makes an epistemological claim that historians should not make.” Paweł Maciejko similarly regards the term as a “poorly constructed concept” and an “obvious oxymoron.” He succinctly suggests that “claims that a particular messianic pretender was false according to set criteria should be studied by scholars; they should not be made by them” (Maciejko 2017, xv).

I agree with both Verskin and Maciejko, but I would like to consider the term “failed” or “false” messiah within a Jewish theological context, where—in its binary conceptualisation³⁰ of the messianic idea—if the world continues without alteration after the advent of a messianic claimant, then, technically, that individual was not the messiah. Yet I hear Maciejko’s censure that:

Even if we argue (and this is a risky proposal) that in the course of the historical development of the Jewish religion, all Jews have accepted some universal standards of messiahship (such as Maimonides’s Laws Pertaining to the Messiah), such standards are not operative categories of scholarship but rather its subjects. (Maciejko 2017, xv)

Perhaps, then, the only way to proceed is to step out of the world of empirical scholarship and conclude by conceptualising from within the point of view of Judaism, donning the hat of a rabbi, as it were, and considering the term “false messiah.” This is not an easy task because, as we have seen, even important rabbis like Yosef Karo refused to acknowledge any “falseness” in Shlomo Molcho, for example.

This position of Yosef Karo is further buoyed by traditionalists who believe that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with “good” false messiahs because, like scientific experiments, one has to fail many times before getting it right (Steinsaltz Center 2012). The messianic claimant is therefore not held accountable, as his intentions were good—

29 In his Acknowledgements at the beginning of his book.

30 I refer here to the *mystical* conceptualisation of the purpose of the messiah. Maimonides, the father of Jewish rationalism, developed a notion of a *natural* messiah (Michal 2022) which is beyond the scope of this article. For more on the general distinctions between Jewish mysticism and rationalism, see Slifkin (2012).

and perhaps under different circumstances things could have turned out better. There is even a Hasidic analogy that compares *meshichei hasheker* or *false messiahs* to someone who has to wake up a sick person from time to time to prevent him from falling into a coma. So too the Jewish people have to be awakened from time to time to keep the messianic dream alive (Steinsaltz Center 2012).

Ironically, support for this may be found in Maimonides's *Iggeret Teiman* (Letter to Yemen, which also referenced another messianic claimant) where he decries those who try to predict or calculate the time of the arrival of the messiah. Yet, surprisingly for a rationalist, Maimonides selectively supports one such enterprise by Rav Saadia Gaon (882–942) who did just that. Maimonides writes:

As for R. Saadia's Messianic calculations, there are extenuating circumstances for them though he knew they were disallowed. For the Jews of his time were perplexed and misguided ... He believed, in all earnestness, that by means of the Messianic calculations, he would inspire the masses with hope for the truth. Verily all his deeds were for the sake of heaven. (Maimonides 1173)³¹

Another common explanation is that there has to be a potential messiah in every generation so that a candidate, so to speak, is always waiting in the wings. In this sense, not every messiah is a false messiah but rather a necessary and potential messiah. This was the view of the later Sabbatians (Goldish 2004).

On the other hand, I would argue that one could take the position that a false messiah is just that—a false messiah—especially when considering the physical, emotional, and theological turmoil that always followed in the wake of such messianic claimants. Lenowitz (n.d.) points out that some of these “Messiah events ... have resulted in colossal shockwaves still traveling through the great ocean of western humanity.” In fairness, if all these false messiahs, themselves, had rather claimed to be potential messiahs, then one could accept all the oft-repeated explanations offered for their failure. The problem is that they didn't. They all claimed to be the messiah.

Relevance

Besides my hypothesis that mysticism always leads to messianism, I have drawn attention to the relationship between these mystical messiahs and the recognised contemporary rabbinic leadership, as well as the huge following these messiahs drew from among the masses. In this study alone, we saw that Asher Lemlein garnered support from the “masses of the House of Israel.” David Reuveni had so much support from his people that the king feared a popular uprising. And Shlomo Molcho's fame encompassed most of the Jewish world at that time. As part of the conceptual

31 *Iggeret Teiman* 12.

framework, mass participation and approval are common affirming mechanisms in Judaism that go back to the biblical image of the people gathered together and united at Sinai. In contemporary Judaism, the notion of the *tzibur* or community is elevated to a status worthy of trust and emulation.

This pattern incorporating these three phenomena (mysticism leading to messianism, rabbinic association with the claimant, and mass participation) allows for the normalisation of unfulfilled messianism, to the extent that there is typically a wide acceptance of the messianic claimant by the populace, often even in the immediate wake of another unsuccessful messiah, as we saw with Molcho and Reuveni.

The reason for the popular acceptance of messianic claimants may be attributed to:

When people are committed to a belief and a course of action, clear disconfirming evidence may simply result in deepened conviction and increased proselyting. (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956, 12)

The more one utterly invests in an idea (especially a spiritual or religious concept or construct) and the more one is prepared to sacrifice for that same notion, the more resilient and steadfast one becomes in the face of any real evidence to the contrary. No hard data in the world will change the mind of one who has undergone such a process. Instead of abandoning the original set of beliefs, one often doubles down and holds them to be even stronger and truer, because “it may even be less painful to tolerate the dissonance than to discard the belief and admit one had been wrong” (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956, 27).

In contemporary Judaism, this unfulfilled messianic history is often overlooked. At a time when a renewed messianism is once again rife across the board and on so many levels, it is important to realise that as popular as current messianic movements are, this is not the first time the Jewish world has been caught up in the fervour of *Ikveta deMeshicha* (messianic birth pangs). Of course, this does not take away from the basic principle of the messiah within Judaism—but, if history is a precedent, then neither a confirming and foundational mystical theology, nor respectable rabbinic endorsement and approbation, nor mass followings, are ever good indications of immediate messianic redemption.

Conclusion

I set out to demonstrate how a pattern of mysticism of some form—be it classical Heichalot, Zoharic, Abulafian esotericism, theosophy, theurgy, Spanish or Ashkenazic kabbalah, or any adaption thereof—appears to always leave its fingerprints on an active emergent messianism. For the backdrop to this discussion, I chose the sixteenth century and its three main Jewish messiahs because that century was pivotal in the shaping of future Judaism as it moved further from Maimonidean rationalism toward mysticism. It

was no accident that the largest Jewish messianic movement, Sabbatianism, was to emerge less than a century later. The pattern, though, is always the same. Mysticism begets messianism and the more acute the mysticism, the stronger the messianism. In a previous study (Michal 2022), I showed how all the important messianic claimants from 500 BCE up to Shabbatai Tzvi and the Sabbatian movement in the seventeenth century were grounded in a previous system of mysticism. Several other messiahs arose in the aftermath of the Sabbatian movement and they too were rooted in extreme mysticism. In this generation, the leader of one of the best-known Hasidic (mystical) movements was widely believed by his followers to be the messiah even after his passing in 1994, and many continue to hold that view to this day. Many of these followers believed, just like the followers of several dozens of previous messiahs, that their messiah and this messianic event was unique and unprecedented in Jewish history.

A related area for further study is the messianism of the Jewish rationalists to determine if any of them ever produced messianic claimants, and if not, what set them apart from the ubiquitous messianism of their mystical counterparts.

Acknowledgements

This article is a shortened version of part of the author's MTh dissertation (Michal 2022) under supervision of Professor Dirk J. Human, Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

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